

## National Roundtable on Women in Skilled Trades

Hosted by The Prosperity Project on December 7, 2021

The Prosperity Project brought together 23 individuals representing a range of organizations, associations, and institutions from across Canada to discuss the transformational change needed to address the lack of women in skilled trades.

**The Prosperity Project** is a pan-Canadian registered charity that was conceived by a diverse and inspirational group of 62 female leaders across the country to support the economic empowerment of women and underscore the economic importance of gender equality. The Prosperity Project is executing five important Initiatives to ensure women are not forgotten during the pandemic – and are not left behind when we recover. These range from matching volunteers with charities that offer much-needed services to women and girls to undertaking research to understand how COVID-19 is affecting family life, work/life integration and women’s responsibilities at home. The Modern-Day Rosie the Riveter-Inspired Initiative has a mission to inspire and empower women and girls to pursue careers in STEM, skilled trades and leadership. By providing women and girls with the tools they need to succeed, we can advance gender equality by increasing the number of women in high-value add-jobs and sectors.

The Rosie Initiative is grateful to Co-Presenting Partners Capital Power and Ontario Power Generation and Amplify Partner BGIS for their support. Thank you to our National Media Partner The Globe and Mail.

The Roundtable gave participants the opportunity to share their experiences and learnings in addressing the barriers women face when entering, remaining and progressing in the trades and to discuss how to work together to advocate, empower and support women in this industry. **Judith Reda**, League of Champions, **Cecile Bukmeier**, NAIT, **Rebecca Lawlor**, Skills Canada Newfoundland and Labrador, **Vanessa Miller**, Office to Advance Women Apprentices Saskatchewan, **Tara Fong**, ITA BC, **Reva Bond-Ramsden**, SAIT, **Jaime Griffin**, Trade HERizons - Women's Network PEI, **Faith Dempster**, BC Construction Association, **Jennifer Green**, Skills Ontario, **Sabrina Tropiano**, Ontario General Contractors Association, **Dakota McLean**, St. Lawrence College, **Amina Dibe**, Chair of RESCON’s Anti-Racism Roundtable, Residential Construction Council of Ontario, **Natalie Smith**, Manpower Alberta - emPOWER - Women in Trades, **Emily Arrowsmith**, Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, **Martha George**, Grand Valley Construction Association, **Allison Zerr**, Saskatchewan Polytech Women in Trades and Technology (WITT), **Karen Dearlove**, BC Centre for Women in Trades (BCCWIT), **Natasha Rombough**, Canadian Home Builders' Association, **Sally Harvey**, Landscape Ontario Horticultural Trades Association, **Kristen Diehl**, Okanagan College - Women in Trades Training Program, **Carol Paul**, Manitoba Construction Sector Council, **Emily Collard**, Skills Ontario, **Chelsea Britt**, New Boots – Progressing Women in Trades, offered insight into the current environment for women in the skilled trades. The Prosperity Project Founder **Pamela Jeffery** chaired the Roundtable.

### The Prosperity Project: What initiatives and programs are you involved with? What has worked well for your organizations?

**Rebecca:** Our programs here in NFL are offered to intermediate students, secondary-level students, post-secondary and apprentices. We believe that getting in at the junior-high level and sparking interest in youth is important. Our secondary level competitions offer areas like public speaking and job searching – all skills for success – and all very important in skilled trades and tech careers. For women

and young girls entering these careers, we have found they gain confidence by competing in our competitions. Another program is Skilled Futures where we give youth hands-on, experiential learning in different trades and technologies. Part of this program offers specific programming to women. It's about providing mentorship opportunities, getting them to work with other women employed in a trade or technology career, and getting them to try the trades as well. It combines the mentoring aspect with hands-on learning.

**Faith:** For BC Construction Association we have our Step Program. It's our skilled trades employment program for women. We stick with them for three months after employment to confirm it's a good fit and to provide advice or support that they might need. This works well because of the one-on-one support which is crucial. It's not just about getting people into a job and assuming that our work is done. There needs to be that ongoing support. We also have an initiative called the Builder's Code. It's a retention concept. After our research, we realized that we must get the guys on board too! Most people working within construction are male. Hence the realization that we must approach this issue to make it about a safe and acceptable work site for everyone, not just women alone. Having an anti-bullying anti-hazing initiative. Then going to those employers, and trying to speak their language because, at the end of the day, they're worried about the bottom line i.e., production and profits. Our approach has been to express the idea that, if you have an organized worksite, where people feel comfortable and feel safe, they can do their job. Production is better end-to-end. A company makes better money when they are not dealing with constant injuries or lawsuits or having to hire and fire often. Shoutout to The BC Center for Women and Trades. They also run an amazing program called be More Than a Bystander, which is focused on men. Their focus is a train-trainer relationship, where they go out to teach their crews. It's a great concept that spreads awareness!

**Jennifer:** This is an overall concept that should be developed in other places. Having diversity, equity, inclusivity with a focus on underrepresented groups, such as women in trades, and being able to provide to all employees so that they understand that when someone comes from one of these groups, they have the basic training or mentorship opportunities available. Skills Ontario hosts Canada's largest women and skilled trades event. Teachers from all-male high school classes express the need for them to participate in these events. It helps them learn and understand the issues women commonly face and can tangibly compare their male experiences.

**Sally:** We're 37% female right now in apprenticeship. We outreach to schools, providing horticulture educators with tools for both young ladies and young men, trying to attract as many people as possible in the early stages of their lives. But our noticeably strongest programs are the women's pre-apprenticeship and or any women in technical trades programs.

**Kristen:** We have two different streams of programming for women in trades training. A 12-week exploratory program, and a foundation-level training program for those who already know what training they want to go in and both programs offer mentorship support. Building a community of connections is important. After they leave, they feel like they have a safety net. Follow-ups are being done with past participants, emphasizing that we are still with them. Even if it's for a short period of time, we are reminding them that they have somewhere to turn when things don't go quite right.

**Carol:** We work with women who have been out of work right out of school and move them into local construction projects. We always start with a three-week job readiness program, safety training, and then we move them into trades training dependent on the construction project. The women that have easily transferred into heavy construction did significantly well, resulting in a hundred percent

employment rate upon completion, and they are now in demand for their expertise! This is because women take better care of the equipment, and they follow directions well. In Manitoba, we do not have water and waste treatment plants. Seeing this, we are training women to work as assistants on water and waste installation with the hope that they will pursue a career. We're helping and working with the colleges to ladder them into that long-term training.

**Emily:** I work with Skills Ontario, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting skilled trades and technologies to students. Our main goal through our Young Women's Program is to connect with young students, specifically young high school girls. Typically targeting grade 7 to 12 students and giving them the opportunity to hear from women who are working in the trades and answer questions, to help take away the stigma. The events have been successful for us - this year alone we've hosted three events and seen a thousand girls from across the province. One of our first steps was to open the idea to parents - to encourage their girls to give the trades a chance. We've partnered with colleges and built the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program. In the past it had been difficult to garner attention from female students but now the messages are finally resonating, and it's perhaps due to the change in mentality and the involvement of colleges.

**Kristen:** What is working well for us is treating the women we are working with, within a case-by-case manner and meeting them where they are and following through. This involves lots of follow-ups, relationship building, and staying in touch with them down the road. When they do reach hurdles - whether it be on the job site or in their foundation training - we are there to re-group with them and help them move on successfully.

**Karen:** The importance of mentoring; being able to have somebody that is already a tradeswoman, working in the skilled trades, so that other women who are interested can ask questions and get a better insight into that world and the opportunities. The "If you can see it, you can be it" idea is important.

**Dakota:** There is a focus on recruiting women in the trades but there is not a lot that we are doing to keep the women in the trades. Whether it be different kinds of supports or mutual respect. We are focused on what we can do in the future to keep women in trades jobs.

### **Taking the current environment for women entering, remaining, or progressing in the trades, what barriers are they facing?**

**Jamie:** In Prince Edward Island, much like the rest of the country, our industry is booming, and companies are having a difficult time finding employees. We're seeing an industry that is desperate for employees but is unwilling to make any changes to meet the needs of the current demographic. Our workforce has changed, and we need to look to make changes for women. We have been attempting to speak to employers about making changes in the workplace to make it better for everyone. We were often met with, "we're not the problem". People don't want to work in those environments; especially in combination with the "tough guy macho" attitude, the issues around the fluidity of the jobs, the issues with projects that often start and stop; it essentially affects the consistency of jobs. This is just a glimpse of some of the challenges the current industry showcases. Employers are unwilling to recognize that there are changes to be made.

**Jennifer:** There was an article released in Ontario about a female plumber who's already in her apprenticeship. She started and she ended up being let go. The excuse they used was, "we don't think

you can keep up with all the rest of them”. Many people came to her defense. Large companies have the funding and the people to be able to put programs together and really advertise and make them work. But a lot of the smaller companies either don't have that, or are projected as “not caring”. Without larger departments for diversity and/or equity inclusivity, they are not going to make that change. Perhaps with a government-level output of, for example, a template on what they can base off, would be effective.

**Reva:** I think it's important to go through the whole life cycle of a tradeswoman in the workforce. I'm on the education side; we find talent, we educate, but then if you just launch them into the working world with no additional support, they join a company where they are the only female on a crew. It insinuates the idea that they are not going to last long. Said company isn't trained or interested in learning and adapting. A way we have combated this is by group mentorship. By associating or setting them up with organizations such as our Empower Program, we know they're going to be psychologically safe when they join the workforce and have a better experience. That is how we can be involved in the whole life cycle from beginning to end. The only issue we have faced is getting women to join these programs. They can become the mentors for the next mentee. In the group mentorship program, we carefully select and train our mentors. We ensure diversity within our group of mentors and that they are completely invested. For the relationship to organically evolve, we look to provide skills and tools on both sides.

**Karen:** In our experience at BCCWIT, we find there are lots of reasons why women don't start in the trades. Starting with the socially constructed gender norms where young girls aren't provided opportunities to play with toys that are focused on building, tinkering, or exposed to the general skilled trades world. Furthermore, women who come to us don't know where to start, and they don't necessarily have the confidence to think about it as a career choice. We link them with women who work in the field in BC. They can ask questions and learn what a day on the job looks like, what to wear, what the working conditions are like. Men often use stories of their fathers, uncles, friends, as their reasoning to become a plumber or an electrician. In comparison to women who typically don't have that basic exposure, they don't have people they can ask those questions to, and inevitably are unaware of these potential career paths.

**Martha:** One of the barriers that I had seen over the years is that typically women are the caregivers. The hours have strictly been 7 am – 4 pm. Even with some flexibility of someone starting at 9 am, they're paid less. Women are faced with the barrier of balancing work with all their caregiving responsibilities. That's not to say that they can't hold jobs, but this work is not geared to that. It's a major concern within the industry. Another reason for women leaving the trades is that they have no references as to what skilled tradespeople do. Schools often don't have the knowledge base to even talk to girls about skilled tradespeople.

**Allison:** Due to a lack of advertisement, there is less reach. We're not promoting the trades as strongly as we should. Especially reaching out to those young girls right before high school, to let them know what kind of classes they should be taking to know their options. I've heard from employers that a lot of times they prefer hiring females because of their attentiveness to detail. Regarding the issue of not being strong enough, with the way we've advanced safety with machines and protocols, women can do just as many jobs as men. It's important to promote the trades for women, letting them know that it's a first-choice option. Mentorship from our observations has been a huge help to fill any gaps of uncertainty. Just reaching out to females in the trades and connecting them to young girls, letting them know that “this might not have been my first choice, but it's my best choice”.

**Karen:** We've observed that there are two major reasons why women don't stay in these jobs. The first is the work environment issue. Especially in the construction industry a lot of jobs sites still seem to have issues with bullying, harassment, and discrimination. We have a program where we educate men about those issues so that they can teach other men how to intervene and be aware of them. It's called Be More Than a Bystander Program. The second seems to be the lack of opportunities for advancement and leadership. Learning how to provide leadership training and education so that women who are in the skilled trades can find advancement and stay within the industry.

**Natasha:** I think the opportunity for advancement fits right in with everything from salary expectations. There is a known bias that trades are for people who don't do well in school, don't make much money, it's physically demanding on the body, and could lead to burnout. That is the image most people have.

**Martha:** We're not a diverse industry in terms of embracing indigenous people or anyone of colour. This industry looks like it's for only white males. If companies are serious about having women and having representation in the industry, they'd make that part of their strategic plan. Having representation goals can target the problem and work towards progress. Construction had been mostly the same for the last hundred years, and so it's going to take a huge shift for change to occur.

**Allison:** In Saskatchewan, we have an extremely high indigenous culture, and many companies are finally tapping into this resource and training these individuals in the skilled trades. We're providing funding for initiatives and schooling so they can work their way up, especially indigenous women. Currently, there is a huge push. I have companies reaching out to me specifying that they're looking for women to get into these jobs.

**Natalie:** We have observed with our students who are older (between 30-40 years) that they were pigeonholed into traditional careers, whether that's office work, teaching, and/or health care systems. Most feel unsuccessful because they've been doing something that they're not passionate about. After periods of unemployment, the realization hits, and they decide that the skilled trades are for them. Initially, skilled trades never seemed to be an option. When we first started the program, it was a struggle approaching the smaller more independent companies; probably because they hadn't heard of us. We're now finding that the smaller companies are starting to reach out to us. It might be for political reasons - they want to appear to support women and trades - but it's still a good place to start.

### **Are there challenges to keeping women in the trades? What works to keep them?**

**Amina:** It's probably something we should talk about more than recruitment. We're making great strides when it comes to promoting skilled trades to young people, women included. I don't think we're talking about retention enough. A lot of young women join and then quit after a couple of months, and I think it's due to the culture of construction. It's unfortunate that it's part of our jobs to promote careers in construction and the skilled trades to women, knowing that we're still missing this key part. We need to improve the culture on site, improve working conditions for women, and make stronger employer policy.

**Faith:** The importance of support - there does have to be that ongoing mentorship and support. We all agreed that the BC Centre for Women in Trades "Be More Than a Bystander" program is strong because it speaks to the men on the site and that is the other group that we need on board. Their train-the-trainer concept teaches groups of men on-site

**Judith:** Seeing women in senior roles is something that younger women and apprentices should have. Somebody to look up to, not necessarily as a mentor, but someone to observe; to think “well she did, I can do it.”

### **Do you see value in a 1:1 and peer mentoring programs in the skilled trades?**

**Kristen:** Absolutely. It's something that we do within our own program; we try to move our women from being in the exploratory program to foundations and then keeping in touch with them throughout their apprenticeship. When they become a red seal and if we know that they're doing well, we offer them a role as a mentor. Our mentor team is therefore full of Red Seal endorsed trades women. This kind of mentor support, saying “I've been there, I've experienced that, but this is what I did next” is so important.

**Sally:** I think a mentorship program on the employer side is going to be important. We have a program called Employers of Choice Program where we work with consultants, workforce development, and successful employers to mentor trades employers around improving workplace culture, wages, life integration, inclusivity, and diversity.

**Reva:** In Alberta there is the Alberta Women in Trades. It's got over a thousand women across Alberta on a Facebook group; they ask each other questions all the time. That peer-to-peer mentorship is huge. I think those asynchronous communication channels for peer-to-peer mentorship will be huge for its success.

**Karen:** At BCCWITT we bring together women in a bunch of different Facebook groups. We have a province-wide one and we help them facilitate monthly. Being able to have someone to talk to about your experiences - you might be the only woman who is on a job site or in a class and just kind of having that of peer, colleague or support group is important. Sometimes it's questions like “where can I go to get a small size safety boot or clothing that is going to fit me?” or “I have had this problem at work or in my class, has anyone else had this problem and how did you deal with it?”

### **Do you think that there is an opportunity for collaboration? What can we do to support?**

**Judith:** I think it would be useful to have some young women entering the trades come on and speak. We can ask them directly “what are you looking for? What do you need?” I think hearing this would be extremely helpful for all of us, so we know how to be better supporters.

**Pamela:** I think that is a good idea. We have been in discussions with Bell Media since they ran our Rosie Campaign in the summer. We are hoping we will have more advertising opportunities - we would love to work with you to support what you're doing through that. What else could we do together as a group?

**Carol:** Share resources and workshops. We have created workshops for women and workshops for employers and am happy to share what else we have developed with others, even if you use it as a template for your own purposes. We've got videos, a trade talk series of women in Manitoba who are tradeswomen. Anything that that would benefit others we would be happy to share.

**Jamie:** One thing that would be helpful is support around changing workplace culture and working with supervisors and company owners. We did a survey of tradeswomen and we called it “Gaining Retention

in Trades.” We have done a lot of work with recruitment and now we are looking at the retention. One of the largest things we heard was that they can have great mentors, great support from coworkers and supportive family members, but if workplace culture support isn’t coming from the top-down, it doesn’t make a difference in terms of how they are treated, how they are seen, and the opportunities to advance. So how do we have those conversations with those supervisors and with the employers to make those changes from the top down?

**Martha:** Maybe part of it is recognizing those firms that do have a supportive workplace culture and do have a stated goal of a percentage of women and visible minorities as part of their team and really recognize and reward them. We know ourselves that companies don’t do anything until they have to; it was the same with safety, they didn’t do it until they absolutely had to and now, they all embrace it.

**Jamie:** I am wondering if anyone has any tangible resources or success stories that we can mimic. We have tried having conversations with our construction associations, with our employers, with our departments and it’s a small-town province so it can be really challenging.

**Dakota:** I know I have had conversations with my male colleagues at work. Typically, with men they don’t know that there is a problem because they don’t see it, whereas we are in it every day. I think bringing it right in their face and saying, “look this is how it is, I am telling you how it’s, it has to change.” That would be big.

**Reva:** Building on that – we have started to shift the conversation towards psychological safety, and we talk about bullying and harassment. When you start bringing this into their world and showing how it impacts them and how being a better person is better for all of us on the job site - to me that is when we will see women stay longer because they are truly welcome and inclusive. I would love if parallel initiatives focused on the problem of behavior because for a woman to speak up and say there is an issue, they just see her as the issue, they don’t see her as trying to solve the issue.

**Kristen:** Sometimes it’s about elevating what is going well and making that the standard versus focusing on the problem. Nobody likes being told that they are in the wrong and the problem. Sometimes we have to look at it in a reversed order in order to see success.

**Karen:** I wanted to talk about an initiative we run through BCCWITT - Be More Than a Bystander Program. This program focuses on safety initiatives and workplace health – we want to normalize occupational health and safety because it’s about respectful and healthy workplaces. It’s not just for women; it’s for everyone. It will help all equity-seeking groups if we can create safe workplaces. It puts the onus on the men who are 95% of the workforce, for understanding and bringing the issues to their attention so they know what women and other people face on the worksites. It’s about making them responsible for changing this behaviour - for intervening, for holding other men accountable. If it became normalized and part of the training on what a safe worksite looks like, then it’s not going to be seen as punishment and it would be better for everybody - retaining all employees on worksites.