

“Can you bring down the systemic barriers in construction?”

Barriers affecting women in trades initiatives in Canada

Report



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to women's persistent underrepresentation in Canada's skilled construction trades, recent years have seen the introduction of roles, programs, and organizations tasked with advancing gender equity in this realm. However, while research has focused on if, how, and to what extent women in trades (WIT) initiatives foster improved outcomes for tradeswomen, there is limited understanding of the barriers experienced by WIT initiatives themselves. Drawing on 48 interviews with WIT initiatives, employers, and other sector stakeholders across Canada, this report shares findings from an exploratory study shedding light on the barriers impeding WIT initiatives from fulfilling their mandates. These include:

- **Bias, prejudice, and sexism** directed at WIT actors as well as the women they support;
- **A lack of buy-in, support, and accountability within the sector**, restricting WIT initiatives' ability to develop and build partnerships in pursuit of their mission;
- **Persistent data gaps**, prohibiting WIT initiatives from connecting with potential clients and measuring their progress;
- **The complex trades sector** in which WIT initiatives operate, involving sector politics as well as varying beliefs about how best to achieve equity and fairness;
- **Funding and financial limitations**, with WIT initiatives struggling to access stable, long-term, and flexible funding to support their activities;
- **Economic, policy, and labour market contexts** that entrench inequities for tradeswomen, further constraining WIT initiatives' capacity to serve them; and
- **Challenges related to the day-to-day efforts of WIT initiatives**, comprising work that is complex, emotional, and underresourced.

Given these barriers, this report offers recommendations across four key areas:

1. **Supporting and strengthening WIT initiatives**, including through improved financial and in-kind support from funders and sector partners, adequate resourcing and compensation for staff, and facilitated opportunities for cross-initiative collaboration.
2. **Building sector knowledge and capacity**, including through the creation of designated fora and opportunities for sector actors to ask questions, learn about gender-based and other inequities, and become more familiar with and confident about these topics.
3. **Collecting data and measuring progress**, including through the systematic collection, sharing, and reporting of gender-disaggregated data within the sector, as well as re-evaluating what constitutes "success."
4. **Fostering industry inclusion**, including through the cultivation of committed leaders and the introduction of gender-responsive policies and programs throughout the sector.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The underrepresentation of women in the skilled construction trades is a long-standing, persistent, and well-documented issue. Women comprise just 4% of the construction trades workforce in Canada, with widespread implications (Build Together, n.d.; Ericksen & Palladino Schultheiss, 2009; Greene & Stitt-Gohdes 1997; Carey, 2014). In response, government, non-profit, and industry stakeholders have sought to identify and address the diverse structural barriers that inhibit women's entry, retention, and advancement in the sector (Gyarmati et al., 2017; Build Together, n.d.). Chief among these efforts has been the introduction of roles, programs, and organizations specifically tasked with supporting women in the trades (Careers in Construction, n.d.). From dedicated positions to new organizations altogether, these initiatives provide services to current and aspiring tradeswomen, offer training and other supports to employers and unions, and engage in public education and advocacy, among other activities.

Research on women in trades (WIT) initiatives has focused primarily on if, how, and to what extent they foster improved outcomes for tradeswomen (Pakula & Gurr, 2020; Currie et al., forthcoming). However, the focus on barriers experienced by individual tradeswomen has not been extended to those that may affect WIT initiatives themselves. This is despite some evidence pointing to resource constraints, employer resistance, and challenges related to operating in a non-profit context as just a few potential obstacles hindering these initiatives' efforts (Pakula & Gurr, 2020; De Armond & Cole, 2018; Gibelman, 2003; Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2018). As the sector looks to WIT initiatives to champion and advance gender equity, there is a clear need to better understand what may be preventing them from realizing this aim.

Recognizing these gaps, this report shares findings from an exploratory study guided by the following research questions:

- *What barriers do women in trades (WIT) initiatives in Canada encounter in their work supporting women in the skilled construction trades?*
- *Where these barriers do exist, what are the effects or implications?*
- *What are some potential solutions or approaches to addressing identified barriers?*

This research was led by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), a mission-driven social policy research and evaluation organization. SRDC is currently conducting a three-year evaluation of the Office to Advance Women Apprentices expansion sites in Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Saskatchewan, funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) and led by Canada's Building Trades Unions (CBTU). Pursued at the encouragement of CBTU, this study emerged from the aforementioned project, supporting the evaluation while standing independently as a distinct piece of research. We explore the above questions through findings

from 48 semi-structured interviews with WIT initiative representatives (i.e., those tasked with gender inclusion in their role or working for a standalone WIT program or organization) (n=22), construction employers (n=15), and other construction stakeholders (e.g., unions, training institutions, sector councils) (n=11). These include interviews conducted as part of the evaluation of the Office to Advance Women Apprentices (where questions related to this topic were asked in addition to evaluation-related questions), as well as those conducted exclusively for this study. For the latter, we focused mainly on expanding our sample to include representatives of WIT initiatives across the country, with a view to producing findings that are reflective of WIT initiatives beyond the Office to Advance Women Apprentices alone.

Interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed by members of the SRDC research team. Anonymized interview quotes are presented throughout to highlight key themes or concepts. Findings are grounded in a feminist theoretical framework, drawing attention to and critically assessing gendered and other marginalized perspectives, experiences, and inequities. While these findings are not intended to be exhaustive or generalizable, we hope this exploratory study might serve as a fruitful starting point for further discussion, research, and interventions dedicated to gender equity – and more specifically, women’s success – in the construction trades.

This report proceeds by outlining the key barriers faced by WIT initiatives that were identified through interviews. Specifically, we focus on barriers that are external to WIT initiatives themselves, including those that are attitudinal as well as systemic or organizational in nature (Council of Ontario Universities, 2013). While organized thematically, these should not be read as distinct from one another: barriers were often described as overlapping and interacting. We conclude with potential recommendations and next steps.

KEY BARRIERS FACED BY WOMEN IN TRADES INITIATIVES

BIAS, PREJUDICE, AND SEXISM

Interviewees readily identified sexism as well as gender-based and other forms of bias and prejudice as a major barrier faced by WIT initiatives. We begin with this theme because in addition to being viewed as a barrier in itself, it was also characterized as underpinning several other barriers that emerged. In some cases, this took the form of WIT initiative representatives – who are primarily women – being personally subjected to sexism, racism, or other forms of discrimination in their work. Some had felt talked down to by other stakeholders or as though they were not taken seriously in their roles. One interviewee observed that when introducing or defending the women’s inclusion initiatives in which they were involved, *“I say something and*

then a male colleague of mine says the exact same thing, it is much better received.” Several participants from WIT initiatives described grappling with bias themselves, often despite their professional work and personal backgrounds: “I’ve even surprised myself occasionally, challenging my own attitudes and realizing, ‘oh my gosh – I have some bias, too.’”

That said, WIT initiatives most frequently described encountering bias, prejudice, and sexism on the part of other sector stakeholders with whom they were expected to collaborate. Participants shared anecdotes of employers and unions being unwilling to take on tradeswomen, sometimes via an explicitly-stated preference for hiring or recruiting men. Other times, this was more subtle: for instance, partners might express concerns about a tradeswoman’s skills or physical strength, despite not having evidence to support this claim. Our findings also point to a gendered double standard within the sector, whereby WIT initiatives seeking to find jobs for tradeswomen may struggle with their clients’ skills or experience being consistently devalued:

“I have a gentleman I met with who was patting himself on the back; he was so proud. He had this young man who was their pizza delivery guy in the area where they worked. He’d asked questions, commented on tools. He said, ‘we brought him in as an apprentice! Great kid, had no training or prior experience, literally graduated from high school...’ I brought him a woman who had graduated from a program and work term placements, and [he said] ‘I don’t think she’s cut out for it.’ This other kid didn’t even own a hammer.”

Importantly, participants often referred to the role and prevalence of unconscious bias, or the “social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness” (Office of Diversity and Outreach, n.d.). For employers and unions, this sometimes resulted in the absence of appropriate washroom facilities, a lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) suitable for women, and no support for childcare, pregnancy, or parental leave. Issues such as these – while perhaps not intentional – were perceived to be grounded in unconscious bias: *“That’s not overt and saying, ‘we don’t want women,’ but it’s like they never thought about it.”*

While bias, prejudice, and sexism pose direct consequences for individual tradeswomen, they also represent substantial barriers for WIT initiatives. This is particularly true when programs or organizations are tasked with supporting women to attain trades employment or union membership. When employers or unions are not prepared or willing to take women on, many WIT initiatives are left with limited options for advancing their mission.

LACK OF SECTOR BUY-IN, SUPPORT, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Several people we spoke with acknowledged that some sector actors may not necessarily be aware of WIT initiatives operating in their area. While worth mentioning, participants emphasized a more pressing concern, whereby sector stakeholders know about WIT initiatives,

but fail to demonstrate sincere buy-in or support. Again, this presents a major challenge for WIT initiatives who rely on partnerships with employers, unions, and other stakeholders to meaningfully advance their work.

Representatives from WIT initiatives widely described struggling to engage partners. In addition to unanswered emails or phone calls, participants described challenges generating widespread support and buy-in for WIT efforts, particularly from those in leadership roles. Reflecting on sector partnerships, one staff member shared that their organization had faced *“a lot of resistance with [...] having us at the table, and wanting to work with us.”* Importantly, this was framed as a persistent issue across stakeholder groups, including unions, industry associations, and employers. For instance, several WIT initiatives had been told by employers that they did not need to work with them because they already hired women:

“There seems to be three kinds of employers: ones that are reaching out to me, they want to be involved, they want to be on board, ‘how can we hire more women?’ The other companies are like, ‘we already hire women, we don’t need you.’ And then the other ones, either they don’t know about us, or they’re not interested.”

Often, this was the case even where helping employers find women candidates was just one of many services an initiative offered. The above quote also underscores another important point that emerged in interviews: many stakeholders that are willing to engage with WIT initiatives are already committed to this work. In other words, those who stand to benefit the most from collaborating with WIT initiatives may be the least interested in doing so.

Where support for WIT initiatives does exist, it was often considered insufficient to create genuine change. One participant, who led WIT work within a larger institution, noted that their employer *“know[s] this work is important, but they’re not really going to push it as hard as we need them to.”* These efforts may receive nominal support or praise, but lack the sector-wide buy-in or resources necessary for their success: as one person emphasized, *“women’s issues are not women’s problems to fix. We need everyone involved.”* Representatives of WIT initiatives shared examples of partners committing to, but not following through on, specific projects or collaborations. Further, many had felt tokenized as a result of sector actors advertising a relationship with their program or organization without meaningfully engaging with them.

Thinking of the sector’s lack of engagement with WIT initiatives, interviewees frequently attributed this to uncertainty, hesitancy, or discomfort. Prospective partners may not have the language, experience, or confidence to engage with issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Some in the sector expressed interest in connecting with WIT initiatives, but were not always sure how: as one employer shared, *“I’ve never had an opportunity to work with an office like this before. It’s quite new.”* For WIT initiatives employing a feminist or social justice-oriented lens, fulfilling their values while avoiding alienating potential partners may also present a challenge.

While interviewees appreciated that these topics were often new to would-be collaborators, some had seen partners withdraw in the face of unfamiliarity:

“They don't like being wrong. They don't like being uncomfortable. And so they don't want to talk about racism, sexism, homophobia, misogyny, transphobia. And unfortunately, it's really hard to talk about inclusion and equity if you're not going to [talk about those things].”

Diversity in trades leadership: Who is in charge?

Those involved in WIT work widely described employer, industry association, union, and other stakeholder leadership as mainly comprised of middle-aged white men: *“There are no women at the decision-making table.”* Where women do seek leadership roles in the trades – often reluctantly – participants had observed backlash from colleagues and lower levels of support in election contests.

Many pointed to this lack of diversity in leadership as a main driver of some the barriers faced by WIT initiatives, including gender-based bias and prejudice as well as lukewarm engagement by sector partners. WIT initiatives often rely on buy-in from leaders without firsthand experience of gender inequity and who may not grasp the severity of the issues they seek to address, posing an additional barrier to meaningful collaboration. While this was not universally the case, this was echoed by several participants: *“If you're a straight white man, and you've had a great experience in construction, and you don't talk to women or know what their lived experience is like...you're not going to suspect there's a problem, even if I tell you there is. A lot of them don't even want to go down that road, because they don't think it could possibly be a problem, because they haven't seen it.”*

Several participants pointed to fears within the sector about saying the wrong thing or *“being thrown under the bus”* when it comes to issues of equity and inclusion, with partners sometimes choosing to disengage entirely. Relatedly, some stakeholders may be less eager to engage with WIT initiatives due to prior experience. A few participants described incidences where recruiting or hiring tradeswomen had led to harassment or backlash from other employees or members, and felt unequipped or unwilling to risk replicating these challenges in the future. Others wanted to avoid potential issues arising altogether: *“The tendency, especially for me, is it's easier to hire a man – just because my confidence would be higher that it will work out longer-term, versus blowing up in my face right off the bat.”* This sentiment, while echoed in the literature, creates clear barriers for WIT initiatives who rely on partners' openness to engaging with tradeswomen to fulfil their mandates (Pakula & Gurr, 2020; Construction Sector Council, 2010; Regis et al., 2019).

Participants also alluded to sectoral support of WIT initiatives being tenuous or conditional in nature. Interviewees perceived diversity and inclusion efforts to be prioritized only when convenient, describing periods of economic downturn where women are the first to be laid off. One interviewee described the attitude of some sector partners as: *“If we have the work, we'll hire a woman on. But if we have no work... [They] really close the ranks.”* Another echoed this, sharing their perspective that – unfortunately – *“the trades shortage is a blessing for women in trades.”* Broadly, participants described support for WIT initiatives as being motivated by either

immediate labour needs or a sense of charity, rather than a genuine commitment to equity or belief in the value tradeswomen might bring to a company or union:

“It’s not because it’s in their best interests. They don’t see us and them as being tied to the same integrated future. It’s like, they’re being generous and we should be grateful, as opposed to, ‘we are supplying the answer to your problems, and you need us more than we need you.’ They don’t see it like that.”

Finally, many of the challenges related to buy-in and support for WIT initiatives were also attributed to a perceived lack of accountability within the sector. While some participants were cautious of measures that may be viewed as punitive by employers or unions, many expressed need for action in this regard: *“Currently, there’s no teeth to the advancement and the push [of women in trades]. There aren’t any ramifications or incentives to promote uptake.”*

PERSISTENT DATA GAPS

A lack of consistent, reliable data within the sector was framed as an ongoing barrier for WIT initiatives. In their pursuit to reach the minority of tradespeople who are women with limited resources, WIT initiatives rely heavily on partners to connect them with employees, students, and members who may benefit from their services. However, interviewees pointed to the widespread absence of gender-based data in the sector as constraining their capacity to identify and reach potential clients:

“We’re going to the unions and saying [...] ‘can you send an email to all the women members?’ No, they can’t. They don’t know who all the women members are. They don’t have a way of searching for that in their lists or databases [...] There are all of these organizations, schools, unions, and they don’t have a way of sorting through their records to find out what peoples’ genders are. And even if they could do that, they have never put anything in place around asking about contacting those people about opportunities.”

Interviewees attributed this to several factors, including sector stakeholders feeling uncomfortable seeking this information, privacy concerns, and the absence of formal requirements mandating the collection of gender-based data.

Beyond individual-level data to support client outreach and program delivery, interviewees also described challenges associated with data gaps within the sector more broadly. The lack of high-quality data within the construction trades in Canada, particularly related to gender, is echoed in existing research (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2018; Construction Sector Council, 2010). This poses diverse challenges for WIT initiatives. For example, while many could speak confidently to successes within their own programs, an absence of other data – for instance, the gender breakdown of a specific trade in a province, and how this is changing over time –

impeded initiatives from assessing higher-order change and their contribution to it. On one hand, this can result in difficulties building buy-in for WIT initiatives: as one person contended, *“the sector is going to have a hard time supporting programs if they don’t see yield for them.”* On the other hand, this raises questions about how both funders and the sector at large are characterizing success for these programs. Data about gender representation within the trades, while both important and valuable, is a small piece of the puzzle: for instance, it cannot capture the quality of tradeswomen’s experiences as a crucial measure of progress.

NAVIGATING A COMPLEX SECTOR

WIT initiatives in Canada are operating within a complex sector, featuring diverse stakeholders with a wide range of goals and missions. Inevitably, this can also pose barriers for WIT initiatives. For instance, sector politics surrounding union and non-union actors were widely framed as difficult for WIT initiatives to navigate. The relationship-based nature of the construction sector was also highlighted, particularly for WIT initiatives and their staff who may be new to the industry and face greater barriers making inroads with prospective partners as a result. While some participants appreciated the relational nature of the construction trades, several WIT initiatives did not always feel as though this extended to them:

“I really want men to understand that that sense of personal satisfaction and enjoyment can come not just from the job, not just from that work, but also from the relationships [...] And a lot of them do have that because they have the sense of brotherhood. But wouldn't it be great if your sense of brotherhood also extended to people of other genders? If it wasn't just cis, straight, white men?”

Some participants also challenged seniority as the primary qualification for leadership roles within the sector. Related to a previous point about representation in construction leadership, they felt that a disproportionate focus on duration of tenure had resulted in sector leaders with a wealth of knowledge and expertise in some areas, but gaps in others. This may result in leaders and managers who are less engaged with and supportive of WIT initiatives’ work:

“You could be a trades-qualified carpenter [...] you could do that for 30 years, then be in the construction association, and then be asked based on that to sit on some board that's making policy decisions around training, around funding, around all these different things. And your voice is listened to because you have merit, because you have clout, because you've been doing this a long time [...] I'm not saying he's not a smart guy, because obviously, he is. But he is lacking very specific skills that are required in order to address equity and inclusion issues.”

Tensions also emerged regarding tradeswomen’s treatment vis-à-vis men, including how this is approached by WIT initiatives. For instance, one WIT initiative aimed to “*encourage employers to think of women as just another employee, not a female employee. When we separate people like that, it adds to pointing out the differences, rather than the similarities.*” Others held a different view, pointing to the importance of advocating for and providing accommodations and supports explicitly tailored to women. However, a few participants had faced backlash when implementing women-focused initiatives. Some attributed this to the equality orientation of unions and the trades more broadly, with efforts that advocate for “special” rights and privileges for women deemed unfair and receiving less support as a result. Despite this, some participants refuted this narrative: “*I think they see it as us wanting to insert a bunch of women ahead of their members who are predominantly men. And that’s not what we want at all.*”

Finally, while participants recognized the value of multiple WIT initiatives operating within the same jurisdiction, this also came with challenges. For example, while those who had collaborated with other WIT initiatives described these experiences as both useful and valuable, others had observed an unwillingness to collaborate, which was often credited to competition for both resources and clients. As one participant expressed, “*how much more collaboration, and partnership, and sharing of resources could be happening?*” Further, some thought that the mandates of different initiatives could be more clearly distinguished, to avoid both service duplication and confusion among clients and sector partners.

FUNDING AND FINANCIAL LIMITATIONS

During interviews, many participants identified an array of funding and finance-related challenges as barriers to WIT initiatives’ efforts. One of the most common themes that arose

Staying on course: Multiple perspectives and priorities

In addition to controversy arising from a social justice orientation or “unfair” emphasis on women, other barriers also emerged from WIT initiatives’ need to navigate diverse perspectives and priorities within the construction trades. For instance, some interviewees believed strongly that supply – rather than retention – was the core driver of women’s underrepresentation in the trades, and as such were skeptical of WIT efforts that were not primarily focused on women’s entry into the trades. Meanwhile, one WIT representative grappled with whether advocating for better childcare options was within their organization’s purview given the challenge this posed for many of their clients, despite not being a funder priority. As referenced elsewhere, WIT initiatives also wrestled with striking a balance between short- and long-term outcomes, wanting to equip women for trades careers while also fostering meaningful change within the industry. Finally, participants highlighted the range of perspectives among tradeswomen themselves, and the risks of assuming that all clients have the same wants and needs: “*Tradeswomen are not homogenous: they’re all unique people who have opinions.*” Taken together, these examples suggest that WIT initiatives may regularly face competing views about what constitutes the best way to approach their work – and often must adjust, adapt, and respond accordingly.

among interviewees representing diverse stakeholder groups was the lack of core, long-term funding available to WIT initiatives. One interviewee, reflecting on the other WIT initiatives they had encountered in their role, shared that:

“One, two, three-year projects [...] were put into play: things were developed, things were implemented, they were done well, they were evaluated, they were proven to be effective. And then they went on the shelf. They get forgotten about and they never, ever happen again because the funding was a one-off funding piece. Governments changed. Things changed.”

This has diverse – and often severe – implications for WIT initiatives. In light of shifting government priorities and the uncertainty of renewed funding, participants expressed concerns about the availability of consistent, reliable services for women in the trades. Some WIT initiatives described spending time proposal-writing at the expense of service delivery to ensure the sustainability of their programs. Many shared instances in which limited funding sources had fostered unwanted tension or competition with WIT initiatives with similar mandates, especially when new programs were introduced without them being informed or consulted. While these challenges are common throughout the non-profit sector, the underfunding of women, gender, and feminist organizations in Canada is both a long-standing and well-documented issue. The effects of this are widespread, including financial vulnerability and precarity, diminished organizational capacity, and obstacles to collaboration or community-building (Boucher & McWhinney, 2017; YWCA Canada et al., 2020).

Even where funding is available, other challenges may arise. Several participants involved with WIT initiatives perceived a lack of alignment between most funding opportunities and their core service offerings. This meant needing to choose between staying true to their mission or continually adapting to adhere to funder priorities:

“We have to reinvent every funding cycle to fit into a funding opportunity. It would be great if we could be recognized in the work we’re doing and not have to reinvent ourselves every time [...] ‘Can you create a different program, or can you do things with kids?’ But that’s not necessarily our goal.”

Others initiatives had faced limitations in how they spent funding. Project-based funding may prohibit expenditures on items such as travel, advertising and promotion, and office supplies and materials. Additionally, some initiatives described funding that restricted their capacity to provide certain in-kind or wraparound supports they felt would be valuable for their clients: for instance, funding for women to obtain appropriate PPE or safety tickets. In the absence of a dedicated budget to support training for clients, one interviewee characterized their WIT program as having a *“gap between helping women identify the trade or training [and] then helping them get into that training.”* Some had sought assistance from sector partners to overcome this barrier, but encountered varying degrees of success.

Labour-intensive reporting requirements by funders also emerged as a challenge for WIT initiatives. Others pointed to the difficulties associated with funder-prescribed indicators of success: some interviewees felt discouraged from pursuing any activities that may not produce the outcomes set out by funders. As a result, measurement may be overwhelmingly focused on short-term (rather than long-term) outcomes. One individual illustrated this: *“Our funders [...] ask you for, ‘How many services are you delivering? How many participants are you reaching?’ [...] but never, ‘Is this actually working? What’s happening over time?’”*

Despite these barriers, WIT initiatives nevertheless felt pressured to achieve and demonstrate such outcomes to funders – even in the context of short-term projects – to justify their ongoing existence: *“Funds come with these big statements of change. Can you bring down the systemic barriers in construction?”*

ECONOMIC, POLICY, AND LABOUR MARKET CONTEXTS

In addition to funding-related challenges, several other barriers external to WIT initiatives themselves were also identified. For instance, participants emphasized the difficulty of operating WIT initiatives in times of economic instability, including in the context of COVID-19. Many found that the challenges associated with finding employment opportunities for tradeswomen were exacerbated in times of downturn. Similarly, others hesitated to encourage women to sign up with unions and pay dues when employment prospects were limited.

Participants also highlighted the role of an unsupportive policy infrastructure, characterizing the absence of certain policies and programs as making their work to advance women in the trades more challenging. This was commonly framed as exacerbating other barriers faced by WIT initiatives: as one interviewee put it, *“when you don’t have a very supportive government, that doesn’t help either.”* Examples provided in interviews included the lack of early morning and affordable childcare, gaps in pregnancy benefits and parental leave within trades jobs, and long waitlists for technical training programs, all of which are also emphasized in existing literature (Gyarmati et al., 2017; Women Unlimited, 2018). While these are barriers directly faced by individual tradeswomen, they simultaneously pose challenges for the WIT staff who are tasked with supporting them.

Further, while interviewees held varying views as to which approaches were most desirable and effective, many critiqued the widespread absence of legislated targets, quotas, community benefit agreements, and wage subsidies as additional policy tools that may make the work of WIT initiatives easier. Without these or similar practices, many sector partners may be less interested or incentivized to engage with WIT initiatives as a means of hiring and retaining tradeswomen.

Finally, the nature of trades jobs themselves was framed as a barrier for WIT initiatives. Specifically, the prevalence of trades jobs that require extensive travel, have schedules that pose challenges for childcare availability, and draw heavily on seniority for recruitment and advancement can all complicate programs' capacity to find appropriate employment opportunities for the tradeswomen they serve.

THE CHALLENGES OF WIT WORK

As a final barrier, many interviews pointed to the nature of WIT work itself, which was widely characterized as high-stakes, labour-intensive, and emotionally-draining. Staff of WIT initiatives are often called on to wear many hats, with responsibilities ranging from client case management to social media copywriting. Taken together, the ongoing systemic and structural barriers faced by a growing client base, an expanding suite of services, limited staff, and challenges engaging sector partners mean that WIT initiatives may struggle *“to move mountains with limited resources.”*

Expectations from funders and sector stakeholders further exacerbate the high-pressure environment in which WIT initiatives operate: as one participant articulated, *“in five years, I’m supposed to change what [the province] hasn’t changed in the last hundred years.”* WIT stakeholders must also contend with the diverse perspectives within the sector about the best way to approach their work, as discussed earlier.

The complex nature of this work underscores the importance of staffing WIT initiatives with those who possess a distinct knowledge and skill set, from service delivery experience to a deep understanding of the construction sector. However, in the absence of competitive pay and benefits, many WIT initiatives had faced difficulties hiring and retaining staff. For some, the underresourcing of WIT initiatives was tied to broader questions about the feminization and resultant devaluation of this work: *“The way our groups are looked at is not having the same levels of expertise, which means we shouldn’t be paying people the same amounts of money. But yet, we’re expected to do all this great work.”*

“Off the side of our desks:” Where WIT work happens

While several programs and initiatives focus exclusively on women in trades, there are also efforts to advance this work within broader institutions. Despite the perceived value of this latter approach, some interviewees felt that many WIT efforts in these contexts were also underresourced. Often, these individuals – primarily women – balanced their involvement in WIT initiatives with other roles and responsibilities, and were expected to do the former *“off the side of our desks”* or on a voluntary basis. This can equally present challenges for organizations whose mandate is entirely focused on women in trades, and whose counterparts dedicated to WIT work at partner stakeholders may be overstretched, if they exist at all. In these cases, participants described struggling to have partners show up at events or follow-up with tradeswomen – not because of lack of buy-in, but because of time and resource constraints when women in trades represents one small piece of a larger portfolio.

Importantly, those engaged with these efforts were clearly passionate about and invested in their work. While a valuable characteristic of any job, some equally framed this as a challenge: “*Emotionally, [the staff] are exhausted because they care about what they do.*” Several interviewees described the personal tolls of operating within a system that was not necessarily designed with them or their clients in mind, citing a range of consequences:

“A lot of these women who are in these positions to try to influence change [...] I’ve seen it now so many times, so I find it impacts [them] in two ways. They either get exhausted and they leave [...] They need to move into somewhere else. Or they harden into it. And when you’re hurt, when you’re hardened into it, you’re not fully in that changemaker space.”

For those who have been doing this work for a sustained period, the effects can be particularly profound, with many participants representing WIT initiatives describing bouts of frustration, exhaustion, or disillusionment while trying to advance their cause.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As women remain dramatically underrepresented in the construction trades, Canada has looked to initiatives, organizations, and programs exclusively committed to supporting tradeswomen as one solution. This report, drawing on 48 interviews with a diversity of stakeholders in Canada’s construction trades sector, represents a first attempt to identify and articulate the unique barriers and challenges that these actors face in their mission to advance women in trades.

Interviewees described a range of barriers inhibiting the success of WIT initiatives in Canada, including a lack of buy-in and support from other sector stakeholders, funding and financial limitations, and external policy and labour market contexts, among others. Taken together, these findings paint a picture of a complex and challenging environment for WIT initiatives attempting to achieve their mandates. If sector actors and existing research have deemed WIT initiatives well-suited to help address barriers faced by individual tradeswomen, then there is also a clear case for ensuring that these initiatives are fully supported in achieving this aim (Pakula & Gurr, 2020). As an aside, it is also worth noting that several participants representing WIT initiatives expressed gratitude for their participation in this study, noting the value and rarity of structured opportunities to discuss the challenges they face in their work. While not the main purpose of this research, this may indicate both the need for and interest in deeper engagement with these topics among sector actors. Further, while we focused exclusively on barriers given the scope of the study, it should be mentioned that interviewees also identified cases where sector champions, strong partnerships, and other factors had positively contributed to their work.

The following pages offer a summary of recommendations that emerged from these findings as potential solutions to explore. These include those brought forward by participants themselves,

and represent actions that may be taken by a range of stakeholders. Further, any single recommendation is unlikely to effect significant change on its own given the diversity of barriers experienced by WIT initiatives in Canada. Rather, the adoption of multiple strategies as part of a systems-wide approach may be most effective in helping address some of the challenges articulated throughout this report.

This exploratory study aimed to shed light on the barriers and challenges faced by initiatives working to advance women in the construction trades in Canada. While limited in scope and preliminary in nature, one key takeaway is clear: the mere existence of these initiatives is not guaranteed to effect meaningful and sustainable change. Without a collaborative, supportive, and equitable operating environment, WIT initiatives are likely to continue to face pressing barriers that hinder them from fulfilling their mandates.

Recommendations: Addressing barriers faced by WIT initiatives

Supporting and strengthening WIT initiatives

- **Reconsider how funding for WIT initiatives is conceptualized and administered.** A 2010 report by the Construction Sector Council contends that “funding temporary pilot projects or defunding them after an initial development period will not help overcome the obstacles to wider female participation in the construction industry” (p. 68), underscoring the importance of stable, long-term, and sustainable funding for these endeavours. Greater funding flexibility may better support WIT initiatives in their day-to-day operations and in offering the supports that best serve their clients. When asked about potential solutions, one participant reflected that *“the thing that comes to mind first is funding and support for the areas that we identify as being the areas where we need help.”*
- **Explore ways for the sector to provide more material support to WIT initiatives.** Beyond traditional funding sources – and recognizing their ongoing limitations and constraints – identify opportunities for sector partners (e.g., construction associations, unions, etc.) to offer financial or in-kind support to WIT initiatives.
- **Ensure that WIT organizations and programs are adequately resourced and that staff are fairly compensated for their work, including via access to benefits.** Avoid asking or expecting individuals in the sector – particularly women – to do this work on an unpaid or voluntary basis.
- **Facilitate structured and ongoing opportunities for WIT stakeholders to connect and collaborate with one another, including to discuss different approaches to this work.** Existing women in trades conferences such as those hosted by IBEW or the Canadian Apprentice Forum (CAF), women’s committees at union locals, and CBTU’s Workforce Development Committee were all highlighted as positive examples of this occurring already. Several participants proposed that regular (i.e., quarterly) meetings convened by a national organization like CBTU or CAF may be valuable in creating a more permanent mechanism for this type of collaboration.

Building sector knowledge and capacity

- **Create space for “tough conversations” within the sector.** The value and importance of non-judgmental, open, and learning-oriented opportunities to discuss women in trades and ongoing barriers and inequities emerged as a common theme in interviews. Meaningful progress on these challenges relies on the sector’s willingness to identify gaps, make mistakes, and lean into discomfort.

- **Continue to build knowledge, awareness, and understanding about WIT initiatives and organizations within the construction trades.** Key actors in the sector should be familiar with the role of these initiatives, their potential value to partners, and how their missions and mandates may complement those of other WIT initiatives operating in that area. In building support for these efforts, it is also important to challenge the notion that programs or supports targeted to tradeswomen are inherently unfair or exclusive.
- **Improve the availability and uptake of training and resources around un/conscious bias, gender inequity and sexism, and other intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination to trades stakeholders.** Relatedly, some interviewees suggested supporting continuous learning about these subjects within WIT initiatives, as well as exploring training and knowledge-building opportunities targeted specifically to men.
- **Pursue strategies that institutionalize support for women in trades throughout the entire sector.** Rather than relying exclusively on WIT initiatives to advance women in trades, this should be characterized as a responsibility shared by all construction trades actors. This may include identifying and supporting sector champions— particularly individuals who hold leadership roles, are men, and have substantial trades experience — as well as establishing dedicated WIT roles within training providers, unions, industry associations, and so on.

Collecting data and measuring progress

- **Encourage and equip unions, employers, and training institutions to collect data more systematically about their membership, including that which can be disaggregated by gender, trade, level, jurisdiction, and other key labour market or sociodemographic characteristics.** Gender-based data should be collected on a voluntary basis, and allow individuals to self-identify (Brennan et al., 2021).
- **Promote responsible and effective data sharing and utilization within the sector.** For instance, education and training institutions could offer women students the opportunity to opt-in to their information being shared with regional WIT initiatives during registration. Opportunities for the public reporting of diversity statistics also exist, with a view to building transparency and accountability within the sector: the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum's #CHAMPION4CHANGE initiative as well as reporting requirements under the 1987 Atlantic Accord were both cited as promising examples in this area (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2020a).
- **Encourage more expansive thinking among funders and sector stakeholders regarding what constitutes success for WIT initiatives and the tradeswomen they support, as well as how outcomes are determined and measured.** This is in alignment with other national strategies that call for not only increased numbers of women in the trades, but also more respectful workplaces, policy change, and other indicators of success to which WIT initiatives may contribute (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2020b).

Fostering industry inclusion

- **Prioritize and cultivate a commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion among sector leaders.** In addition to training and capacity-building opportunities, emphasize the importance of these values within recruitment, advancement, and leadership contests or elections. Further, explore ways to improve access to leadership roles for women in the construction trades. This includes equipping and supporting women to address any potential challenges associated within these roles, along with working to systematically create an environment where women leaders are valued and respected.
- **Advocate for and implement policies and practices that may support a more inclusive and diverse trades sector more broadly.** Legislated targets and quotas, wage subsidies, community benefit agreements, and designated seats within trades training courses are all potential ways to incentivize trades actors to engage more sincerely with WIT initiatives. Similarly, efforts to expand childcare options, improve parental leave, and strengthen workplace responses to violence and harassment can help address the barriers WIT initiatives face when supporting individual clients.

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