

FROM ENTRY TO LEADERSHIP

Women's Careers in the Skilled Trades

Learnings from Skills for Change's national *Women in Skilled Trades: Inclusive Pathways to Apprenticeship for Immigrant and Racialized Women* initiative.

Workplace Culture: Safety Issues, Cultural Barriers, & Policy Gaps

CONTEXT



In 2019, the Government of Canada launched the Canadian Apprenticeship Strategy (CAS), a funding program aimed at increasing the visibility of career pathways in the skilled trades while tackling barriers for entry into the sector for equity-deserving groups. A women-focused initiative under the CAS was launched in 2022 for projects that would improve the recruitment, retention, and success of women apprentices in the skilled trades. One of the explicit objectives of this initiative is “creating a welcoming space where women can feel comfortable and safe in the training and work sites.”¹

Skills for Change responded, and through our Women in Skilled Trades: Inclusive Pathways to Apprenticeship for Immigrant and Racialized Women (WiST) program, we are working with women, employers, unions, and trainers across the country to build a stronger, more equitable construction and manufacturing skilled trades sector. Our convenings in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia foster critical dialogue, develop new networks, and advance understanding of the issues women face in skilled trades careers. The WiST Leadership Academy provides mentorship, career guidance, and leadership training to help women advance their career aspirations. And, we have conducted a national survey² of women and employers to gather insights into women’s perceptions about careers in the skilled trades, experiences of women already in a skilled trades career, and employer practices that support women’s careers and advancement. And through all these activities, this project looks ahead to the future of skilled trades and emerging pathways in environmentally sustainable practice.

This report is the fifth in a series of ten based on our national survey, augmented with data from other sources to build out a fuller picture of the skilled trades sector in Canada. In this issue, we proceed from having shared what women and employers in our national survey told us and look to the fields of both research and practice to stitch together the broader, systemic picture. What emerges is concerning, but there is progress being made. However, there remains much work to be done to ensure women can not only enter the trades and thrive in their careers but be safe doing so.

All of our reports, as well as our full suite of programs and services for women including mental health supports for those experiencing discrimination or violence at home or in the workplace, are available on our website.

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ISSUES IN THE WORKPLACE



Since the launch of the CAS in 2019, the need for skilled trades³ workers has only increased. A national housing crisis and an aging workforce are driving an urgent demand for labour. Canada faces a severe housing shortage, with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) estimating that 4.8 million new housing units need to be constructed by 2035 to meet projected demand.⁴ The shortage is exacerbated by restrictive zoning and land-use policies, an aging skilled trades workforce, and insufficient apprenticeship and training programs.^{5,6} Over 700,000 skilled trades workers are projected to retire by 2030,^{7,8,9} with construction alone needing over 300,000 new workers.¹⁰ To address these issues, governments have committed to doubling the pace of housing construction, including traditional methods and new technologies, which means Canada must hire and train thousands of new skilled tradespeople.¹¹ With these myriad pressures continuing to compound, Canada is in crisis.

In our first four reports, we provided an overview of who survey respondents are and some of the issues they identified as problem areas for the skilled trades sector. In this report, we continue to center the discussion on what we heard through the survey but also take a step back to provide a broader review of issues identified in other projects and research initiatives. As such, this report provides a more narrative account that allows us to describe in greater detail the sector's pain points and opportunities for systems-level change.

Despite growing national attention to equity, diversity, and inclusion, workplace realities continue to be exclusionary, especially for racialized and immigrant women. Reports 3 and 4 of this series provide responses from our national survey and compare perceptions women considering careers in the skilled trades have with those of women already working in the sector. Their specific experiences and expectations illuminated major entry barriers, but as we have looked to other sources of information and data, broader systemic challenges—deeply rooted in worksite culture, institutional design, and policy frameworks—remain unaddressed. Literature and policy evidence point to persistent problems of safety, informality, lack of accommodation, and gendered expectations that shape women’s daily experiences in trades workplaces. These issues are reinforced by a funding environment that rewards individual job hire numbers over structural change, sustaining inequities even in well-intentioned programs.

Persistent Safety and Cultural Barriers

The skilled trades remain one of the most gender-segregated sectors of the labour market. Decades of advocacy have not yet transformed entrenched “macho” cultures that prize toughness, physical endurance, and competitiveness over collaboration and safety.¹² Studies from Canada and abroad reveal that women frequently experience verbal harassment, inappropriate comments, and sometimes physical intimidation at work.^{13,14} Fear of retaliation often prevents reporting, reinforcing a cycle in which hostility is normalized. Such cultures are sustained through informal hiring and advancement systems like word-of-mouth referrals, male-dominated union networks, and long-standing social ties, which reproduces isolation and even exclusion. Trades employers frequently hire within their own networks, limiting access for women and newcomers.¹⁵ These informal systems effectively decide who is seen as “fit” for the trades, shaping access to apprenticeships, mentorship, and leadership roles. International evidence mirrors this pattern, with women describing “macho” apprenticeship settings characterized by bullying and exclusion.^{16,17}

Safety, therefore, extends beyond physical hazards to include psychological and social well-being. When harassment, job insecurity, and isolation combine, women often exit before completing certification. In Canada, only 34% of women completed apprenticeships in the 15 largest programs in 2021, compared with 47% of men—a gap not explained by interest or aptitude.¹⁸

Inadequate Environments and Policy Gaps

Material and policy design in the trades continues to signal that women are outsiders. Worksites often lack gender-appropriate infrastructure such as separate washrooms and changing areas, while personal protective equipment is frequently sized for male bodies, creating discomfort and safety risks.¹⁹ These gaps communicate exclusion at both a symbolic and practical level. Beyond infrastructure, limited access to benefits, maternity leave, and childcare forces women to choose between family responsibilities and career advancement. The cost of training programs, tools, and safety equipment adds to the burden, particularly for newcomers balancing settlement expenses or single-parent households.^{20,21} Where accommodations exist, they are inconsistently implemented, and enforcement of anti-discrimination laws remains weak.²² Insufficient data collection on newcomer and racialized women’s retention and outcomes in trades programs further obscures these inequities, impeding targeted policy interventions.

The cumulative result is a work environment that fails to integrate gender equity into its core operations. Even supportive employers often rely on informal commitments or individual champions rather than systemic change. Our second report in this series gives some insight into why employers struggle with systems change. And so, without clear standards, accountability frameworks, or other tools, barriers remain.

Gendered Expectations and Everyday Bias

The cultural construction of the “ideal tradesperson” remains deeply gendered. Physical strength, endurance, and emotional stoicism continue to define competence, while collaboration and communication—skills often emphasized by women—are undervalued. Women entering trades report pressure to “fit in” by adopting masculine behaviours, and those who do not conform risk marginalization or being relegated to less visible tasks. As a result, women are often assigned repetitive or low-responsibility duties that

offer little opportunity for advancement.^{23,24} One survey respondent shared experiences of “not being placed to do certain tasks because [managers/employers] think it would be too hard for me to do.”²⁵ These expectations feed directly into wage inequality.

Across Canada, women in trades earn roughly 46% of men’s wages after certification.²⁶ More than 80% of women in all skilled trades (not just construction and manufacturing-related trades) work in low-income fields like hairstyling and cooking (often referred to as the women-dominated specializations), and it is in these specific trades that the pay gap between women and men is most pronounced.²⁷ For example, women, 8 years after certification, earn on average \$27,000 to \$41,000, while men in the same women-dominated trades earn between \$36,000 and \$51,000.²⁸ At the same time, sectors like construction tend to maintain persistent wage discrimination.²⁹ These dynamics reinforce gender hierarchies within the sector and discourage long-term participation.

Intersectional Inequities for Racialized and Immigrant Women

Race and migration status further shape workplace experiences. Racialized and immigrant women face compounded barriers including language differences and racial bias. As we noted in our second report, the skilled trades often rely on informal networks, which intensifies disadvantages: when apprentice sponsorship depends on existing social networks, newcomers lacking local contacts struggle to progress from pre-apprenticeship to registered apprenticeship. One national evaluation study found that 79% of pre-apprentices wished to continue training, yet 64% could not find a sponsor.³⁰

Structural factors magnify these inequities. Colleges and unions, which serve as group sponsors, face lengthy waitlists, with flagship programs such as electrical construction or HVAC having delays of up to two years.^{31,32} Small and medium-sized employers—the backbone of Canada’s apprenticeship system—often cannot absorb the cost of training a four-year apprentice, even with available grants and tax credits.³³ For example, the average cost for a single four-year construction electrician apprenticeship in Canada is estimated at approximately \$275,000, more than triple the cost faced by employers in Germany.³⁴ Limited administrative capacity and fears of losing trained apprentices to larger firms further reduce sponsorship willingness.

These barriers are not simply economic; they also reflect systemic undervaluing of racialized and immigrant women’s labour. Research on migration shows that skilled women who move internationally often face deskilling and wage penalties in host economies.³⁵ Within Canada, similar dynamics occur when immigrant tradeswomen are channelled into precarious, short-term roles without benefits or progression. While evidence shows that certified trades training yields the strongest income gains for newcomers, lowering the likelihood of low-income status seven years after arrival, participation rates remain exceptionally low at 1.5% compared with 15% for other postsecondary programs.³⁶

The Green Transition as a Missed Opportunity

Skills for Change also works in the environmental sustainability space. As such, we were curious about the intersections between climate action and skilled trades. Canada’s transition toward a low-carbon economy and other climate-related initiatives could be a powerful catalyst for re-designing workplace norms and attracting women to the construction and manufacturing skilled trades. Tradespeople are indeed central to green infrastructure, from retrofits and renewable-energy systems to electric-vehicle manufacturing. Yet the “green” technology sectors largely replicate existing inequities. Women account for only 28.6% of the environmental and clean-technology workforce, with even lower representation in technical or leadership roles.³⁷ Women who identify as Indigenous, racialized, or immigrants face compounded intersectional barriers, including even lower representation in the sector and persistent pay gaps compared to their male counterparts.³⁸ Without deliberate inclusion strategies, the clean-energy boom risks reinforcing gender and racial hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

WIST’s survey introduced a climate-justice component, linking sustainability values with women’s motivations for entering the trades. This shift reflects growing recognition that women’s environmental engagement can be leveraged as an entry point for inclusive participation.³⁹ However, for this potential to materialize, climate-aligned training needs to be paired with inclusive employment standards.⁴⁰ If low-carbon job sites replicate old hierarchies, the green transition will remain socially exclusive even as it becomes technologically progressive.⁴¹

From Counting Women to Changing Workplaces


Addressing workplace issues in the skilled trades requires moving beyond representation to transformation. Policy interventions and program design should target the structural conditions that reproduce inequity rather than merely expanding participation, as participation does not equal inclusion.⁴² This entails embedding intersectional analysis into all levels of practice—training, hiring, supervision, and evaluation—and accountability beyond job hire numbers and productivity. As such, workplace safety needs to encompass psychological well-being and cultural respect. Integrating harassment prevention and fair task distribution into health and safety audits ensures that relational and cultural harms are treated with the same institutional seriousness as physical ones. Designing infrastructure and PPE standards that attend to gender-specific needs as essential safety criteria, not optional accommodations, removes structural barriers that signal whose bodies and experiences the workplace was built for. Furthermore, apprenticeship sponsorship models that use pooled or consortium approaches distribute financial risk across multiple employers, allowing small firms to participate without bearing disproportionate costs.⁴³ Such systems-level interventions will create the scaffolding for a more equitable and human-centred skilled trades ecosystem.

Equally crucial is the redefinition of success indicators. Programs need to evolve from counting participants to valuing experience. Qualitative measures—workers' sense of belonging, perceived respect, and access to advancement—are complements to traditional metrics that speak to the experiential and can be good indicators of strong retention and career growth. Bringing evaluation closer to methodologies that emphasize reflexivity, relationality, and structural critique is part of creating a more accountable system.⁴⁴ Equally crucial is the redefinition of success indicators. Programs need to evolve from counting participants to valuing experience. Qualitative measures—workers' sense of belonging, perceived respect, and access to advancement—are complements to traditional metrics that speak to the experiential and can be good indicators of strong retention and career growth. Bringing evaluation closer to methodologies that emphasize reflexivity, relationality, and structural critique is part of creating a more accountable system.

Toward Transformative Inclusion

Workplace issues in the skilled trades are not merely individual experiences of bias or discomfort; they are manifestations of structural power relations embedded in economic and policy systems. Merely counting women without transforming conditions, risks reproducing the inequities programs like WiST seek to solve. The task ahead is therefore about redefining what counts as success, safety, and skill. True inclusion means ensuring that every measure of progress—productivity, safety, training quality—reflects care, dignity, and equity. It means that newcomer and racialized women are not simply inserted into existing frameworks but participate in reshaping them. When programs, employers, and policymakers adopt this lens, safety becomes cultural as much as procedural, and diversity becomes a shared standard rather than an aspirational slogan. In this sense, the future of equity in skilled trades depends on the transformation of the workplaces that await them. Only by embedding equity principles into the everyday practices of training, supervision, and governance can Canada's skilled trades evolve from sites of exclusion into spaces of belonging and shared prosperity.

THE STORY CONTUNUES



The barriers described in this report are not new. Researchers, advocates, and tradeswomen themselves have been naming them for decades. What this literature review adds is a sharper picture of how these challenges compound, like how a poorly fitted hard hat, an informal hiring network, and an absent mentor are not isolated inconveniences but interconnected signals that tell women, and particularly racialized and immigrant women, whether they belong.

Knowing what the problems are, however, is only part of the work. The harder question is where change actually happens. In the skilled trades, employers sit at the centre of that answer. They decide who gets hired, how a worksite is run, whether a harassment complaint goes anywhere, and whether equity is a posted policy or a practiced one.

In our next report, we look closely at employers, their recruitment and retention practices, what they are doing well, and where good intentions are not translating into meaningful outcomes. Some of what we found is encouraging. Some of it is not. All of it points toward a more honest conversation about what systemic change actually demands of the people and organizations closest to the work.

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