

Shift Change Gender-Based Needs Assessment: *scoping the landscape and exploring interventions*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We learned that:

- Women's underrepresentation in trades is a complex problem.
- Nova Scotia is doing excellent work in the field with a number of strong, highly-regarded interventions.
- Despite decades of excellent work change is elusive - women remain less than 4.5% of employees in the skilled trades in Canada.
- Decades of studies have left few significant research gaps - results are clear and consistent.
- Organizational culture change is an important focus area and well-suited to this project: female graduates are having trouble finding workplaces that will employ them; there is concern that we are bringing too many women into the trades without enough focus on workplace culture; there is attrition along the path from NSCC to the workforce.
- Understanding the experiences of men in leadership roles, particularly in the context of the Me Too movement, is a gap and could lead to useful interventions.
- Systems-thinking tools may be of help. This approach includes a broad range of actors, looks at high-level interconnections in the system and identifies leverage points.

Proposed project scope and activities:

- Multi-employer research using focus groups to look at misconceptions and barriers among male supervisors, managers and employers.
- Building on the above research, the production of one or more tools for onboarding and supporting leaders.
- A pledge campaign for NS employers to make a public commitment to bringing more women onto their teams and associated enabling actions.

PURPOSE

The YWCA Halifax's Shift Change project is a 36-month initiative to explore and address barriers to careers for women in the trades in NS. The purpose of this research was to help establish scope, priority actions and manner of delivery for the YWCA Halifax's Shift Change project. We explored the landscape, the players and where our work can have the most impact. In addition to deepening our understanding this work also built and strengthened our network.

APPROACH

This report summarizes lessons from 39 key-informant interviews, three group discussions and a literature review. We based our research primarily on unscripted, snowball interviews with some strategic interviews. This methodology allowed us to pursue an adaptive research flow where we could validate ideas while also gathering new information. Feminist and adaptive principles informed our approach. As did the state of play; we are new to a strong and well-established field so building a network was important as was speaking to experts in the field for their ability to synthesize a diversity of first-hand experiences.

Our research process was as follows:

- *39 key-informant interviews of which 31 were relevant to the trades*
- *3 group discussions*
- *Literature review and landscape survey*
- *Narrowing our sectoral scope to careers in the trades and our focus to organizational culture change*
- *3 expert reviewers who provided input and validation*
- *Developing and refining a series of promising interventions through further meetings and discussions*

LEARNINGS

Conclusions

At the outset our sectoral focus was broad. It included fields where women are under-represented and where compensation is family-sustaining and where work is poised to remain stable or increase over time. We considered a range of sectors including trades, technology and engineering.

We chose to narrow the project focus to trades because it has a solid base of existing work and strong collaborators, is closest to the YWCA's mission around poverty alleviation and is a clear group of occupations.

We further narrowed our focus to the area of organizational culture change as is the space where we found there was the best overlap of need, gap and fit.

- *Need: many female graduates are having trouble finding workplaces that will employ them; sector actors are concerned that we are bringing too many women into the trades without enough focus on workplace culture.*

- Gap: unlike some other provinces there isn't an organization in NS that specializes in this; it is an up-and-coming area of work here and nationwide.
- Fit: good alignment with our strengths which include partnership with NS Power and an advisory committee that's very connected to the business sector.

We heard that barriers to careers for women in the trades has been very well researched. The results are clear and consistent and women's needs and experiences are well explored. However we identified a gap in understanding around the experiences of men in leadership roles, particularly in the context of the [Me Too movement](#). It is clear that their concerns and choices are a strong influence in women securing employment and enjoying a respectful workplace. Our research showed that significant gender-based hurdles still exist for women looking to secure employment or apprenticeships.

We see an opportunity to bring more visibility and leadership to the issue through a pledge campaign. NS employers would make a public commitment to bringing more women onto their teams. The pledge would include measurement of success and commitments to associated enabling actions. Two examples are: [Equal by 30](#) a campaign in the clean energy sector and the [Electricity HR Canada Leadership Accord on Gender Diversity](#).

Based on our research the areas where long-term interventions seem needed in NS are (1) employer capacity and culture shift work (including customized programs for employers that tackle policies, respectful workplace training.), (2) career support (mentoring, networking and employment support) specifically for women not connected to [Women Unlimited](#) which runs an excellent 14-week career exploration program. There is recent news that Canada's Building Trades Union will be tackling this gap with the launch of an [Office to Advance Women Apprentices](#) in NS.

Context

Women's underrepresentation in trades is a highly complex and deep-rooted problem. The trades sector includes a number of factors that add to its complexity including unions, apprenticeship, diversity of employer sizes and types, challenging business models (small margins, boom/bust cycles, etc.), and a highly political landscape. Influences on the number of women can be summarized as:

- Gender stereotypes and sector stereotypes (societal)
- Lack of role models, info and support (career exploration)
- Barriers in pre-apprenticeship training (training)
- Barriers to workforce entry including apprenticeship (recruitment)
- Workplace culture and safety (retention and advancement)

Interviews and literature-review revealed a very strong belief that decades of studies have left few significant research gaps. Instead there is a sense that two or more decades of research has clearly stated the problems and centred women's voices but substantial system-wide change is still elusive¹.

It was clear that NS is doing excellent work in the field. There are strong, established players that include two highly regarded and unique NS interventions targeting women: [Women Unlimited](#), [Techsploration](#). The NS Apprenticeship Agency has a substantive [diversity and inclusion framework and action plan](#) and inclusivity is part of one of their strategic priorities. In addition, the Department of Education's Skilled Trades Centres, [Skills Canada - NS](#) and the [NS Construction Sector Council's Trades Exhibition Hall](#) are addressing barriers for young people entering the skilled trades.

We found solid interest from employers in the topic. There seemed to be a good (if fairly new) understanding of and commitment to the importance of workforce diversity, among larger employers and human resource experts. Interviewees were generous with their time and showed a good level of interest in collaboration.

There is definite attrition as women travel the path from NSCC to apprenticeship to the workforce².

Some highlights of what we heard:

- Women are having a really hard time getting jobs ("top 10% of the class; last 10% to be hired"). Small employers are very unwilling to take on women; see it as too big a risk ("terrified"). Women are also the first to get laid off³.
- There is a contradiction in the system in that progressive employers would like to hire more women and can't find them while women graduates have trouble finding work/apprenticeships. The number of graduates is still small. Less than 16% of 2017 graduates from NSCC's Trades and Technology school were women⁴.
- Clear that workplaces (workplace culture) are still very challenging for women. Mixed reports but some saying nothing has changed in 20 years. Feeling that change needs to happen "on the floor" tied with some "you can't dictate

¹ Statistics Canada data shows that seven per cent of women had a trades certificate in 2015 – down three per cent from the early 1990s. (Bryan Alary (2018) Techlife Today <https://www.techlifetoday.ca/articles/2018/metoo-comes-for-the-trades>) In BC the percentage of women in the skilled trades increased from 3% to 4% between 2001 and 2015. (Enhancing the Retention and Advancement of Women in Trade in BC)

² NS 2015 construction labour market data: students 29% female; apprentices 6% female; journeypeople 3% female. (NS Construction Labour Market Assessment 2015 <http://nscsc.ca/Documents/LMA/LMA%202015%20Full%20Report%20-%20for%20Release.pdf>)

³ "...women in general... continue to be among the last hired and first fired." (Enhancing the Retention and Advancement of Women in Trade in BC)

⁴ Percent of women graduates from NSCC's 4 largest trades programs: C&I electrical certificate (9%), automotive service repair (11%), carpentry diploma (9%), plumbing (1%). (Stats provided by NSCC.)

culture” sentiment. Sense that there is push back or anti-diversity attitudes from mid-level managers at bigger employers - “the frozen middle”.

- Unions are a barrier for unionized employers. We didn’t find a strong momentum for change or focus on gender and diversity in NS. Unions are feeling under threat on other fronts.
- Most non-union hiring is via NSCC instructor recommendations or word of mouth. (70% of construction isn’t unionized in NS.)
- Generally the construction sector is very boom or bust for hiring. Both this and union factor make them a lot less like employers and more like contractors.
- The nature of much of the construction sector is also very tight margins and hard-to-control factors, like weather. This means that even employers that are really committed are limited in what they can do.
- Employers in rural and small-town NS offer both the greatest need for culture change efforts as well an important opportunity - employers are looking for workers who are likely to stay and women are more likely to do this.
- The trades does not universally meet our criteria of “family sustaining” as some jobs are poorly paid, many have a lot of insecurity due to the “project” or seasonal nature of the work, and a good portion won’t have benefits or be big enough to consistently provide an adequately safe environment for women. Suggests that a focus on key areas or types of employers might be beneficial.
- Very few construction/trades employers or unions have more than a few trades women (1-5) per job type (the variety of jobs and their diversity makes it challenging to compare). This is a big factor in culture and culture-change efforts.

Drivers of Change

During our interview process we looked for drivers of change and gaps in the system. We heard:

- More employers need to feel ready to hire women.
- Workplace cultures need to be more respectful in general to retain and attract women.
- The apprenticeship system is making a needed effort to increase recruitment and retention of female apprentices.
- A job coach and mentorship program for women looking to get employed in these fields (beyond the Women Unlimited graduates) could help the problem of women having a really hard time getting jobs.
- For unionized employers collective agreement negotiations could be a big driver of the number of women in these roles.
- There were indications that changes to tenders and/or procurement policies would drive change among employers and unions.
- Women and girls still don’t see these job as “for them” with gender stereotypes, socialization and lack of role models being big factors.

- Technology is and will change the skilled trades sector considerably (“wrenches to programming”) and a focus on digital literacy might be the most strategic place to focus from a long-term perspective.
- The near-term future is quite entrenched (by existing systems, structures, perceptions and players) so there was a suggestion to focus on a long-term horizon.
- Perhaps a more systems approach would help us identify ways make further progress. This is a complex system and one characteristic of these systems is that you can’t expect to see simple cause and effect relationships but instead need to look at the system as a whole. For example, more fuel-efficient cars won’t decrease fuel consumption if people respond by driving more or spend the money saved on air travel. Here we might be succeeding in attracting more women to training but those successes may be swamped by other responses such as women leaving or moving sideways into related careers, or a greater reluctance to hire women in certain fields.

OTHER RESOURCES

Research Reports

Considerable research has been done on this subject in Canada and elsewhere. In NS there is 15+ years of substantial research carried out by the Hypatia Association, WEE Society and Women Unlimited. Some important Canadian resources:

[Women in Trades Symposium Report \(2018\)](#) Women Unlimited and NS Apprenticeship Agency

[Enhancing the Retention and Advancement of Women in Trades in BC](#) (2017) SkillPlan with the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation and IBEW 213 (Build Together)

[The State of Women in Construction in Canada](#) (2010) Canadian Construction Sector Council

[A Degree in Possibilities: Building Careers for Women in Trades and Technology](#) (2012) Women Unlimited

[On the Level: Women in Trades and Technology - an employers guide to creating respectful workplaces](#) (2009) Hypatia Association

[Working it Out: Women Describe their Employment Experiences in Trades and Technology](#) (2008) Hypatia Association

[In the Picture](#): a future with diversity in trades, science and technology (2006)
Hypatia Association

Culture Change Resources

There has been good work done in Canada to develop materials and resources to make the business case for diversity, inform employees, support better workplace practises. Some of these include:

Canadian Building Trades Union has a very good list of resources and links including employer and employee handbooks, videos, templates and instruction manuals.
<http://buildtogether.ca/resources/respectful-workplaces/>

Build Force Canada has a Respectful and Inclusive Workplace Toolkit <https://www.buildforce.ca/respectfulworkplaces> and their “Building a Foundation of Respect” Blog <https://www.buildforce.ca/en/blog>

Industry Training Authority of BC’s publication (no date) [Levelling the Field: a best practises guide to employing women in the trades](#)

The YWCA Hamilton created a city-specific set of tools and templates for the recruitment, retention and advancement of women.
<http://www.advancewomenintrades.com/>

Canadian Apprenticeship Forum’s publication (no date; ~2014) [The Competitive Advantage: A Business Case for Hiring and Training Women in the Skilled Trades and Technical Professions](#)

Deloitte’s 2017 publication [Outcomes Over Optics: Building Inclusive Organizations](#)

Organizational culture change work is typically done in a customized and long-term fashion. A number of provincial organizations focus on this work across Canada. In Atlantic Canada: [MAP Strategic Workforce Services](#) in NB and [Women in Resource Development Corporation](#) (WRDC) in Newfoundland are doing substantial work in this field. In NS Women Unlimited continues to do excellent work with employers, although they aren’t running a customized training program at this time.

SCOPE AND WORKPLAN

As a new player and a short-term intervention we need to choose our work carefully to ensure impact.

GENDER BASED NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- This **scoping report**.
- Research program to explore **perceptions and barriers** with men in supervisory roles.
- Short article on **systems approaches** targeted to other stakeholders.

PILOTING CHANGES WITH EMPLOYERS

- From results of research, and in partnership with employers and other stakeholders, tailor a **tool(s)** for onboarding and supporting leaders.
- Recruit NS employers to sign on to a **pledge** regarding hiring women and supporting respectful workplaces.
- **Presentations** to other organizations and businesses.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS

- **Collaborate** with other players on culture-shift work for region.
- **Support** players who are connecting to advocate/organize around certain issues. E.g. Canadian Trades Women Taskforce.
- **Explore** other strategic actions.

APPENDIX A: the data

A total of 39 key-informant interviews and three group discussions were conducted between Sept and Dec 2018. Interviews broke down as follows:

Sectors (by interview)

1 architecture
1 engineering
10 multiple fields
1 technology
22 trades

Gender (by participant)

79% female (34F/9M)

31 interviews were relevant to careers in the trades and broke down as follows:

Sectors (by interview)

22 trades
9 multiple fields

Roles (by interview)

4 associations
3 educators
1 government
6 employers
8 pathways
2 researchers
1 students
6 tradespeople

Gender (by participant)

83% female (30F/6M)

Group discussions broke down as follows:

Sector

1 architecture
1 engineering
1 multiple fields

Gender

51% female

(4F/13M)

(7F)

(8F/1M)

APPENDIX B: rationale for systems-approaches paper

Intractable or “wicked” problems are often a sign that the system is complex. Feedback loops in complex systems often result in an immunity to change or an inability to create transformation (“flip the system”). In part this approach brings multiple perspectives and actors together to look at leverage points and interconnections. It is possible that this is a stuck system. “Women in trades has been discussed and targeted for about a decade, but few real gains have been seen in Canada in the number of women employed in the skilled trades.” BC Centre for Women in Trades (Facilitators Guide)

“...systems thinking can help you understand the situation systemically. This helps us to see the big picture – from which we may identify multiple leverage points that can be addressed to support constructive change. It also helps us see the connectivity between elements in the situation, so as to support joined-up actions.”
<http://learningforsustainability.net/systems-thinking/>

A good summary:

<http://learningforsustainability.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Intro-systems-thinking-and-tools-for-systems-thinking-20180417.pdf>