

Women in Skilled Trades

Building Pathways through Knowledge Sharing

Introduction & Context

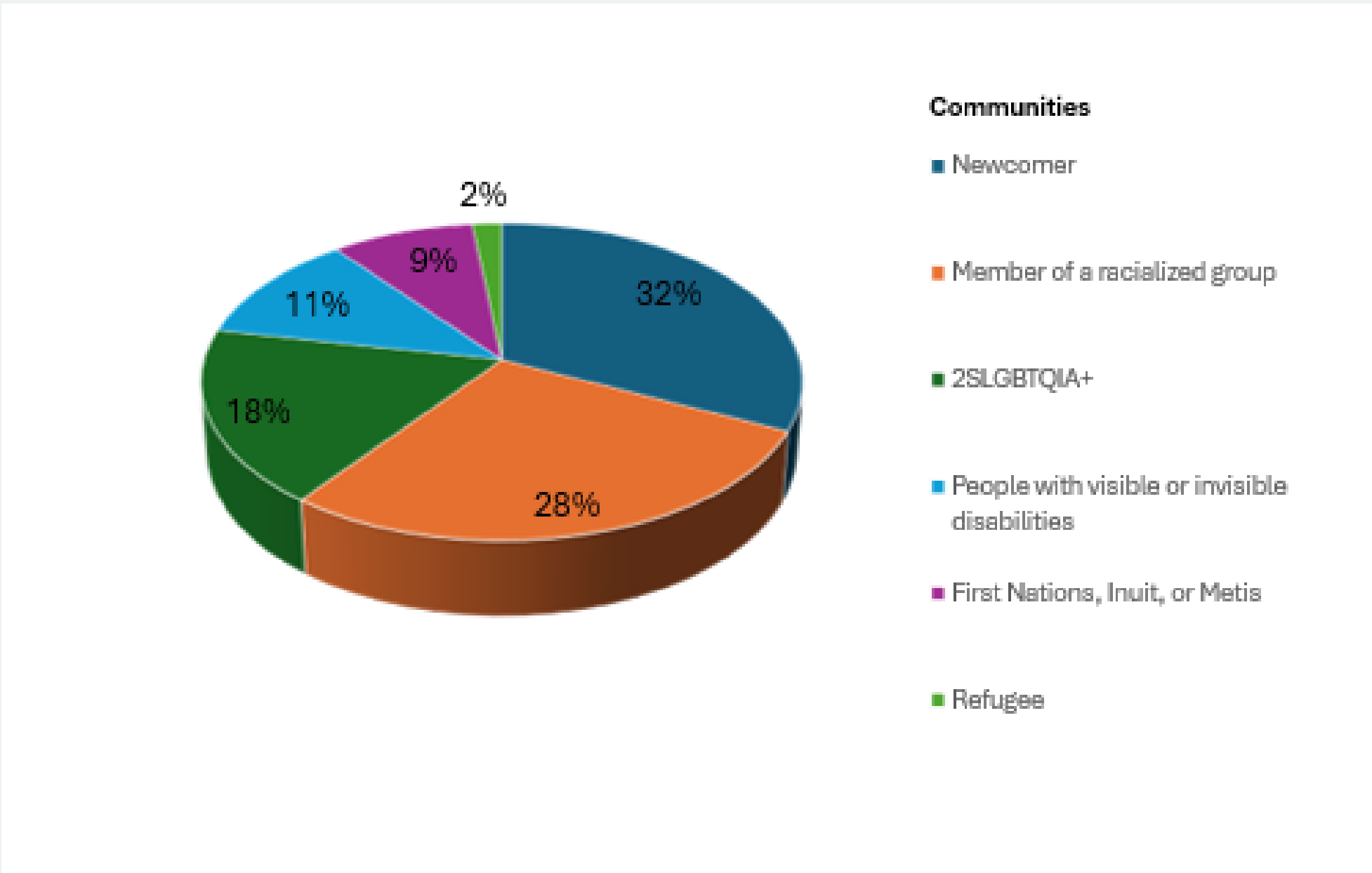
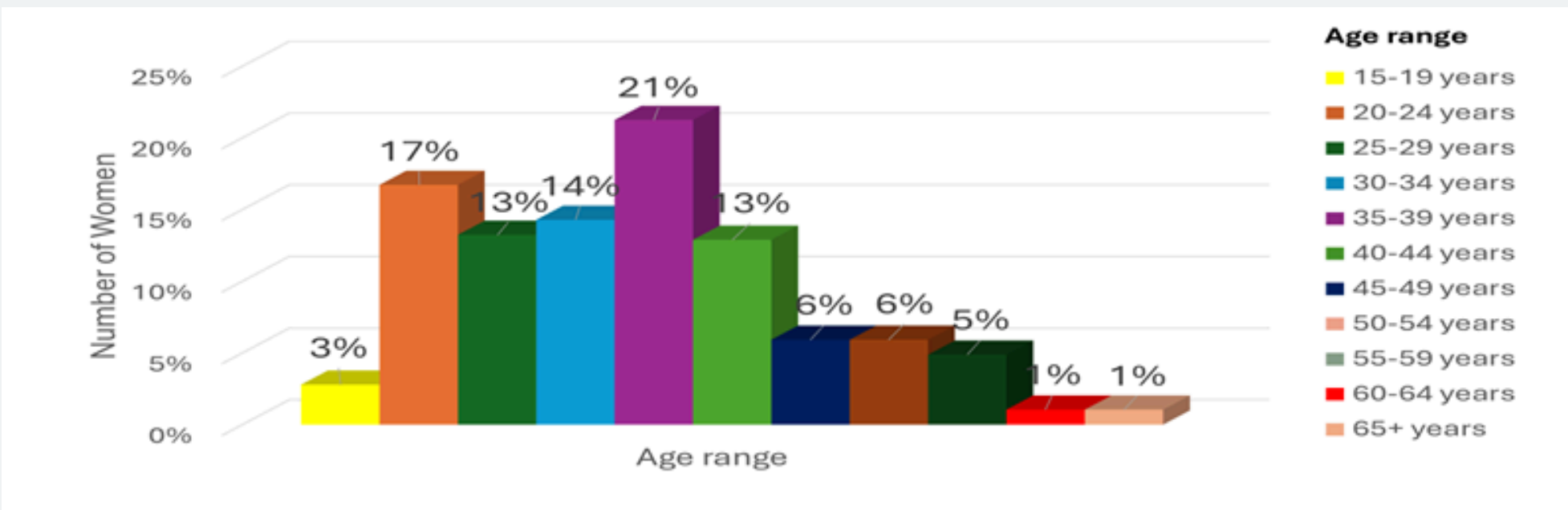
Skilled trades are a cornerstone of Canada’s economy, employing roughly one in six Canadians across key sectors like construction, manufacturing, and transportation. In response to persistent labour shortages and equity gaps, the Government of Canada launched the Canadian Apprenticeship Strategy (CAS) in 2019 to promote skilled trades careers and reduce barriers for equity-deserving groups. A women-focused stream introduced in 2022 supports projects aimed at improving recruitment, retention, and success for women apprentices. Skills for Change’s Women in Skilled Trades (WiST) project is advancing equity by working with women, employers, and trainers nationwide. Through convenings in five provinces, a national survey, and the WiST Leadership Academy, the program fosters dialogue, mentorship, and leadership development. A suite of 10 knowledge mobilization reports will share insights from this work, revealing that while women are eager to enter and grow in skilled trades careers, systemic barriers must be addressed to ensure their long-term success.

Canada’s Skilled Trades Sector

Canada’s skilled trades sector is under immense pressure due to a national housing crisis and an aging workforce. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) estimates that 4.8 million new homes must be built by 2035 to restore affordability, requiring a near doubling of current construction rates and a significantly expanded labour force. Compounding this challenge, over 700,000 skilled trades workers are expected to retire by 2028, with construction alone needing more than 300,000 new workers. As such, the inclusion of women in the skilled trades emerges as one key solution at this critical juncture. Women remain drastically underrepresented, comprising just 13.7% of apprentices, with even lower participation among immigrant and racialized women. Barriers include ill-fitting personal protective equipment (PPE), lack of gender-appropriate facilities, and systemic challenges faced by newcomers. Addressing these issues is essential not only for economic resilience but also for advancing gender and social equity in Canada’s workforce.

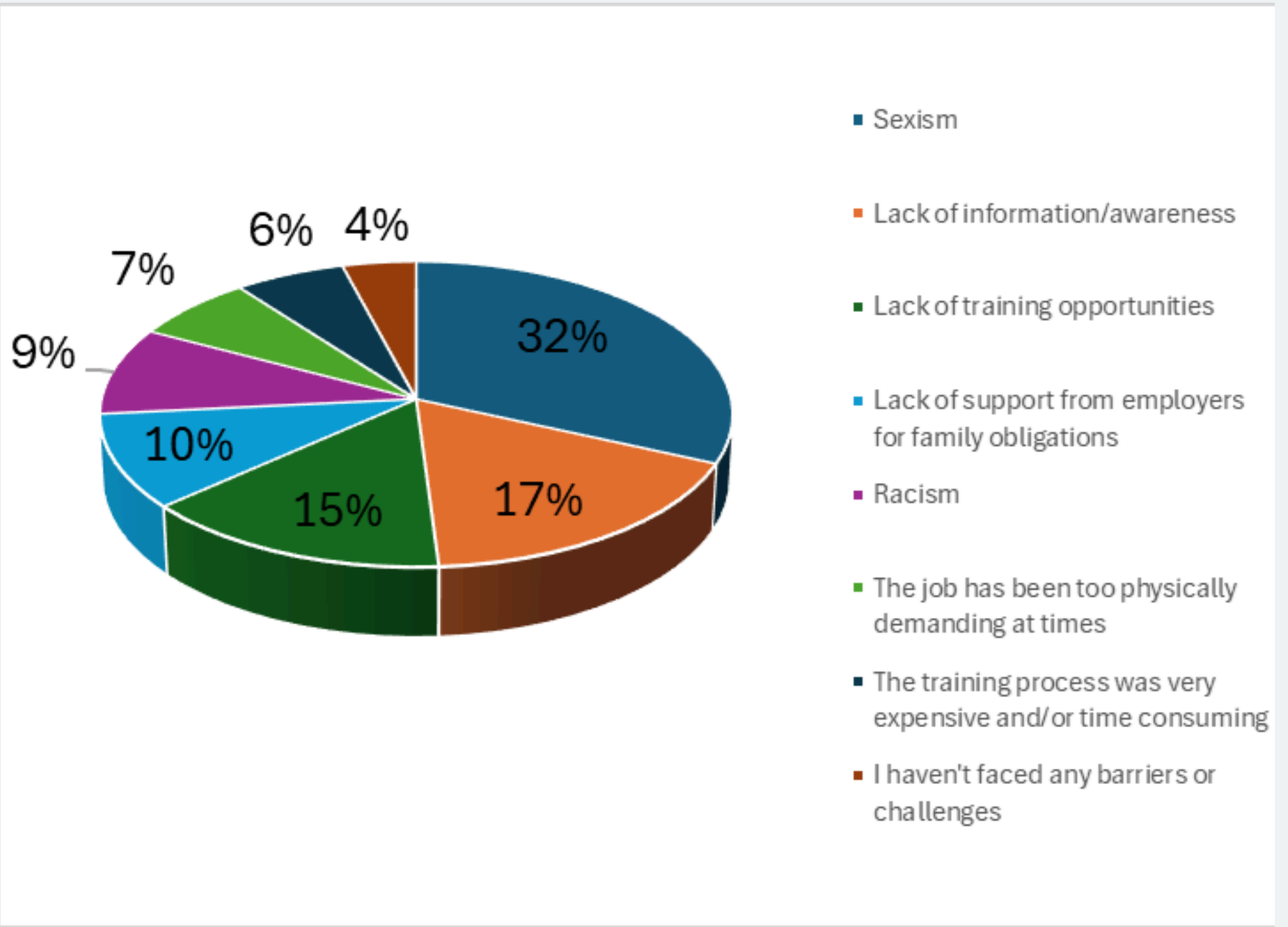
Research & Data Collection

Our survey paints a vivid picture of just some of the women who are shaping the skilled trades. Respondents make up a diverse cohort and have a broad range of educational backgrounds. The majority of respondents are 35–39 years of age (21%), newcomers (24%), and/or members of a racialized group (22%), with a minimum of a high school diploma or equivalent (26%).



Women currently in the Trades (121): Experiences of navigating barriers

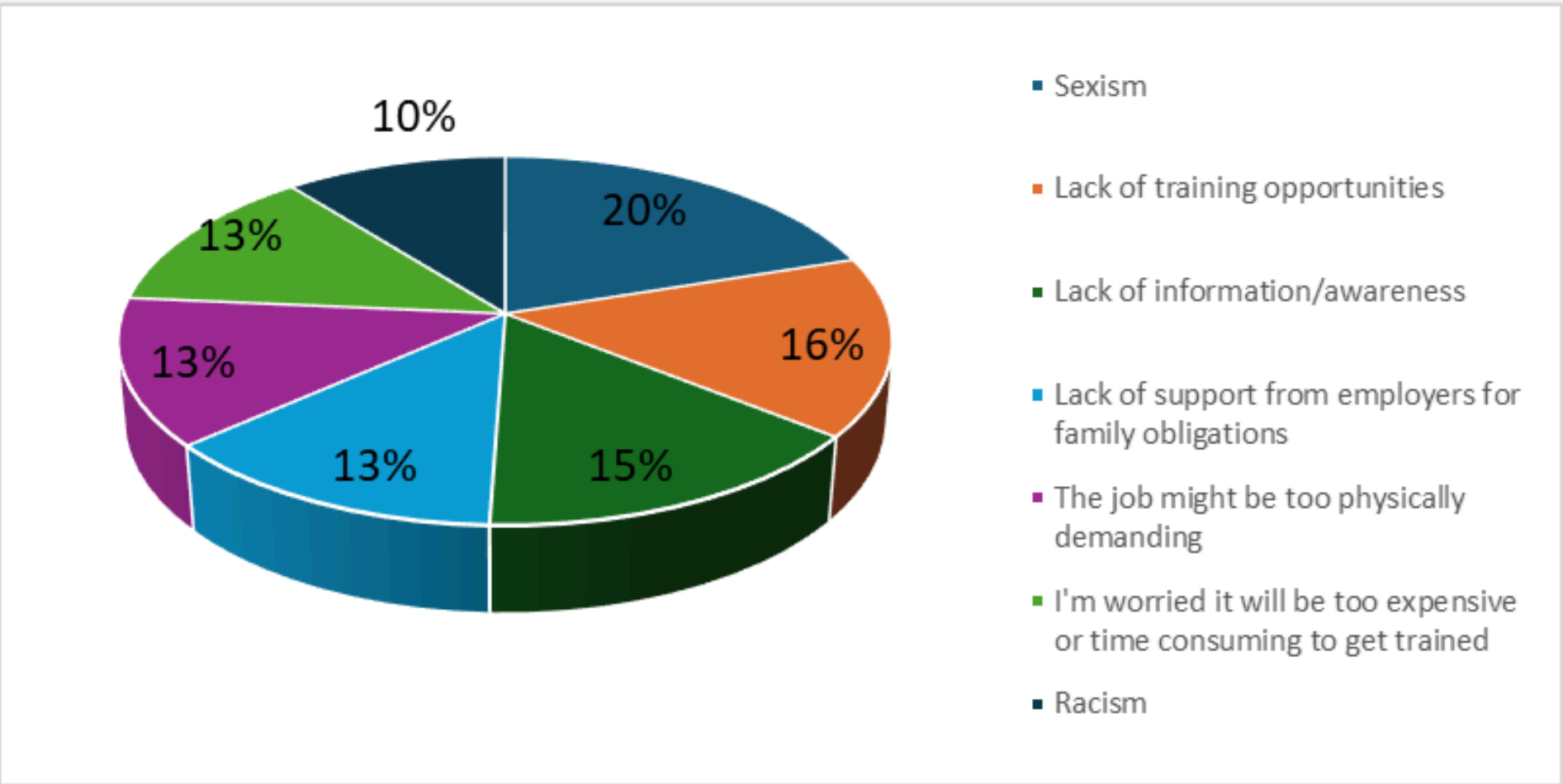
Top barriers:
Sexism (32%)
Lack of information/awareness (17%)
Lack of training opportunities (15%)



Insights and Impact

Women interested in the Trades (135): Perceived barriers

Top perceived barriers:
Sexism (20%)
Lack of training opportunities (16%)
Lack of information/awareness (15%)



Why the trades appeal:

- Hands-on, meaningful work with visible results
- Path to job security, good pay, and stability—especially for Newcomers
- Avoids student debt and offers faster entry into the workforce

What they need to commit:

- Visibility of women—especially women of colour—in leadership roles
- Strong mentorship and clear career path information
- Respect, fairness, and structured support for advancement

What they’re asking for:

- A fair chance to succeed
- Systems that remove hidden barriers and offer real pathways to employment and growth

Program Impact

Through the Women in Skilled Trades Program, we engaged 62 women across three cohorts, offering a compelling model for cultivating female leadership in the skilled trades.

Participant feedback highlighted the program’s transformative impact, especially for newcomer women, while also revealing the need for tailored content for women already working in the trades, pointing to opportunities for more specialized, advanced training.

Recommendations

A National Convening Model for Collective Impact

Delivered through a national partnership and convening model, the WiST initiative demonstrated the power of collaboration in advancing gender equity and workforce development across Canada’s skilled trades. By bringing together employers, unions, educators, and community organizations, Skills for Change built a shared platform for dialogue, innovation, and action. Through this model, we convened nearly 2,000 women and sector leaders across five provinces—Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Ontario, and British Columbia—ensuring that each event reflected local realities while contributing to national learning. Guided by both a national advisory committee and regional partners, the convenings created lasting networks. This collaborative approach has proven that national programs are most impactful when they are locally grounded, enabling communities to co-create solutions, share knowledge, and collectively drive systemic change toward equity, inclusion, and sustainability in Canada’s skilled trades sector.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Tailored Strategies**
Policies must reflect the realities of each trade, region, and community — one size does not fit all.
- Safe & Equitable Workplaces**
Mandate anti-discrimination policies, audits, and reporting systems to eliminate sexism and racism.
- Support for Small Employers**
Fund and equip SMEs to create retention, training, and networking systems.
- Leadership & Mentorship**
Invest in regional women-specific leadership and mentorship programs led by visible role models.
- Clear Career Pathways**
Map transparent routes from pre-apprentice to Red Seal certification to support long-term growth.
- Wrap-Around Supports**
Provide early childcare, flexible hours, and transport solutions to reduce systemic barriers.
- Health, Safety & Dignity**
Mandate proper PPE and basic on-site facilities as non-negotiable standards.
- Partnership-Based Training**
Foster employer-union-training partnerships to deliver regionally tailored programs.
- Future-Focused Green Skills**
Launch youth and green skills programs to build a climate-ready workforce.

