

Women in Trades: Progress, Barriers and Opportunities



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Executive Summary

Canada's skilled trades sector faces a mounting labour shortage at precisely the moment when demand has never been higher. Up to 700,000 tradespeople are expected to retire by 2028—the construction sector alone will need more than 1.4 million new workers by 2033. National priorities, including housing, infrastructure, clean growth, electrification, advanced manufacturing, critical minerals and defence, also depend on a substantially larger workforce. The Government of Canada's 2026 Team Canada Strong initiative, pledging \$6 billion to add 100,000 Red Seal workers in five years, signals the urgency.

Women remain significantly underrepresented across most skilled trades. Their participation has changed only modestly over time, particularly in many of the largest and highest-demand Red Seal trades. While governments, employers, unions, colleges and community organizations have introduced a range of initiatives to improve access and retention, many efforts remain fragmented, project-based and uneven across regions and trades. As a result, progress has not matched the scale of the workforce challenge.

This report, produced by the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University in partnership with Electricity Human Resources Canada, the Toronto Community Benefits Network, BuildForce Canada and Electricity Canada, examines the systemic barriers that prevent women from entering, completing, remaining in and advancing in the trades. These barriers span societal norms, education and training pathways, organizational cultures, workplace practices and individual-level factors, such as access to information, confidence, mentorship and social capital. The report identifies promising approaches and argues that the most urgent need is not only new ideas but scale: strengthening and coordinating proven models through sustained leadership, shared data, clear measures, and accountability for results.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Women's share of apprenticeship registrations has risen only from 7.6% in 1996 to 12.5% in 2024, and women hold just 4.3% to 6.9% of registrations in core trades like plumbing, electrical, carpentry and automotive service.
- 2** Women certified in Red Seal trades earn only 46% of men's earnings eight years after certification, nearly five times the overall Canadian gender wage gap, driven largely by occupational segregation that channels women into the sector's lowest-paying trades.
- 3** Programs that combine targeted recruitment, wraparound supports, employer engagement and workplace culture change show promise. However, without stronger coordination, shared measures and sustained investment, these successes remain too isolated to drive systemic change across the skilled trades sector.

The Issue

Canada's skilled trades sector faces an acute and worsening labour shortage. Up to 700,000 tradespeople are expected to retire by 2028; the construction sector alone will need more than 1.4 million new workers by 2033; and 30% of manufacturing firms and 36% of construction firms already report that skills shortages are constraining their growth. National priorities, including housing, infrastructure renewal, clean growth, electrification, advanced manufacturing, critical minerals and defence, depend on a significantly expanded workforce. In 2026, the Government of Canada signalled this urgency through Team Canada Strong, pledging \$6 billion to recruit, train and hire up to 100,000 additional Red Seal workers over five years.

Women's underrepresentation makes this challenge significantly harder to meet. Women account for just 7.3% of workers in trades, transportation and equipment-operation occupations, a share that has changed little since 1996. In core Red Seal trades such as electrical, carpentry, plumbing and automotive service, women make up only 4.3% to 6.9% of apprenticeship registrations. Women certified in Red Seal trades earn only 46% of men's earnings eight years after certification, a gap nearly five times the overall Canadian gender wage gap, largely because occupational segregation continues to channel women into the sector's lowest-paying trades.

Despite decades of initiatives, progress remains limited and uneven. Fragmented, project-based efforts have not produced the scale of change needed to expand and sustain the skilled trades workforce. Meeting Canada's current economic priorities requires treating the inclusion of women and other equity-deserving groups not as a parallel goal, but as a core part of trades workforce strategy.



What We Investigated

The research addressed three core questions: What is the current state of women's participation in skilled trades in Canada? What systemic barriers prevent women from entering, completing and advancing in the trades? And what strategies, domestically and internationally, have shown the most promise in addressing these barriers?

The analysis drew on Canadian labour market and apprenticeship data, including Statistics Canada data on apprenticeship registrations, trade certifications and earnings, alongside a review of government programs, employer practices, union initiatives, community-based supports and postsecondary education models.

International comparisons drew on evidence from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and the European Union. The research examined interventions at societal, organizational and individual levels. Within the employer practice section, the Diversity Institute's Diversity Assessment Tool (DAT) framework was used as a lens to assess promising practices across governance, leadership and strategy; human resources processes; values and culture; measurement and tracking; and gender equity and diversity across the value chain.

✓ What We're Learning

The research confirms that women's underrepresentation in skilled trades is persistent and deeply embedded, but also identifies what works.

Women's participation has barely shifted. Women account for 7.3% of workers in trades, transportation and equipment-operation occupations, up from 6.9% in 1996. In core Red Seal trades, women make up just 6.2% of electrician apprentices, 6.6% of carpentry apprentices, 4.3% of plumbing apprentices and 6.9% of automotive service apprentices. In 1996, women represented 1.7% of electrician apprentices; nearly 30 years later, that share has risen to just 6.2%. Women make up 10.9% of all trades certificates granted, and just 8.8% of Red Seal certifications.

The wage penalty is severe. Women certified in Red Seal trades earn only 46% of men's earnings eight years after certification, nearly five times the overall 11% Canadian gender wage gap. Much of this is driven by occupational segregation. Women remain concentrated in lower-paying Red Seal trades, such as hairstyling, cooking and baking, where post-certification earnings fall well below the Red Seal average of \$111,500. At the same time, women remain largely absent from some of the highest-paying trades, such as crane operation, heavy-duty equipment mechanics, industrial electrical work and power-line maintenance.

Barriers operate across the full trades pathway. Gendered stereotypes and limited exposure to trades careers can discourage girls and women before they enter training. Once they begin, women often face difficulty securing apprenticeship sponsorship, limited access to informal networks, unequal training opportunities, harassment, unsafe or unwelcoming worksites, ill-fitting equipment and a lack of effective accountability when discrimination occurs. These challenges are compounded by fragmented labour market structures, including small firms, subcontracting, informal recruitment practices, and uneven access to union or employer supports. At the leadership level, women remain under-represented in senior decision-making roles across many trades-dependent sectors, limiting the extent to which inclusion is embedded in organizational culture, workforce planning, and accountability systems.

Effective initiatives tend to share several features. They combine early outreach, targeted recruitment, paid training pathways, mentorship, wraparound supports, employer engagement and workplace culture change. Examples from Canada and internationally suggest that the most promising approaches are tied to larger systems, including public infrastructure spending, apprenticeship pathways, union and employer practices, postsecondary training models, and sector-wide workforce planning. Programs such as community benefit agreements, women-focused pre-apprenticeship pathways, mentorship networks and dedicated apprenticeship placement supports show promise because they address more than entry alone. They help women access training, secure placements, remain in the trades and advance in workplaces.

The critical gap is not innovation but scale. Promising practices are fragmented by trade, geography and organizational capacity. The competitive grant structure discourages data-sharing, and so organizations have little incentive to disclose what works. The result is that effective programs cannot be replicated at a rate that drives national change.

★ Why It Matters

Canada cannot meet its most pressing economic priorities without a substantially larger skilled trades workforce. The Government of Canada's Team Canada Strong target of recruiting, training and hiring up to 100,000 additional Red Seal workers over five years makes equity, diversity and inclusion an economic imperative. With women accounting for only 7.3% of workers in trades, transportation and equipment-operation occupations, and remaining especially underrepresented in many core Red Seal trades, workforce expansion will require a much broader talent pool.

For governments, the evidence points to the need for stronger coordination and sustained leadership. The skilled trades sector is fragmented across employers, unions, training providers and jurisdictions, which limits the impact of isolated initiatives. Public investments in infrastructure, housing and workforce development should be linked to clear equity goals, stronger data collection and accountability for results. The Canadian Apprenticeship Strategy should also be strengthened through dedicated funding, clearer targets, and supports that help women and other underrepresented groups enter, complete and remain in the trades.

Funders also have an important role in improving transparency and learning across programs. Competitive funding structures can discourage organizations from sharing outcomes or lessons learned. Building data-sharing, public reporting and independent evaluation into funding agreements would help identify which approaches are working, support knowledge exchange and create a stronger evidence base for scaling effective programs.

For employers, inclusion must be treated as part of workforce planning and retention. Recruitment, sponsorship, training, workplace culture, equipment, harassment prevention and advancement practices all shape whether women can enter and remain in the trades. Employers should move beyond general commitments by reviewing their practices; enforcing inclusive workplace policies; improving access to mentorship and advancement; and tracking representation, pay, retention and workplace climate. Smaller employers may need practical supports, tools and navigation services to implement these changes.

For educational institutions, the priority is to strengthen the pathway from early exposure to apprenticeship and employment. Outreach, women-focused pre-apprenticeship programs, mentorship and employer partnerships can help women access training and transition into the workforce.



State of Skills: Innovation in Training, Recruitment and Upskilling for Skilled Trades

Canada needs to address long standing shortages of skilled tradespeople to advance policy priorities around decarbonization, affordable housing and transforming industry to add more value to what we produce.

Read Thematic Report

The broader lesson is that isolated programs are not enough. Progress requires coordinated action across governments, employers, unions, educational institutions, and community organizations, supported by shared data, common measures, and accountability for results.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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