

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.

Perceptions of the Skilled Trades

MESSAGE FROM THE CEO



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 third 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 third issue, we share what we heard from women who are not in the skilled trades but who are considering careers in the sector. For employers, government, trainers, and nonprofit workforce development agencies, these insights are integral to understanding how to better reach women and what concerns or fears about careers in the trades with which they need to contend.

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.

Surranna Sandy
Chief Executive Officer

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SKILLED TRADES



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.

Our survey focused on two groups of women: those that are already in the skilled trades, and those that are interested in a career in the skilled trades. In the first report of this series, we briefly mentioned some perceptions that women in the latter group have about the sector. Here, we reveal more about what they told us and look at what they said would help influence them to choose a skilled trades career. Understanding what women think they'll encounter, potentially dissuading them from pursuing skilled trades careers, is essential for not only bettering the sector's reputation but for creating meaningful, systemic change in the workplace.

In our first report, we identified that the women from our survey who are interested in a trades career (n=135) have one fundamental perceived barrier: sexism (63%). But they also worry about a lack of training opportunities (50%) and say they have a lack of information or awareness about the trades as a career pathway (47%).



Perceived barriers of Women interested in a trades career.

As well, 100% of Indigenous and 44% of racialized women said they expect to encounter racism in the workplace.

Understanding the perceptions of specific groups of women can help guide the development of more tailored programs and services to support women's entry into the skilled trades sector.

- Ages 15-19 (n=6): sexism (100%), lack of support from employers for family obligations (80%), lack of training opportunities (40%)
- Ages 20-24 (n=25): sexism (71%), lack of training opportunities (52%), lack of information/awareness (48%)
- Indigenous women (n=6): racism (100%), lack of support from employers for family obligations (80%), sexism (20%), I'm worried it will be too expensive or time consuming (20%)
- Racialized women (n=50): sexism (79%), lack of information/awareness (56%), lack of training opportunities (47%), racism (44%)
- Newcomer women (n=65): sexism (65%), lack of information/awareness (54%), lack of training opportunities (54%), racism (28%)

WAYS IN



Despite both practical and systemic hurdles, we heard that there are things that would help influence women to enter the skilled trades sector.

The chance to keep learning new skills and possibly teach others in the future.

Seeing other women of color succeed in [the] trades would really inspire me.

Knowing there's a welcoming community and clear paths to learn without hidden barriers would make me feel confident to jump in.

I'd need to see more women of colour in leadership.

Fairness and respect on the job are critical, alongside clear paths for advancement.

Knowing I'll be valued and can grow is what would truly get me all in.

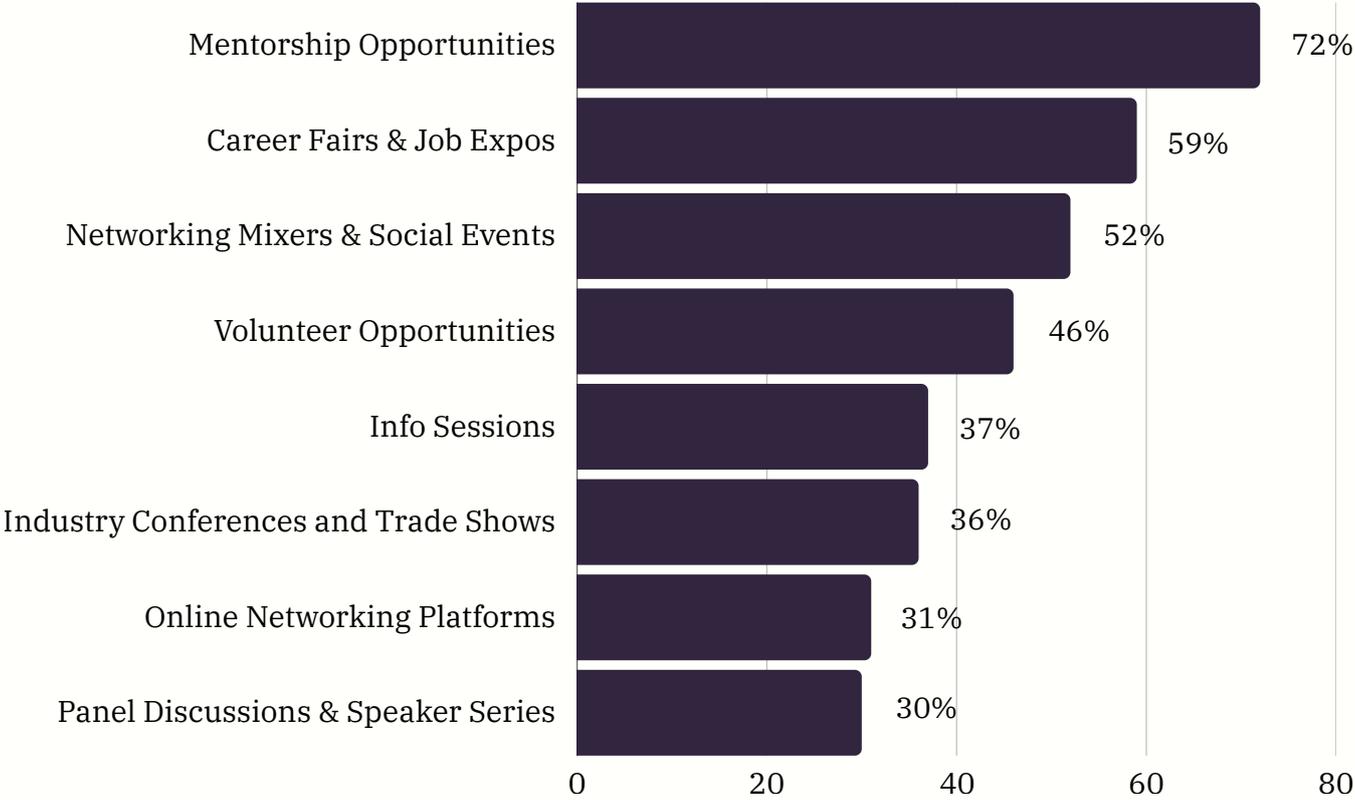
Strong mentorship would really help me take the next step.

Supportive mentorship, especially other women in the field, and clear information about the different paths I can take.

Seeing more representation and knowing there's a strong community behind me would boost my confidence.

I want to be part of a field where I can grow and make a difference.

Learning, representation, mentorship, and community. How can the skilled trades show where women entering the field can find these things?



As part of our series of WIST events, Skills for Change offered Initiatives like mentorship opportunities, career fairs and expos, networking mixers, and other social events. We saw first-hand that providing opportunities for women thinking of entering the trades to connect with women already established in the sector is a vital part of any initiative seeking to open pathways.

However, even the best program or event needs to generate a lot of attention, and knowing how to reach women to promote skilled trades careers takes effort. Only 27% of women we surveyed who are interested in a skilled trades career said they are “very aware” of opportunities. While another 50% are “somewhat aware,” these numbers tell us that there is much more work to be done on showing women that there are viable career pathways for them in the skilled trades sector.

WHY ARE THESE PERCEPTIONS IMPORTANT



These data show that there is a motivated and diverse pool of talent who view the trades as a pathway to a secure, stable, and meaningful career in Canada. However, it's easy to see that women still have some negative expectations of the skilled trades workplace. The persistent fears of sexism and racism are perhaps not surprising but remain very serious issues to address.

One way to shift these perceptions is by increasing the visibility of women in leadership positions, something many women responding to our survey identified. This requires funders, employers, unions, training delivery agents, and workforce development agencies to collaborate on practical training opportunities that not only bring women into the sector but support their advancement. If more women are seen leading, not only will this attract more women to the trades but it will fundamentally shift the power dynamics in the workplace so that women feel safe and are able to build fulfilling careers.

THE STORY CONTUNUES



How does perception align with reality? Comparing what women expect to what women have experienced is important for building bridges and pathways into the sector, and for creating pathways into the sector that extend into career longevity and security.

Experiences in the Skilled Trades

What have women had to navigate in their skilled trades careers? This report offers what you might expect but also has some surprises.

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For more information, contact:

research@skillsforchange.org

www.skillsforchange.org/research

791 St. Clair Avenue West

Toronto, ON

M6C 1B7

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The survey was designed in consultation with a national advisory committee, with representatives in British Columbia, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba. The survey was circulated digitally through the WIST network via newsletters and social media, as well as at in-person events, and was open from April 2025 to November 2025. The survey sample is not representative.