

Working It Out

WOMEN DESCRIBE THEIR
EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES IN
TRADES AND TECHNOLOGY

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The Hypatia Association

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The Hypatia Association is a non-profit organization with a mandate to promote the full participation of women in science, trades and technology.

HYPATIA


The Hypatia Association
Gender Equity in Science, Trades, and Technology



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Background

Although they are well represented in the total labour force, women in Nova Scotia have been mostly excluded from training and employment opportunities in skilled trades and technology. People sometimes think women have access to any career they choose. Yet statistics show that women are clustered in low-paying jobs, such as childcare and secretarial work. This and the increase in women's part-time and temporary work has many consequences – lower wages, few or no benefits, few opportunities for advancement, and greater risk of poverty.

In 1991, 4.5% of Nova Scotians employed in skilled trades were women. By 2006, the participation rate had risen to 5%, an increase of only .5% over 15 years. Fewer than 5% of active apprentices in Nova Scotia are women. In technology-based occupations, women represent about 19% of all employees. Although half of the students enrolled at the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) are women, they make up only 10% of students enrolled in trades and technology programs. Considering a 47% participation rate of women in the Nova Scotia labour force, employment data clearly indicates women are substantially underrepresented in trades and technology. There are serious consequences for industry, for our economy, for our communities, and for women. At a time of shortages of skilled workers in trades and technology, women are an untapped resource. Many of these women are in their twenties and thirties and are eager to re-enter the workforce.

Why are so few women choosing careers in trades and technology? We have learned there is no single factor that explains the data. Women's participation in trades and technology is affected by many factors.

Women have told us repeatedly that work-life balance is an important factor in their choice of career. Women continue to carry the majority of responsibilities for childcare, housework, and increasingly, eldercare. Occupations and workplaces that enable a balance between work and family responsibilities are crucial for most women. A closely linked factor is financial. Often funding for childcare, transportation, books, tools, and special clothing is not readily available for women, especially those wanting to get the training needed to re-enter the workforce after an absence of several years while raising children.

The single most significant and prevailing factor influencing women in trades and technology is gender-role stereotyping.

For many women, choosing to enter non-traditional training or work adds another layer of responsibility to an already complex life. The scope of women's unpaid work is vast – she can be daughter, mother, community volunteer, wife, and friend. Women's unpaid work takes many forms, including caring for children and/or elderly parents, dealing with family members' health care and school needs, managing the household shopping, cooking, cleaning and finances, and doing volunteer work.

Women of African descent and from Aboriginal communities face racism, discrimination, and cultural annihilation. Women with disabilities encounter a range of accessibility issues. New Canadian women may experience cultural and language barriers. These are life conditions that add layers of complexity to gender-based barriers to trades and technology training and employment.

The single most significant and prevailing factor influencing women in trades and technology is gender-role stereotyping. The images and expectations of the role of women in our communities and in our workplaces seem to be exclusive of women in trades and technology. The image and the reality of trades and technology workers in Nova Scotia is of men – primarily white men. Generally, when images of workers in trades and technology are portrayed, women do not see themselves. And generally, employers do not see women as trades and technology employees.

Gender-role stereotyping affects diverse women throughout the entire continuum of their lives. It is expressed in our society, in our families, in our communities, in our education systems, and in the culture of our workplaces. In *Working It Out – Women Describe Their Employment Experiences in Trades and Technology*, we wanted to understand what characterized the work environment women encountered every day. We were particularly interested in learning more about how workplace culture has an impact on diverse women in trades and technology.

Workplace Culture

“Workplace culture” is a concept that originated from the broader concept of culture within a society. While there is no universally accepted single definition, culture generally refers to the system of shared beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and values that characterize a particular society. When considering culture, researchers often stress the fact that culture is a learned phenomenon – it is passed from one generation to the next. Culture is usually studied indirectly by studying behavior, customs, language, and rituals.

Culture refers in general to the way things are done. Workplace culture refers to the type of environment in which employees work as well as the assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs that shape that environment. Workplace culture includes the way employees interact with one another, how they go about doing their work, and the practices routinely followed in the course of the workday. Workplace culture also refers to programs, procedures, and policies of particular interest to women such as diversity training, harassment and discrimination policies, and flexible work arrangements that accommodate child and elder care needs.

Methodology

Between June 2007 and October 2008, we held seven focus groups involving about 70 diverse women currently employed in trades and technology in Nova Scotia. The groups included Aboriginal women, African Nova Scotian women, and immigrant women. In addition, we spoke with women individually and in small groups. The discussions took place in Halifax, Bridgewater, and Kentville. The focus groups averaged 2 ½ hours and were held during the working day. To accomplish this, we had the support of over 20 employers who enabled women employees to attend the sessions without financial penalty. In some sessions, the discussions were recorded and later transcribed. In others, documentation was accomplished through notes and flip-chart recordings.

Discussion topics included:

- reasons for choosing trades and/or technology
- learning about job opportunities in trades and technology
- being interviewed
- being hired
- orientation – first experiences in the workplace
- diversity in the workplace
- what's good and not-so-good about being a woman in non-traditional trades and technology
- impact of workplace culture on women's experiences
- apprenticeship – formal and informal
- issues of greatest concern for women
- support for women in non-traditional occupations
- workplace safety issues for women
- why women stay
- suggestions to make trades and technology workplaces better for women

Themes and highlights arising from the discussions are presented here in *Working It Out*. Previous research involved discussions with employers about the challenges they face in recruitment and hiring of women in trades and technology. The findings of that research can be found in *In the Picture...a future with diversity in trades, science and technology, Volume 3* on the Hypatia website at www.hypatiaassociation.ca.



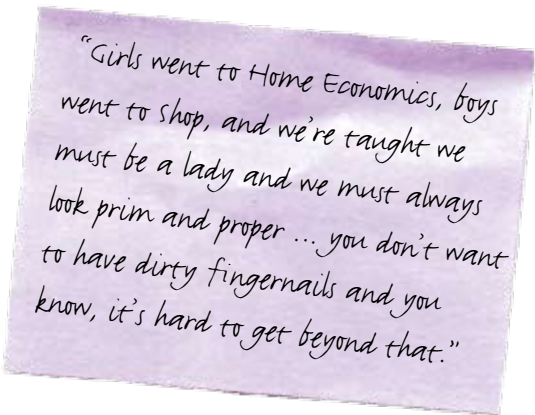
From a Young Age – Early Education about Trades and Technology

Many of the women in the focus groups reported they were the sole female employee in their work environment. One woman’s depiction of herself as “the lone ranger, the only female” was a familiar, often wistful, truth for many participants. This didn’t surprise us – we knew from previous studies and from talking to employers that women are profoundly underrepresented on non-traditional job sites in Nova Scotia. We asked the focus group participants why they thought that so few women in the province are embracing careers in trades and technology.

Overwhelmingly, the women identified three factors responsible for the current shortage of women in non-traditional occupations:

- a lack of exposure to trades and technology,
- a lack of awareness about trades and technology occupations, and
- a lack of encouragement to choose work in trades and technology fields.

Many of the women recounted how they’d been actively discouraged from work deemed suitable for boys and men, but not for girls or women. One woman described how she’d been recently excluded from helping her father and her grandfather build a deck and mused that, “Both my grandfathers were tradesmen and I had no idea what they did. I was actively discouraged from asking questions.” Another woman remembered her father’s adamant reaction to her expressed desire to be a truck driver: “No way you’re doing that. None whatsoever.”



“Girls went to Home Economics, boys went to shop, and we’re taught we must be a lady and we must always look prim and proper ... you don’t want to have dirty fingernails and you know, it’s hard to get beyond that.”

One focus group participant noted: “Not many women are exposed to trades or technology so they have no idea what those work environments are like, what those occupations are like. You know, they’re usually exposed to whatever their parents or their sisters or their aunts do, which is generally traditional.”

Even though educational approaches are not currently so rigid, the women felt that false ideas about trades and technology still exist throughout our society and are unconsciously passed down to girls and young women. Throughout the focus groups, participants identified basic myths and misconceptions they believe affect girls’ and women’s perceptions about jobs in trades and technology:

- it’s physically dirty work
- it’s not a “real” career
- it’s not honourable work
- it’s work typically done by people not “smart enough” to go to university
- it’s not social – it’s very solitary work (especially technology jobs)

The women also identified what they believe to be the reality about employment in trades and technology. They expressed the desire that these experiences be communicated better to girls and women:

- trades and technology occupations are a career, not just a job
- work in these fields can be highly rewarding
- jobs in trades and technology can be very well-paying
- skills learned in these fields are transferable
- skilled workers in these fields are currently in demand

Women spoke passionately about the need for girls to be exposed to trades and technology occupations early in their educational lives. One woman's emphatic statement, "I think it does have to start in the schools, bringing the trades back into the schools," effectively sums up what the participants frequently asserted throughout the focus groups.

The low participation rate of women in trades and technology is not the sole responsibility of the school system, however. According to the women, guidance counselors and teachers are often ill-informed about jobs in trades and technology fields and as a result don't encourage female students in that direction. As one woman said, non-traditional work for women, "...is not promoted in the school. Even if you have a guidance counselor, first thing he's not handing you is 'Here, be a plumber. Go be a carpenter. Go be a welder.' You know, they're handing you a university certificate or 'Go to community college and take reception or business.'"

*non-traditional work
for women, "...is not
promoted in the
school."*

Many of the women felt that employers could play a key role in educating girls and young women about work options in trades and technology. When we asked the women what things employers should do to attract female employees, participants overwhelmingly said that employers should educate guidance counselors in high schools about the kinds of work available: "Employers should be talking with guidance counselors saying that 'We need so many people in this trade or in college, or university, or whatever.'"

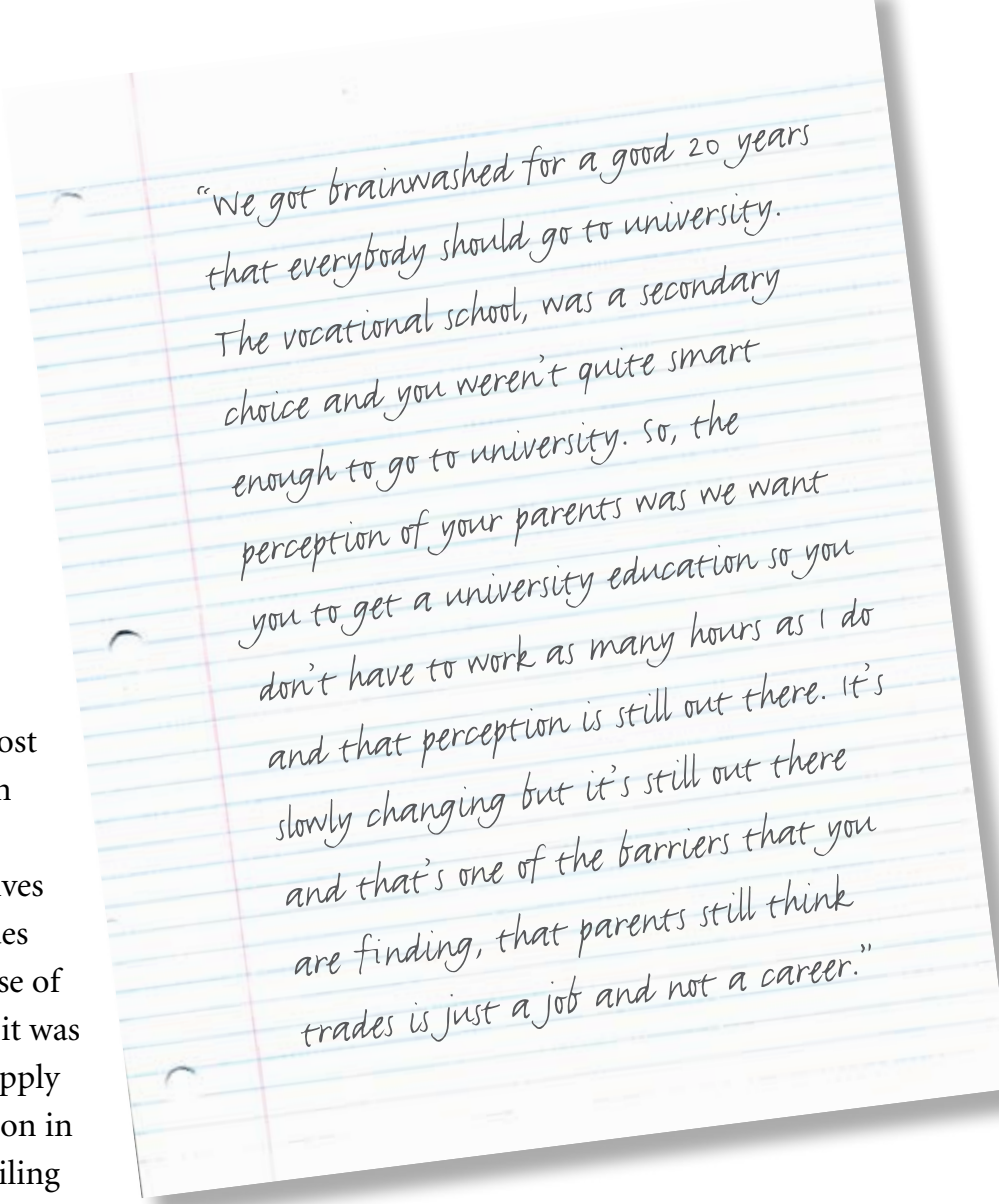
Many women described having had trouble "trying to find out" about the trade they were interested in and suggested that employers make a concerted effort to provide schools and community resource centres with specific information about the kinds of jobs that exist within their industries.

The women identified a number of ways employers could provide much-needed information:

- supply schools with recruitment packages
- organize school tours of job sites
- create mentoring and/or job-shadowing programs
- arrange for female employees to speak to classes
- promote "bring your daughter to work" days
- make information easily available online on a company website or through a community clearinghouse

Several women noted that although many employers promote workplace diversity, most young girls and women aren't encouraged by their parents and relatives towards careers in trades and technology. Because of this, many women felt it was vital that employers supply schools with information in order to counter prevailing myths about work in trades and technology.

As one woman observed, "Social attitudes and the social environment isn't getting up to speed with embracing women doing whatever it is that they want to do whether it's traditional or non-traditional."

A photograph of a handwritten note on a piece of lined paper. The paper is tilted and has three binder holes on the left side. The handwriting is in cursive and reads: "We got brainwashed for a good 20 years that everybody should go to university. The vocational school, was a secondary choice and you weren't quite smart enough to go to university. So, the perception of your parents was we want you to get a university education so you don't have to work as many hours as I do and that perception is still out there. It's slowly changing but it's still out there and that's one of the barriers that you are finding, that parents still think trades is just a job and not a career."

"We got brainwashed for a good 20 years that everybody should go to university. The vocational school, was a secondary choice and you weren't quite smart enough to go to university. So, the perception of your parents was we want you to get a university education so you don't have to work as many hours as I do and that perception is still out there. It's slowly changing but it's still out there and that's one of the barriers that you are finding, that parents still think trades is just a job and not a career."

In Their Own Words

"I have a three year-old daughter and she's trying to play with trucks in the dirt. My friend's there going, 'No, girls don't want to get dirty.'"

"Let's put the women in [the schools] to do the mentoring to show young girls that yes, it is possible and yes, they can do it."

"In junior high, there was a woodworking class and cooking class, and basically, you had to go to both whether you were male or female. I enjoyed that but once you got to high school, there's no training."

"In high school, in grade 12, they took us down to the dockyards and they showed us all the trades that they had down there and that's kind of what got me interested in a trade because you were seeing what the guys were doing."

It takes intelligence to do [trades and technology] work and people didn't make those connections. Now it's harder to talk to people about coming into the trades because they've not been looked at as being something that's been honourable."

Welcoming Women – Employers and the Hiring Process

Recruiting

Many employers in Nova Scotia report being eager to hire female tradeswomen and technicians. Yet women remain seriously underrepresented in trades and technology fields despite opportunities created by widespread skills shortages and good pay. Employers have told us that although they want to hire women, women don't apply for available positions.

We wondered why so few women are applying for jobs in the areas of trades and technology. We asked the focus group participants to tell us about their experiences through different stages of the hiring process.

Women reported learning about their current jobs in a variety of ways. Some responded to job ads on Internet websites like Monster and Workopolis. A few were contacted after dropping off résumés and “basically apply[ing] everywhere.” Other women learned about openings through family members and acquaintances who were already employed with the company. One woman reported being contacted directly as part of a “recommendation program” in which employees recommend people they know and are paid a finder's fee by the company if the person is hired.

"I think it's not one barrier, it's many – financial, discrimination, racism, culture, no support. It's a bigger thing than we may think ... these things affect all the immigrant women in Nova Scotia because I am sure all immigrant women have the same problems in different contexts."

Some women in the focus groups reported having problems reaching the initial stages of the hiring process. Although not commonly reported, one woman who approached an employer directly was told, "I'm not hiring you. You're a female." Another tradeswoman, familiar with this scenario, noted that employers "have no qualms around here saying that." In some instances, employers told the women that their employees' wives and girlfriends would be upset if a woman was hired to work in the shop or on the floor.

The women reported that most organizations and businesses try to attract new employees in standard ways:

- they place advertisements in newspapers and on Internet job sites
- they contact their own laid-off employees
- they encourage employees to refer friends and family to them
- they recruit in the schools (i.e. community college)

Women have told us they especially noticed the language employers use in their job ads. One woman stated that diversity is the number one thing she looks for in a workplace. They are attracted to ads in which employers indicate they will hire women and make them feel welcome. There are many ways to do this. Preferred approaches are, “We are an employment equity employer” or the more personal, “We welcome applications from women” or “Applications from women, Aboriginal people, African Nova Scotians, persons living with disabilities, and new Canadians are welcome.”

Reference to diversity goals and anti-harassment or zero-tolerance policies send an important message. Many women also said they would notice if non-inclusive language was used in an ad such as “journeyman” or “fireman” instead of “journeyperson” or “firefighter.”

The women told us ads and web sites containing pictures displaying diversity within the workforce are important, as is reference to opportunities for training and advancement.

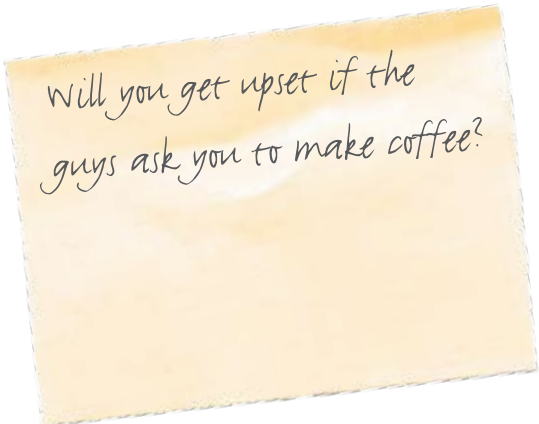
Women also spoke to us about the recruiting practice of “highlighting” or “showcasing” female tradeswomen and technicians in posters, videos, and television interviews. Some of the women viewed being depicted in marketing materials as basically positive for their careers and felt a sense of pride in being able to reach out to other women. Others spoke of the unfair pressure they felt to participate in the making of these recruitment tools.

In Their Own Words

"I think employers could be giving out information about the trades that they hire. You know, what do they do? What does their workforce look like? Who are the new people coming in? How many women are there?"

"My employer has actually asked me 'How can we do this? How can we get more women in here?' I said, 'Well, go to the high schools. Go to the colleges.'"

"If employers went to women, went places where women congregate, they would have more success around recruitment."



Will you get upset if the guys ask you to make coffee?

Interviews

Being interviewed for a job is stressful for women and for men. While many employers wish to establish equal-opportunity workplaces and claim they are open to hiring women, the interview process itself often acts as a barrier to women eager to enter the non-traditional workforce.

Several focus group participants reported having negative experiences during job interviews. One of the biggest issues to emerge in the focus groups was that women were almost routinely asked questions they viewed as inappropriate. The women explained that these questions made them feel highly uncomfortable and caused them to wonder whether the workplace would really be welcoming. Although many of the tradeswomen reported having been asked the very same or similar interview questions, they felt certain their male colleagues had not been asked these questions as part of the hiring process.

Some of the questions women reported being asked during job interviews were:

- Do you know that you're going to get dirty?
- Are you physically able to do this job?
- Will you get upset if the guys ask you to make coffee?
- Will you be able to get a babysitter if we need you to work shift work?
- If somebody sexually harasses you, are you going to lodge a complaint?

...aptitude tests sometimes required to gain employment in trades and technology jobs often register a person's experience developing a certain skill rather than measuring their ability to learn that skill.

Several women said they would like to have been told about the employer's diversity goals and policies. They would also like to have the opportunity to ask employers about workplace diversity without feeling they were jeopardizing their chances of getting the job.

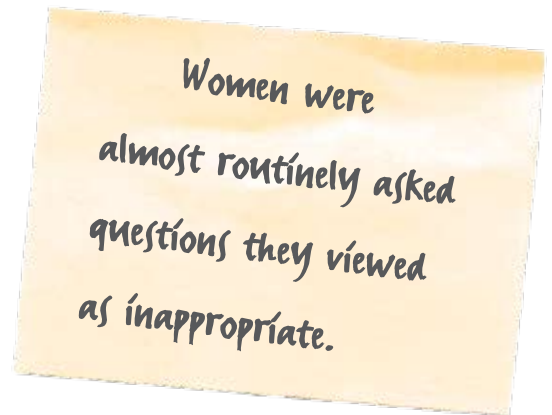
A number of women also described how the formal set-up of the interview process itself made them feel awkward and intimidated. Many women reported that they had been interviewed by an all-male team. One woman described a scenario of, "...seven people sitting around a room. Nobody smiled. Nobody laughed. They all just stared at me."

One tradeswoman referred to a past situation in which a major company employed women as consultants to gain insight into why so few women were being hired. As this woman puts it, "It's no wonder there were no women in the line trade. They couldn't get past the first stage because all the men sitting on the board didn't think there should be any women line people." The consultants informed the company that unless they changed their interview process, they would continue to have a shortage of female workers.

Many women also identified taking tests as being especially stressful. They pointed out that the kinds of aptitude tests sometimes required to gain employment in trades and technology jobs often register a person's experience developing a certain skill rather than measuring their ability to learn that skill. One woman told us that her test scores were lower than her male counterparts' because "they grew up doing that so they have that advantage over you."

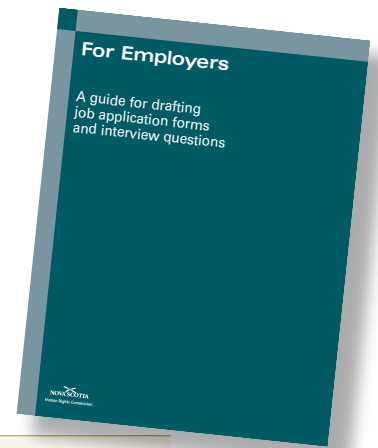
Immigrant women reported that a huge barrier for them accessing employment is language. In one case, a woman told us her husband didn't allow her to learn English because he needed someone to stay at home, take care of their child, and do all the household chores. Another woman who was a teacher in her home country accepted what seemed to be the only option available for her as a housekeeper in a hotel.

Another immigrant woman felt the biggest barrier for her is discrimination. "It's not a question of level of education, it's about discrimination and it doesn't matter how much I study, I will always be a dark-skinned Latina and that is enough for any employer in Nova Scotia to not hire me."



Women were almost routinely asked questions they viewed as inappropriate.

Many of the concerns raised by the women are addressed in a publication from the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission.



Before a person is hired	After a person begins work
Physical or mental disability	
Can not ask any questions about disabilities, past dependency on drugs or alcohol, or health issues.	Can ask what kind of accommodation the person may need for a disability.
Race or colour	
Can not ask any questions.	Can not ask any questions.
Sex (includes gender and pregnancy)	
Can not ask any questions, including any about gender, pregnancy, or plans for child-bearing.	Can not ask any questions, including any about gender, pregnancy, or plans for child-bearing.
Sexual orientation	
Can not ask any questions.	Can not ask any questions.
Marital status	
Can not ask any questions, including any about a person's spouse or a second family income.	
Family status	
Can ask about a person's ability to meet job requirements such as for travel and shift work.	Can ask about a person's ability to meet job requirements such as for travel and shift work.
Can not ask any questions about issues such as childcare arrangements or number of dependents or children.	Can not ask any questions about issues such as childcare arrangements or number of dependents or children.

Before a person is hired	After a person begins work
Origin/ethnic, national, or Aboriginal	
Can ask for a Social Insurance Number and other documents that show the person is eligible to work in Canada.	
Can ask questions to find out if the person speaks or writes a language well enough to do a job when there is a legitimate need for them to be fluent in a particular language to do the job.	
Can not ask about the nationality of the person or their relatives.	
Can not ask for a birth certificate, citizenship status, or mother tongue.	
Religion or creed	
Can not ask any questions, including any about religious affiliations or customs, or whether the person will want to take religious holidays.	Can ask what kind of accommodation the person may need for such things as religious holidays.
Other personal information	
Can ask questions about any specific physical or mental abilities that a job requires, when they are bona fide requirements for the job.	Can ask for a photograph for identification purposes.
Can not ask for a photograph.	Can ask for any information required for tax benefit or insurance purposes.
Can not ask for a medical examination.	Can ask for a medical exam that is required for the job. The medical exam questions must relate to the job.

Transferable Skills

Participants also emphasized the importance of employers recognizing transferable skills. A number of tradeswomen pointed out that unlike their male counterparts, they weren't exposed early to the kinds of activities that boys often are. Rarely, for example, are girls encouraged by their fathers, mothers, brothers, or uncles to help build a deck or get under the hood of a car. As a result, women seeking to enter into trades and technology may lack specific knowledge and experience that potential male employees may take for granted.

Another woman described attending a “guild expo” after successfully making it through the interview stage. Although she was the only woman invited to the expo, she reported feeling comfortable performing hands-on tasks she'd never done before at the various stations.

She noted that this particular employer, “Emphasized transferable skills in their advertising so ... if I could come up with examples that demonstrated, yes, I don't mind working heights or I shingled my roof and stuff like that, that all was good. Just as much as if you were some guy who was working in a factory or whatever.”

Another woman summed this up well by pointing out that “all that hands-on stuff is teachable” and can be learned as an adult. As she emphatically stated, “Aptitude is a code word for experience and exposure.”

"I'm starting to realize that almost all the guys I've worked with, in fact every single guy I work with, has what I call the 'informal twenty-year apprenticeship' which is being around it when you're growing up. Even if it was just helping their dad shingle the roof or working on the car. They always have these stories about old broken stuff that was lying around and they would try to fix it and maybe it would work and maybe it wouldn't. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that when they got to start in the trades ... it was like a language. To me, it feels like a second language, like learning a second language."

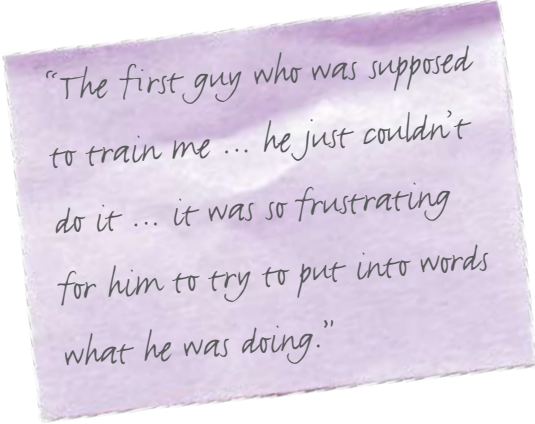
"Aptitude is a code word for experience and exposure."

On the Job – Encountering the Non-traditional Workplace

The First Day

Many of the women indicated their first day on the job was intimidating, overwhelming, and confusing. One of the biggest issues for a number of the women going onto a job site for the very first time was that their male co-workers had not been told a woman had been hired. As a result, a number of the women were greeted with baffled looks rather than with interested or welcoming expressions. One woman in the construction industry described the loneliness that seemed typical of many first-day experiences: “They were constructing a building and I felt like an intruder. I didn’t want to go into the trailer where they were all having lunch because they were all talking and laughing and stuff. Instead, I went somewhere else to have lunch alone.”

The majority of the women told us that they did not receive any kind of formal orientation on their first day on the job. They were left to learn their way around pretty much on their own. As one woman who worked as a computer programmer described it: “Here you go. Here’s the computer. See ya!”



"The first guy who was supposed to train me ... he just couldn't do it ... it was so frustrating for him to try to put into words what he was doing."

On-site

Although trades work is frequently hands-on and passed down from generation to generation, a number of female workers claimed their male co-workers often found it difficult to assist them with hands-on learning. According to the women, even men who were specifically tasked with training became impatient and frustrated. Sometimes, the men would simply stop showing the women how to do things altogether leaving the women at a loss. This was a difficult and frustrating situation for the women, and for the men too.

One woman described the on-going dilemma this created for her: "The first guy who was supposed to train me for the whole first year, he just couldn't do it. It was like he just couldn't do it. He'd just talk to me but he didn't know how to ... it was so frustrating for him to try to put into words what he was doing. He would rather do it behind my back while I was at lunch ... and so then, I still didn't know the next time around and now, I'm four years in and people are like 'Didn't anybody ever teach you that? How come you don't know this and you've been here four years?'"

Many women told us that when it came to on-the-job training, they had to learn the hard way – on their own and without support.

One participant noted even the most supportive male employees in her workplace were genuinely shocked to discover she didn't know how a particular piece of equipment worked or didn't know the name for something. Another tradeswoman noted the men in her shop had all picked up the names for different equipment by "osmosis" that comes from an early exposure to trades work in childhood. A lack of familiarity with terminology is difficult for the women to hide. As one woman observed, "It doesn't necessarily have to do with your skill set but if you don't know those terms on a work site, they think you're incompetent."

A number of women also reported feeling ill at ease and "not at home" because of specific, concrete aspects of their job sites and of the way things were routinely done as part of the acceptable workplace culture.

Although issues such as "girlie" calendar images, properly fitting gear, and private washrooms might be viewed by employers as mundane, their presence or absence on a non-traditional job site has an enormous significance for female workers. Women experience these things in symbolic and emotional terms as well as practically. How an employer deals with issues such as whether or not there are locks on the bathroom doors, or whether a pregnant employee can get a well-fitting company jacket, sends a message to women about whether or not they are welcome within the company.

As one female worker put it when talking about the “girlie” pictures that adorn the walls of many shops, “What it says is this is an all-male straight environment. That’s what it says when those images are there, you know. It speaks about the work place culture and it says you’re going to be uncomfortable when you work here if you get hired, and everyone else is going to continue to be comfortable in the way that they’re accustomed to.”

We asked women to imagine they were walking through a workplace for the first time. What signs would tell them it was a safe and welcoming workplace for them, one they would like to join?

Their responses:

- clean, accessible women’s washrooms
- no “girlie” pictures, no cartoons of female co-workers or their phone numbers on the wall
- other women working in non-traditional occupations
- a diversity of male employees, not just white men
- coveralls and safety equipment in a variety of sizes to fit
- no bare chests for anyone!
- lots of safety signs posted
- introductions made to other co-workers
- guys talking about women with respect, no leering, no jokes
- sexual harassment policies in place already
- an uncluttered and safe work site
- energetic and friendly staff
- workplace is accessible for people with disabilities

In Their Own Words

"Almost all the work clothing is designed for guys and it's ridiculous because work gloves are too big."

"A lot of times there's not the appropriate washrooms, but washrooms were always a big deal to me. You go there and it's a private space. There were times when I'd have a bad experience; and go to the washroom and cry alone."

"I don't know why I didn't mention it to my employer but, there's this Miss Canada thing and they had a picture of one of the ladies in a swimsuit on the wall."

Working Together, Working Alone – Relationships with Male Co-workers

Her Right to Be There

We learned from the focus groups that the attitudes and behaviours of male co-workers dramatically affect how a woman experiences work culture. Female workers stepping onto the shop floor or the building site are entering what has traditionally been the sole terrain of men, what one participant termed “a male environment.” As a result, women working in trades and technology often encounter prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about gender and work. The impact is even greater on women of colour, immigrant women, and women living with disabilities.


Some women reported highly negative experiences in work cultures where the general attitude towards women was poor: “Bad experience would have been my previous employer. The attitude was not good. They pretty well treated me like I was stupid and doing nothing.” Another woman recounted how at one job, “Instead of putting my skills to use, I was cleaning toilets and sweeping the floor.”

Sometimes negative attitudes towards female employees were explicitly stated. One woman in law enforcement reported that, “I’ve gotten the comment that in order to do this job, you need to have broad shoulders and if you don’t, you shouldn’t be here. I don’t know what the size of my shoulders has to do with the job.”

Sexist comments weren't the only factor making women feel discounted and unwanted on the job site. One reason had to do with the reluctance of male co-workers to credit a woman's suggestions and ideas, to take her advice about a particular task or aspect of the work they were supposedly doing as a team.

One woman described an incident where she and her male co-workers were having trouble assembling a catwalk. Her suggestion about which pieces should go up first was met with hostility from one man in particular who stormed off maintaining that he "didn't come here to be told what to do," despite the fact that he frequently told her how she should be doing things. "He didn't want to take my advice," she concluded. Although the other men weren't openly resistant "nobody would bother listening" to suggestions she made though they later proved correct.

Several focus group participants distinguished between the attitudes and behavior of older and younger men. Many women felt older male employees tended to harbour an old boy's club attitude. They had little, if any, experience working with women and were more likely to feel trades work was not appropriate work for women. This woman's account of an older co-worker's comments to her is typical: "I was the first woman in the field I worked in and an older man would say 'Why do you work here anyway? You know, what are you doing here? You should be a teacher or something. You shouldn't be out here with us.'"

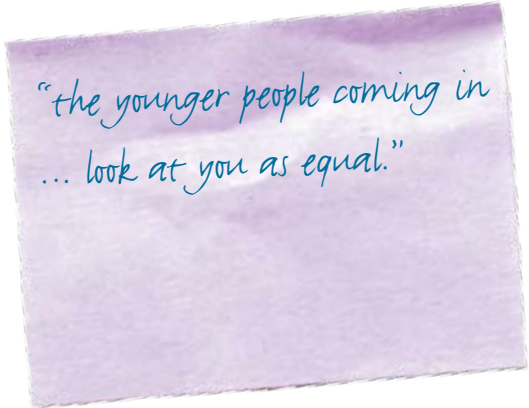


Hey, a girl. Hey,
what are you
doing here?

Although we did not hear it often, one woman told us that one of her first supervisors advised her regularly: “You should be home and pregnant.” One woman simply concluded that “the older generation do not see women doing these jobs.” Another said, “They’ll throw every obstacle in your way that they can just to prove that women have no place here.”

We also heard from women about some older male workers who treated them like daughters and were perhaps overly protective. Women also talked about older male workers who were very polite and supportive, contributing in positive ways to their experiences.

Because attitudes about women in trades and technology are societal in nature and wide-spread, they were not limited to male employees. Many of the women told us that they have had to deal with openly sexist comments from clients and customers as well as from co-workers: “Some old guys would come into the shop and bring their trucks in, so they’d, like, walk past and ... ‘Hey, a girl. Hey, what are you doing here? What do you want to do that job for?’ What would I want to be a house cleaner for? What would I want to be a secretary for? What do you want to drive a truck for, you know?” A woman who worked for an electronics company and dealt frequently with customers told us that, “You really have to prove ... that yes, I do know what I’m talking about. They would rather go to a man.”



*“the younger people coming in
... look at you as equal.”*

The tradeswomen agreed that younger men seemed to have a much more accepting attitude towards women in non-traditional fields and they were generally “so used to there being women in almost everything.” One woman’s comment summed up the participants’ overall sense that “the younger people coming in ... look at you as equal.”

While they tended to be more accepting of a woman’s right to work beside them on the shop floor or on the road, several women reported having difficulties with young men. One woman reported her male colleagues were jealous of her and convinced that she would benefit from special treatment just because she was a woman: “When I was in college ... the guys would say, ‘Oh, you’re gonna get a job before us.’ I did get a permanent job and they hated me. They were really mad at me.”

A number of the tradeswomen also described how the behaviour of their male co-workers was shaped by the men’s wives and girlfriends. As one woman explained, “I’ve had more problems with the girlfriends ... that’s a big thing. I’ll never forget the first Christmas party I ever went to for my company. I walked up to somebody, one of the guys I worked with, and ... he didn’t want to talk to me because his date was with him.” Another woman agreed that company functions are often very isolating and awkward because, “If I do talk to the men, then the women are like, ‘Who’s that and why are you talking to her?’” Women reported that often, even on the job site, their male co-workers will consciously act distant towards them as a way of coping with pressure from their wives or girlfriends.



Women don't want to be treated differently simply because they're female.

Proving Herself

Despite the many factors women working in trades and technology occupations had to deal with, they were unanimous about how they would like to be treated by their male co-workers. Over and over, women emphatically stated they didn't want to be treated differently simply because they were female: "I don't want to go into the workplace and be made to feel that I have to be put on a pedestal or I'm special because I'm a girl there." In fact, several of the focus group participants spoke passionately about not wanting to be given any special treatment because they're women. They insisted: "...if we want to be treated equal, equal pay, equal treatment, we have to prove ourselves just the same as the man does. We can't get it passed to us because we're women." Not playing "the female card" at work was a point of pride for a number of women.

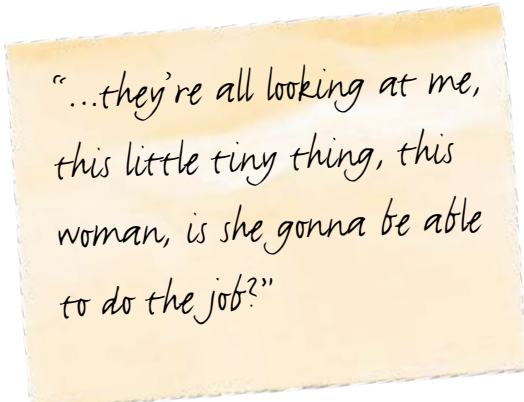
Many of the participants were proud to have "held their own" on an all-male work site and to have demonstrated to their skeptical co-workers that they could, in fact, perform the work involved: "...they're all looking at me, this little tiny thing, this woman, is she gonna be able to do the job? Once they realized that I was really there not as a token woman, I was there to work, they treated me just like one of the guys."

But does a man have to continually prove his ability to do the job in the same relentless way that the women do?


Even women who describe their work environments as largely positive told the group, “Like all of you probably know, you have to prove yourself and work twice as hard just to let everybody know what you can do.” For many tradeswomen, acceptance and recognition from their male peers hadn’t come quickly, if at all. Over and over again, women in different kinds of work spoke of the relentless, on-going pressure to prove themselves: “You’re in a different environment when you’re working with men ... you’ve got to work like they do and you’re only as good as your last shift. You can be a great employee and you can have great time-keeping ... but you are only as good as the minute you clock out.”

One participant concluded, “Put aside all the niceties ... there’s a systematic problem when it comes to accepting women in the trades.”

Sometimes the pressure that comes from not being accepted proves to be too much: “I tell you, if they know how to get to you, they’re gonna do it. That’s what happened with me ... you can only defend yourself so much and then it becomes you. You’ve got an attitude problem. Then, you’d be too defensive and you can’t stand up for yourself and you just kind of put yourself in the corner and put your head down and work and get blamed for everything around you and you just try and deal and that’s why I quit. I couldn’t deal with it.”



“...they’re all looking at me, this little tiny thing, this woman, is she gonna be able to do the job?”



“Hiring more women is beneficial to the employer because everyone’s happier.”

Faced with the isolation that comes from being perceived and treated differently, it is vitally important for women employees that there be another woman somewhere in the work environment. One woman explained even though she didn’t run into any problems in her job, it helped just knowing, “This is my sister here, so if I have any trouble, I’m going to her because she’s been there, done that.” As another tradeswoman put it, “I think it makes it a little easier if there’s somebody who’s “been there” and who’s established and they kind of say ‘If you have any problems, just come see me,’ because when you’re just starting there, whether you’re an apprentice or you’re job training or whatever, they [male co-workers] can be pretty intimidating.”

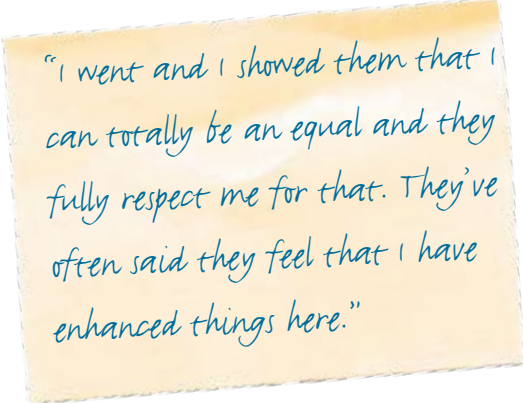
Another woman maintained that hiring more women is beneficial to the employer because everyone’s happier. She explained, “They [the women] feel more content because there’s safety in numbers. You take five women. Those five women, chances are, are going to be much happier at their job, much more content, feel much more safe than the one who’s all by herself.” She pointed out that having more women on the job would ultimately benefit the men, as well: “They’ll be used to working with more women and then it becomes easier. It’s hard with one. It gets easier with two. Little easier with three.”

Supportive Work Environments

Some women in the focus groups reported very high levels of support and acceptance from their male co-workers. One of the participants, the only woman on her job site, explained that her male colleagues had all received sensitivity training and she's not treated differently in terms of roles or expectations: "We clean our electronic equipment and I never feel any different. They'll clean. I'll clean. We all do it."

Another stated she worked with "a really good bunch" of men who tease and joke around with her but "know when they step on my toes" and apologize. She went on to explain these men are, "Very respectful when there's any kind of conflict public-wise or amongst ourselves ... they come and they ask me, 'What's your opinion?'" She also reported the men give credence to her views and listen to her as a matter of course: "Sometimes when there's a problem or a situation, I might speak up and say, 'Well, maybe this would work,' [and] you know, they'll listen to what I have to say and if they think it's a good idea, they'll apply it." She concluded, "I do feel very equal there."

Another woman recounted how the men in her shop invited her full participation from the very beginning. She spoke about one man in particular: "I was just kind of standing around watching and he's like, 'What are you standing around watching for? Get over here and help me. Climb up that trailer and take those lights off for me.'" She remembered how, "...the whole time, they let me do stuff and all summer long, I was right in there like a dirty shirt."



"I went and I showed them that I can totally be an equal and they fully respect me for that. They've often said they feel that I have enhanced things here."

Nearly all the women who reported high levels of job satisfaction expressed a common theme – their male colleagues valued and appreciated them for the unique skills and aptitudes they brought to the workplace as women.

"When I first went there, I know the guys had their concerns. 'Well, can she lift a pail of water?' I went and I showed them that I can totally be an equal and they fully respect me for that. They've often said they feel that I have enhanced things here. Not only with just the cleaning part, but dealing with the public, getting to know what goes on...."

Several participants spoke with pride of playing an emotionally nurturing role such as informal facilitator, mediator, coach, or counselor for male co-workers. One woman noted she's like the "arena mother" in her job site; another referred to herself as "the shift counselor."

Another woman described how she found herself naturally in the role of facilitator and the good effect she thinks that's created: "I don't get directly involved in power struggles, but you know, sometimes one guy might say to me, 'Well, do you think I'm right?' or whatever and I just try to be objective and say, 'Well, you know, I can sort of see this person's way of thinking and your way of thinking ... and you need to sit down and work it out,' but I think since I have started doing this temporary position, things are running a little smoother now than they did ... they're learning to make it work."

Work cultures that valued the difference between female and male employees rather than ignoring or being negative about that difference enabled the women to flourish and feel they played important roles on their job sites. Rather than aspiring to be “one of the guys,” these women felt free to use a wide range of skills typically associated with women’s societal experience as caretakers – skills such as mediation, organization, and facilitation.

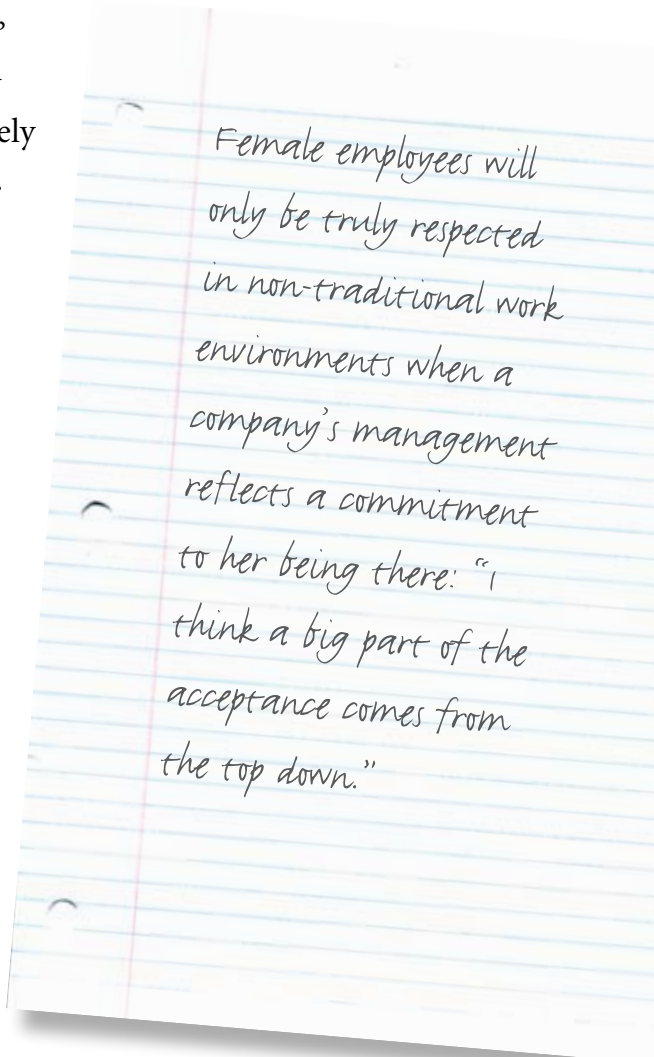
Participants who felt appreciated for the skills and aptitudes they bring naturally to their jobs felt good about their work environments. They were excited about the contributions they were making as employees.

From the Top – Women’s Relationships with Their Employers


Employer Leadership

One participant, a woman employed in a management position, observed that although her company had hired more women, “there’s still always that boy’s club. There’s that difference between how the women are treated and the men are treated.” According to a number of the participants, only leadership on the part of employers can effectively address and change inequality in the workplace. Female employees will only be truly respected in non-traditional work environments when a company’s management reflects a commitment to her being there: “I think a big part of the acceptance comes from the top down.”

Another woman who formerly worked in construction also identified management as a determining factor in terms of how welcoming a workplace was for women: “For me, the two things that were the most significant were: A. what’s the management like? If the management is proactive, the management is taking a leadership role around ... issues, it’s a much more positive environment on the floor, and B. what’s that workplace culture like? I’ve witnessed a great deal in life, a lot



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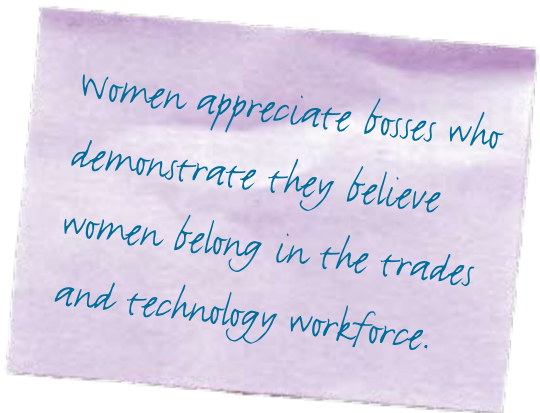
of sexism, lots of homophobia, all of that ... and a big part of it was about management and about how comfortable they were, you know, in the workplace ... the level of professionalism."

One tradeswoman who worked for a large company spoke strongly about her desire for her employer to be aware of the challenges she faces as a woman in non-traditional work.

She wishes that her employer would also educate male employees about those challenges: "I want to know that they're knowledgeable about what the barriers are to women entering the trades and it would be wonderful if someone would acknowledge it somewhere along the way ... because in every room I've been in where there's a bunch of guys, there's the element, I'm the woman and they don't really know how to act and what they should do. I think they just need a little more education about what the issues are."

According to the women, employers indicate their awareness of the obstacles women face and demonstrate their commitment to supporting their female employees in two ways – through words and through actions.

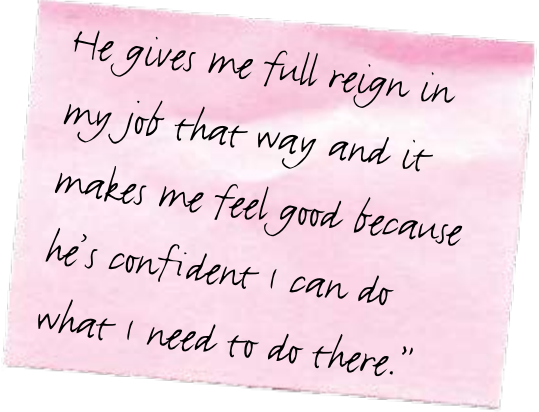
One woman explained why she thought employers should routinely make clear proactive statements to their employees about the company's commitment to creating and maintaining an inclusive workplace: "I know in the last job I had, the person who hired me did that and it made a difference. They did have quite a level of diversity in that workplace. It made a big difference that they said it out loud."



Women appreciate bosses who demonstrate they believe women belong in the trades and technology workforce.

Several women spoke appreciatively of bosses and supervisors who demonstrated, through their behaviour that, they believed women were more than qualified to be in the trades and technology workforce: "...if I ever had somebody say anything to me about why I would want to do the job, why I'm working where I am, my boss is behind the guy saying, 'Well, [she] took school and she did this and she knows this.' Like, [he's] always talked me up. Anytime anybody says anything ... he treats me with respect."

The theme of supervisors and bosses modeling respect towards their female employees came up again and again in the focus groups. One woman who reported very high levels of job satisfaction, described her supervisor's typical response when she approaches him with new suggestions about how to do things: "If I think something will work better, I go to him and he'll say, 'That's a good idea. Go ahead.' He gives me full reign in my job that way and it makes me feel good because he's confident I can do what I need to do there."



He gives me full reign in my job that way and it makes me feel good because he's confident I can do what I need to do there."

The Employer of Choice

It became clear throughout the focus groups the women weren't simply concerned about their own experiences – they wanted employers to demonstrate respect and fairness towards all employees regardless of gender: “Stop making it about the men and women who work there. It's about the employees who work there.”

For virtually all of the women, an “employer of choice” is one that treats all its employees with respect and:

- values and promotes diversity*
- values, appreciates, and appropriately rewards its employees*
- has fair policies regarding vacation time, maternity leave, taking time off, pay scales, etc.*
- offers good training and promotion opportunities*
- honours work/life balance*

In Their Own Words

"A diverse workforce creates a productive company and a successful company."

"I think the employer should educate their employees ... on sensitivity training. I think it would be a great thing."

"I would like to see more respect in the workplace. Everybody should be treated fairly and everybody should be treated with respect ... people are trying to, go forward ... but positions are picked prior to even applying or even being posted."

"Every day is a fight. Absolutely every day is a fight to change. It's a fight to ... modernize the workplace. It's a fight to develop a level of respect for each other in the workplace."

"I think recognition is the biggest thing for me. I find that you get lots of recognition when you make a mistake but when you do good things, when you do good work, you don't get much of anything."

"We have major communication issues in our department ... because everybody's on a power struggle, I think."

"We have [a meeting] every morning. I mean, we just come in. We sit down. The five of us are there. We talk about the day, who's doing what, what's going on. Everybody knows what's happening ... everything works really good."

A Positive Practice

One woman described how her employer had implemented a practice of cross-training in which employees shared their expertise with each other to the benefit of all.

She spoke happily of how she and her male co-workers took turns listening to and learning from each other: “A couple of the guys have more experience out in the distribution system when I have more experience in the treatment plant and right now, what we’re trying to do is cross-train everyone.... So, when I’m out there, I know they know more than I do, so I pay attention to what they’re saying but when they’re in the plant, then I get the respect. They know I know more than them and they listen to what I’m telling them and they go by what I say.”

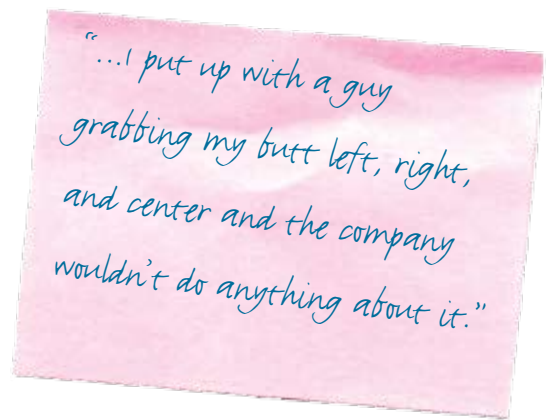
When the Worst Happens – Dealing with Harassment

Fear of Reporting

We heard throughout the focus groups that many female employees are hesitant to report instances of harassment even when the company they work for has formal anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies.

The reasons for this fear and hesitancy are complex.

- Fear they won't be believed or taken seriously – “All they're going to do is go ‘Oh, she's just bitching.’”
- Fear of conflict and confrontation – “You don't like confrontation and you don't want to talk to this huge guy...”
- Fear of being hurt by the offending male – “I'm not going to go running to the boss because I don't know whether the guy's going to take me out and beat the crap out of me.”
- Fear of making the situation worse – “It's already uncomfortable working with him because I don't even want to talk to the guy, but if I say something, then it makes it worse.”
- Fear the employer will not be supportive – “[If] you have an employer that's just as bad as their guys, it wouldn't make any difference whether you went to them about harassment or not.”



*"...I put up with a guy
grabbing my butt left, right,
and center and the company
wouldn't do anything about it."*

Women told us that often their employers don't act decisively on the harassment that's been reported even though there are anti-harassment policies in place for the employees' protection. As one woman who had reported repeated harassment to her employer explained, "I just changed departments because the company wouldn't do anything about it even though they've got harassment policies and stuff... just change departments, and unfortunately, the idiot followed me so I just changed departments again." According to another female worker, "I worked in a plant for twenty years and they had harassment policies up the yin-yang and I put up with a guy grabbing my butt left, right, and center and the company wouldn't do anything about it."

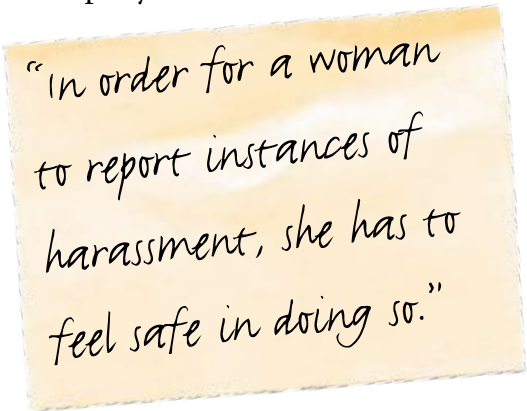
Despite women's hesitancy to inform their bosses that they are being harassed, one woman perceptively noted, "If you don't go and tell the employer that this is going on, then he just assumes that there is no such thing as harassment." However, in order for a woman to report instances of harassment, she has to feel safe in doing so. As one woman explained, having "an employer who respects you and treats you with respect in order for other people to see" helps a woman know that she will be taken seriously and is a key to her feeling safe enough to report harassment.

Taking Action

Repeatedly, female workers expressed the wish that their employers act decisively when faced with reports of harassment in the workplace: “They have to address it. So, if I went to him or somebody else went to him or her with a problem, then address it. Do something about it. Don’t make a joke out of it or completely ignore it. Something has to be done and if it’s not done, then these types of attitudes will continue because that type of attitude will just pass on to the next guy that comes in who has no learning and it will just continue on.”

Holding employees accountable demonstrates that the employer is serious about creating and maintaining an inclusive workplace – one based upon respect for all employees. According to the women, this kind of zero-tolerance approach wins their trust and helps them feel safe in their workplaces.

One woman, faced with inappropriate racist and sexual comments being made by male co-workers, turned to an older woman in the company and together the two women informed the plant manager. The woman expressed gratitude that this particular manager acted in a way that communicated harassment will not be tolerated: “They [her male co-workers] were all taken up to the office and they were given a notice, like, if you do this again, you will be fired.”



“In order for a woman to report instances of harassment, she has to feel safe in doing so.”

A Story of Personal Leadership

One woman told us a poignant story about a male classmate demonstrating the kind of vision that transcends stereotypes and helps heal divisions between male and female employees. She explained how her class was reading through the handbook that was required reading for tradespeople going into her particular line of work. The handbook hadn't been rewritten with inclusive language and used the male pronoun "he" to refer to all workers in this field.

As this woman remembers,

"One of the things we were doing was going around the classroom reading this chapter in the book, and the guys were reading paragraph after paragraph about climbing poles. One guy just decided ... he's twenty years old and he's not the greatest reader but he changed all the pronouns to "she" and around the classroom there were these kinds of little snickers and stuff like that. Afterwards, I said something to him. I said, 'That was a very nice gesture,' and he said, 'This is not right.' I mean, it's changing and that's leadership."

Final Words – A Wish List for Change

We asked women why they want to work in non-traditional trades and technology, and why they remain in those jobs. The three most commonly heard responses:

- the work is very satisfying and is a good use of their talents and interests
- they like to work with their hands
- there is greater economic security for them and their families

We also asked women to describe one wish they have for women who would like to enter the trades and technology workforce. Here's a sampling of what they said:

"My wish would be for women to feel as comfortable in their workplace, in their non-traditional workplace, as the men generally feel."

"Less discrimination."

"I wish for leadership ... I think leadership in the college and within the industry, within each of those corporations is what's really important."

"I wish that I was allowed to have the education that I got when I was forty when I was in high school and I wouldn't have to go through all this and so, I think getting her education early is very important."

"I wish we could remove all of the stereotypes that are out there about what are acceptable jobs and roles for women and that women can be leaders and women can be supervisors ... and remove all the fear that's out there about changing the roles."

"the younger people coming in ... look at you as equal."

Women appreciate bosses who demonstrate they believe women belong in the trades and technology workforce.

Women don't want to be treated differently simply because they're female.

"I went and I showed them that I can totally be an equal and they fully respect me for that. They've often said they feel that I have enhanced things here."

"Aptitude is a code word for experience and exposure."

The single most significant and prevailing factor influencing women in trades and technology is gender-role stereotyping.

non-traditional work for women, "...is not promoted in the school."

Will you get upset if the guys ask you to make coffee?

Women were almost routinely asked questions they viewed as inappropriate.

...aptitude tests sometimes required to gain employment in trades and technology jobs often register a person's experience developing a certain skill rather than measuring their ability to learn that skill.

"...I put up with a guy grabbing my butt left, right, and center and the company wouldn't do anything about it."

Hey, a girl. Hey, what are you doing here?

He gives me full reign in my job that way and it makes me feel good because he's confident I can do what I need to do there."

"The first guy who was supposed to train me ... he just couldn't do it ... it was so frustrating for him to try to ... what I was

"in order for a woman to report instances of harassment, she has to feel safe in doing so."