



Task Title: Practical Support for Women in Trades

OALCF Cover Sheet – Learner Copy

Learner Name: _____

Date Started: _____

Date Completed: _____

Successful Completion: Yes ☐ No ☐

Goal Path: Employment ☒ Apprenticeship ☒

Secondary School ☐ Post Secondary ☐ Independence ☐

Task Description: The learner will read an article about women in skilled trades and write opinion paragraphs about practical ways workplaces can support tradeswomen.

Main Competency/Task Group/Level Indicator:

- Find and Use Information/Read continuous text/A1.3
- Communicate Ideas and Information/Write continuous text/B2.3
- Use Digital Technology/D.2 (optional)

Materials Required:

- Pen/pencil and paper and/or digital device
- Computer (optional for D.2 competency)

Learner Information

Women continue to be underrepresented in skilled trades in Ontario. Understanding how tradeswomen can be supported when choosing this career path is an important step towards eliminating gender imbalance.

Read the article, "Women Making Inroads in the Trades but Still Have a Ways to Go".

Women are Making Inroads in the Trades but Still Have a Ways to Go

Although more women are finding lucrative and satisfying work in male-dominated skilled trades, progress is too slow to meet the demand for skilled workers, in some cases because the work environments are unwelcoming, experts say.

According to data from Statistics Canada's most recent Labour Force Survey, women made only marginal gains in the trades between 2008 and 2018. Of the 934,000 people working in industrial, electrical and construction trades in 2008, 34,600 — or 3.7 per cent — were women.

By 2018, 38,600 fewer people were working in the trades overall, but women's sliver of the shrinking pie grew by about 200 women to 34,800. That's just under 3.9 per cent.

Among those coming up through the ranks as trainees, about one in 10 Canadian apprentices are women, and most of them are concentrated in female-dominated programs such as hairstylist, esthetician and — in provinces where it's considered a trade — early childhood education.

Representation in the male-dominated trades, defined as those where men account for 75 per cent or more of apprentices, is even lower. Just a small fraction of those one in 10 apprentices who are women choose male-dominated programs, which lead to more lucrative work.

Although there are now a variety of initiatives aimed at improving those numbers, there are cultural and structural issues that haven't made the trades particularly appealing or welcoming for women. Acceptance is one big barrier, says Mandy Rennehan, who is one of the people leading the charge in not only promoting trades employment in general but also paving the road for other women.

Given the trades are so male-dominated, she said, it's like asking women "to climb a set of stairs" to get into them.

Rennehan has had plenty of years to become accustomed to being the only woman on a job site. Originally from Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, where her father was a lobster fisher, Rennehan left home at 18 and started working in construction before opening her retail renovation and maintenance company Freshco (unrelated to the grocery chain) a year later, in 1995. Based in Oakville, Ont., the company has clients across Canada and in the eastern United States.

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But there are plenty of women who won't find the working conditions particularly hospitable, said Rennehan. Challenges range from difficulty simply finding well-fitting work apparel — which can be a safety issue — to a culture not really accepting of a worker leaving at 5 p.m. to make it to daycare.

"You can't just say you support women and then not have the structure to absolutely execute on that," she said.

Supporting women in the trades just makes good business sense, said Rennehan. Considering the acute shortage of trades workers in much of the country, Canada can't afford for half the population to give trades careers a miss.

"This really started affecting my business about 10 to 12 years ago in Canada and the U.S." Rennehan said she's turned down millions of dollars in contracts because she simply hasn't had the people to fulfil those projects.

She describes the shortage of trades professionals as "a massive economic issue for governments, for business and —more importantly — for consumers." Already she's inundated with calls from people desperate for help on home renovation projects gone wrong, a situation she expects will only worsen unless industry and policy-makers can entice a lot more people, of any gender, to enter the trades.

Natasha Lalonde, a certified journeyperson electrician for Uptime Industrial in Surrey, B.C., is part of a cohort of young women who are pursuing trades after getting an introduction through local, provincial or industry initiatives aimed at promoting trades to girls and women.

After some encouragement from her high school shop teacher, Lalonde completed a program called Trades Discovery for Women at British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) in Burnaby, B.C. Students get hands-on experience in about 15 different trades ranging from pipefitting to framing, welding to working with heavy equipment.

Today she considers herself fortunate to have found a job where she's treated as an equal to the men on staff.

"I've definitely had my fair share of experiences that have put me on edge and made me consider not doing it anymore," said Lalonde. "I've worked for companies where there's been the odd guy where I don't know if I'd feel comfortable working alone with just them for the day. But there's no one like that at the company I work with now."

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In addition to experiences where a colleague might seem threatening, there are subtler social dynamics to navigate, too, when you're the only woman on staff.

"The first couple days on a job site, they kind of tiptoe around you," said Lalonde. "They don't know how to act around me and it's kind of entertaining. Usually after the first couple of days they do get comfortable with me."

She said the comfortable and supportive work environment she enjoys today at Uptime is a welcome change.

If she has a question, her boss doesn't patronize her — something she says she's experienced elsewhere. "He'll respond and he'll explain and he'll do it in a nice way. I've worked for companies where if you ask a question, they'll look at you like you're an idiot."

Her advice to other young women in the trades is to try not to be discouraged by "a couple of negative things happening" and keep looking for the right workplace fit. "You'll eventually find a company that you really love, like I did. It only took me seven years but I found it."

Elizabeth Moses has been working as an apprentice machinist since 2017 at Windsor Molds Group in Windsor, Ont., which makes plastic components for the automotive industry.

Even in 2016, when she left high school, she was discouraged from entering the trades, in part because her good grades in university-streamed courses qualified her for a traditional academic path. "I was told to go into dentistry or health care or other more traditional occupations that women pursue," said Moses.

"But I didn't know what I wanted to pursue in university and I knew I liked machining and building things."

Moses, who was born in an Ethiopian refugee camp where her parents were fleeing violence in what is now South Sudan, has thrived in her apprentice job, even moving up to a programming role. Today she's an ambassador for Build a Dream, a non-profit that promotes careers in STEM and skilled trades to girls and women.

Still, she notes that her experience is different than that of her male colleagues. "You have to prove yourself constantly over and over again," whereas men "can prove themselves once."

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"It takes time for you to earn that respect, to show that you can actually do the job."

Tamara Pongracz has certainly found that to be the case. After growing up in Castlegar, B.C., she got her start in welding in 1988 and today runs BCIT's trades access department, which supports students who are enrolled in or planning to enter trades studies.

She says when a woman arrives on a job site, the faces of many men seem to say "Ugh, the girl is here."

Every new person on a job site gets tested, she said, but the women face "extreme expectations."

"You need to be the super tradesperson, or you're dismissed as 'you won't be here forever.'"

[Sourced from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/women-in-trades-1.5215384>]

Work Sheet

Task 1: Create a list of 8-10 ideas that a company could implement to help support women working in skilled trades. You can use examples from the article, or add your own. You may also conduct an internet search to come up with more ideas.

Answer:

Task 2: Choose three ideas from the list you created in Task 1. For each idea, write one paragraph of at least five (5) sentences explaining how you would implement the idea if you were president of a company hiring skilled tradespeople.

Answer:

