Future Skills Centre | Centre des Compétences futures

State of Skills Report

Building Beyond Barriers: Accelerating Women's Participation and Retention in the Skilled Trades

LOCATIONS
Across Canada

PUBLISHED
November 2026

CONTRIBUTORS
Betina Borova, Sharon Broughton, Shraddha Chatterjee and Wendy Cukier

How to Cite this Report

Borova, B., Broughton, S., Chatterjee, S., Cukier, W. (2026). *Building Beyond Barriers: Accelerating Women's Participation and Retention in the Skilled Trades.* Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Advancing the integration of women in the skilled trades is more crucial now than ever before, but their participation in these professions remains low. Women currently make up only 12.5% of all workers in the skilled trades, and make up only 14.8% of all Red Seal certification holders. If hairstyling, cooking, or baking are excluded, this number falls to 5.2%.

2. Women continue to face discrimination and systemic barriers to joining and remaining in the skilled trades across their lifetime. This includes a lack of female role models in school, cultural norms and the belief that skilled trades are "not for women", unsafe worksites, and workplace misogyny that results in harassment and limited advancement opportunities.

3. Although many organizations currently offer isolated programs to recruit women into the skilled trades, sector fragmentation prevents these individual initiatives from scaling effectively. Lasting progress requires coordinated, system-wide strategies across governments, unions, institutions, and society to foster a truly supportive and empowering culture for women.

4. As sponsors for apprentices and drivers of recruitment, employers and unions are key catalysts for increasing women's participation in the skilled trades. Employers and unions shape workplace and jobsite cultures, define leadership pathways, and set industry standards.

The Issue

Canada currently faces an acute and persistent shortage of workers across the skilled trades. This scarcity has significant consequences for the Canadian economy; in 2024 alone, the skills mismatch cost the economy $2.6 billion. The recent AI boom is adding further pressure, as demand for data centers soars while the lack of workers in construction gets worse.

In response to the shortage of skilled tradespeople in Canada, and in line with the proposed plan to amp up infrastructure in the country, the federal government announced Team Canada Strong, a nationwide plan to recruit, train, and hire 80,000-100,000 Red Seal workers over the next five years. However, there are many contributing factors for Canada's shortage of skilled workers that any such recruitment effort should consider – an aging population; the lack of recognition of credentials held by immigrants with skilled trades; long apprenticeship programs; attitudinal barriers like skilled trades careers being considered low-skilled and low-paying; and, importantly, extreme and lasting gender disparities in the skilled trades.

Women have been underrepresented in the skilled trades in Canada for many years. They account for only 12.5% of all workers employed in the skilled trades (compared to occupying 47% of the workforce across all sectors). These low numbers have only marginally improved across decades; in 1991, women comprised 4% of the workforce in these jobs.

While these aggregates are dismal already, the occupation-specific numbers of women in the pipeline into skilled trades reveal that the problem is even worse. In electrician, carpentry, plumbing, and automotive service programmes, which together constitute the largest share of trade registrations, women made up between 4-7% of total registrants in 2024. By contrast, women constituted between 85-95% of registrants for childhood education, social work, and hairstylist and aesthetician training, revealing a deep gender bias in the skilled trades.

Given the persistent underrepresentation of women in the skilled trades, there are many important initiatives that are currently underway to increase their participation in these professions. Generalized efforts like the federal government's 50-30 Challenge, targeted efforts like the Office to Advance Women Apprentices (which operates on a provincial level), training such as Women in Trades & Technology by Manitoba Institute for Trades and Technology, non-profit initiatives like the Immigrant Women Trades Apprenticeship Program, and union chapters such as the Ontario Building and Construction Tradeswomen by Provincial Building & Construction Trades Council of Ontario are only a few successful examples. Another successful example comes from Skillplan, which, with support from the Future Skills Centre, led a multi-year effort to broaden recruitment into the skilled trades, particularly targeting women and racialized persons.

However, the primary roadblock to scaling such successful initiatives is that the skilled trades sector is highly decentralized, consisting of hundreds of different trades, multiple unions, and various levels of government jurisdiction. Most initiatives operate as discrete, local programs rather than as part of a coordinated regional or national strategy. Additionally, the skilled trades — particularly construction — rely heavily on informal hiring networks and short-term contracts, which makes standardized equity policies difficult to enforce across the industry. Further still, a vast majority of the skilled trades sector is composed of micro-firms and SMEs that lack the internal resources to scale inclusion efforts. These factors result in "siloed" best practices that never reach the critical mass required for systemic change.

Given these challenges, the Future Skills Centre is exploring strategies that could lead to systems change in the skilled trades sector, and investing in projects that test innovative solutions to these problems.

🔧 What We Investigated

How to overcome the social and educational barriers that keep girls and women away from the skilled trades
There are many perceptions at play in Canadian society about the skilled trades that make them seem like unviable careers, especially for women. Skilled trades are often seen as "dirty jobs," and combined with everyday socialization and gendered stereotypes, young girls and women receive powerful cues that these jobs are not for them. Even though recent data suggests the perception of skilled trades is changing, and more Canadians are likely to recommend a job-oriented trade program instead of a university degree, gender biases about *who* should take up a skilled trade remain persistent.

Further, when women manage to pursue post-secondary education in the skilled trades, bias in classroom settings reinforces that the skilled trades are better suited for men. The Future Skills Centre researched approaches to better understand how such barriers to the skilled trades take shape and how they can be overcome:

- Women in Trades, led by the Diversity Institute, provided a comprehensive analysis of all the barriers women face in the skilled trades, and outlined recommendations for increasing their participation in these professions.
- Building Tomorrow: Strengthening the Skilled Trades Workforce in Construction, led by Signal 49, investigated how perceptions about the skilled trades, especially amongst youth and women,

impact the shortage of qualified workers. The project used mixed-methods techniques in geographic areas to represent perspectives from stakeholders across Canada.
- More than Just Numbers: Women in Engineering, led by the Diversity Institute, examined the ongoing gender disparity in engineering to explore strategies to overcome the persistent barriers women face in the field.

How to transcend systemic organizational barriers to recruitment, retention, and promotion of women in the skilled trades

In the rare cases where women manage to complete apprenticeships and certifications in the skilled trades, they face numerous organizational roadblocks that make employment and retention difficult. This includes heightened discrimination in hiring and a larger-than-typical wage gap, the inability to find mentors or sponsors, unsafe job sites, sexual harassment, isolation, and a leadership bottleneck, among other problems. In other words, skilled trades-related workplace cultures continue to be made for (and defined by) men, and there is a lack of buy-in for initiatives that support women in these professions. In light of these challenges, the Future Skills Centre, working with partners, has piloted innovative solutions for increasing women's access to skilled trades and professions:

- Expanding and Enhancing a National Recruitment System for the Unionized Construction Industry, led by SkillPlan designed and tested virtual strategies to widen the recruitment funnel to attract more individuals, especially those from under-represented groups (women, Indigenous, racialized peoples, newcomers and youth), to a career in the skilled trades. Later phases of the project shifted the focus from awareness to moving interested users toward unions, training, and employment – with apprenticeship liaisons providing individual support to users who expressed interest in union jobs or training opportunities.
- Doing It Right, led by Yukon Women in Trades and Technology, explored the peer and group support needs of women and gender-diverse tradespeople in the Yukon. The project involved multiple stakeholders, including tradespeople, community organizations, and educational institutions, and was conducted using feminist participatory-action research as its methodology.
- Leveraging Technology to Develop Modern Mining Skills, led by NORCAT, sought to integrate augmented reality and virtual reality in training programs for the skilled trades, with a special emphasis on training women, Indigenous people, and youth.

✔ What We're Learning

Early exposure to skilled trades increases recruitment

Findings from Building Tomorrow: Strengthening the Skilled Trades Workforce in Construction suggest that exposing K-12 students to careers in the skilled trades will forge foundational skills and help reframe perceptions of the skilled trades, reinforcing the importance of this sector as crucial to meeting Canada's housing, infrastructure, and sustainability goals. Insights from the Women in Trades project add that such exposure must target girls with specialized toolkits and strategies, like doubling down on math and science education for girls. Further, including educator training in these efforts will ensure a reduction in gendered bias in classroom settings.

Targeted inclusion of women throughout the training and recruitment pathway is crucial for increasing participation

Educational institutions and training providers play a crucial role in supporting women through the skilled trades pathway. Findings from Women in Trades and More Than Just Numbers suggest that inclusive language in training, awareness campaigns and resources targeting women, women-only programs that include work-integrated learning components, simplifying the application process, targeted efforts to increase women's enrolment in skilled trades programs, and ensuring that women build networks while training are all strategies that can improve their recruitment and employment opportunities. The most recent phase of Expanding and Enhancing a National Recruitment System for the Unionized Construction Industry, led by SkillPlan, showed that when women received multiple contacts from an apprenticeship liaison, their satisfaction increased to a greater extent, suggesting they may benefit from more frequent outreach. Further, the Leveraging Technology project highlights the importance of using cutting-edge technologies like virtual reality in targeted ways to significantly increase knowledge and reduce barriers to inclusion. Supporting Women in the Skilled Trades (SWIT) by the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum and women-only apprenticeship training provided by Niagara College and Conestoga College are examples of such efforts.

Employers and unions are crucial to creating a more inclusive culture and retaining women in the skilled trades

According to the Decarbonization Pathways for the Green Building Workforce, retention is the most significant workforce challenge for underrepresented groups, including women, in the skilled trades. Women cite workplace culture and lack of supervision as the top barrier to their retention in the skilled trades, surpassing wages, physical working conditions, or job demands. As such, employers play an integral role in changing workplace norms and incentivizing inclusivity across the leadership ladder in these professions.

Findings from Building Tomorrow highlight that social-emotional skills like leadership, teamwork, and cultural awareness are becoming increasingly important on today's job sites, not only to maintain safety and clear communication, but also to embed inclusive and non-discriminatory language towards tradeswomen in these professions. Further, as we learned from the Doing It Right and Decarbonization Pathways for the Green Building Workforce projects, women in the skilled trades require tailored mentorship and networking opportunities to make up for the isolation and lack of support they often experience in their roles.

For example, LaunchHER into Trades by First Peoples Development Inc. provides work-related supports, networking, and mentorship opportunities for women in the Red Seal trades in Manitoba, and the Women in Skilled Trades program by Skills for Change provides training, equipment, and job search support for low-income Canadian women looking to begin their career in the construction industry.

There is a need for more employer-led initiatives to increase women's recruitment and retention in the skilled trades. Employers that set inclusion targets in their leadership pathways and across their procurement chain, enforce zero-tolerance harassment policies, and provide psychological safety training for supervisors, ensure that women in these professions are adequately supported and rewarded for their skills.

Embedding inclusive targets in unions, policy, and government initiatives will improve women's participation in skilled trades

The federal, provincial, and municipal governments in Canada have a number of initiatives to increase women's participation in the skilled trades. For example, some provinces and municipalities have embedded equity targets in their public works contracts and government procurement processes, as well as using community benefits agreements. On a federal level, efforts like the Women in the Skilled Trades Initiative by Employment and Social Development Canada; Ontario's Skills Development Fund and training programs run by the BC Centre for Women in the Trades on a provincial level; and union initiatives like CBTU's Build Together are all examples of embedding gendered inclusion in the skilled trades sector.

However, as the Women in Trades project finds, cross-sector collaborations are crucial for improving gender equity across the value chain in sustainable ways. The Canadian Apprenticeship Forum's task force and subsequent National Strategy to Support Women in Trades are more recent examples of a cross-sector effort to drive change at the national level. Similarly, SkillPlan's Virtual Recruitment Strategy built a pan-Canadian partnership model to help centralize and coordinate activities across the unionized construction industry in Canada. This model allows partners to share digital infrastructure, resources, and best practices for recruitment. By involving all stakeholders, including governments, unions, employers, authorities, training providers, and community organizations, in the process, this project demonstrates that this kind of complex partnership is possible and needed to improve women's participation in the skilled trades.

★ Why It Matters

Girls and women face multiple long-standing barriers to entering the skilled trades, and experience significant challenges in gaining employment and being retained and promoted in these professions. It is crucial to understand women's under-representation in the skilled trades as a systemic problem that operates across multiple levels. Currently, some efforts are being made towards increasing women's participation in the skilled trades; however, these efforts are fragmented, while the solutions demand coordination and integration across all key players in the skilled trades ecosystem.

The persistent shortage of skilled tradespeople in Canada, combined with the country's emissions targets and current ambitions of Building Canada Strong amidst a national push towards self-reliance, will increase the demand for skilled tradespeople even further. Deloitte's 2030 estimates for new labour requirements range from 410,000-520,000 new workers in construction alone – and this doesn't reflect the workers who will retire in that time. Given these factors, the lack of skilled tradespeople threatens the country's manufacturing base, economic growth, and long-term prosperity, and it is simply impossible to address this increasing demand without more women entering these professions.

However, the argument for increasing women's participation in the skilled trades is about more than filling a widening gap. Research has repeatedly indicated that diverse teams deliver better performance and have a greater capacity for innovation. Changes brought on by diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts create a better and more supportive workplace for all workers – companies with diverse leaders perform better, and employers who make DEI a priority become more appealing to job seekers. Especially in the context of the skilled trades, embracing DEI can improve communication and result in increased safety for all employees, especially at worksites.

Given the persistence of women's under-representation in the skilled trades across decades, in light of the increasing demand for workers in this sector, and keeping in mind the general benefits of an inclusive economy, it is imperative that coordinated cross-sector efforts are made and sustained to increase the recruitment and retention of women across the skilled trades ecosystem. As investments flow through Building Canada Strong, there is a clear opportunity to leverage proven evidence and foster the cross-sector coordination needed to drive lasting increases in women entering and remaining in the skilled trades.

Projects in this Report

Building Tomorrow: Strengthening the Skilled Trades Workforce in Construction, Signal 49

Decarbonization Pathways for the Green Building Workforce, Canada Green Building Council

Doing it Right, Yukon Women in Trades & Technology

Enhancing a National Recruitment System for the Unionized Construction Industry, SkillPlan

Future-Proofing the Personal Support Worker Workforce: Toward Confidence, Competence and Resilience, University Health Network and Women's College Hospital

From Newcomers to Game Changers: Immigrant Skills Utilization in the Construction Sector, Signal49

Leveraging Technology to Develop Modern Mining Skills, NORCAT

More Than Just Numbers Revisited: Women in Engineering, Diversity Institute and Ontario Society of Professional Engineers

Perceptions of trades training gaining traction over university, Environics Institute for Survey Research

Skilled Trades and Entrepreneurship: The Need for Business Competencies, Diversity Institute

Women in Trades, Diversity Institute

Have questions about this report? Contact us communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program



This report was produced based on projects funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), with financial support from the Government of Canada. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

© Copyright 2026 – Future Skills Centre / Centre des Competences futures