

W

ROUGH TRADES

FEMALE TRADESPEOPLE WILL TELL YOU THAT THEIR MALE-DOMINATED PROFESSION IS RIFE WITH SEXISM, BULLYING AND DISCRIMINATION. BUT AS MOMENTUM BUILDS TO MAKE THE INDUSTRY MORE WELCOMING TO WOMEN, THEY COULD HELP B.C. BEAT ITS SHORTAGE OF CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

/// by **ROBERTA STALEY** /// photographs by **TALLULAH**

T



WORKING IT
Lindsay Kearns,
an electrician, is
vice-president of the
BC Tradeswomen
Society



ON POINT

When electrician Sandra Brynjolfson started in the trades 20 years ago, women on the job were a rare sight

If you look up at the second-floor walkway, with its metal bannister skirting a succession of tall, narrow doors, it's suddenly clear that this was once a jail. But rather than guards and inmates, about a dozen tradespeople occupy the space. Dressed in steel-toe boots, work pants and T-shirts, with bulky tool pouches slung around their hips, they pound and drill, creating a buzzing, discordant symphony to a remarkable metamorphosis.

On the ground floor of the stripped-down interior, a living room with an enormous fireplace is taking shape while a former guards' area is being reborn as a games zone. With help from more than 500 volunteers and 120 businesses, this building near downtown Victoria, previously the Juvenile Detention Facility, is being transformed into a peer-to-peer recovery centre. Renamed Our Place Therapeutic Recovery Community, it will offer a voluntary two-year, community-based program for 50 men who have suffered trauma, addiction or homelessness or who aspire to a new life after incarceration.

There's another metamorphosis going on here. Like most construction sites, Our Place hosts young, inexperienced workers getting hands-on training. But in contrast to similar locales, all 25 of them are women, students from the 12-week, female-only Trade Skills Foundation program offered by Victoria's Camosun College.

For 27-year-old Katalina Diston, who is learning to be a welder, the trades offer not just the prospect of steady, well-paid work but relief from societal pressures on women to look and dress in ways that prize physical attractiveness over skills and brains. "Most girls were prim and proper, getting their nails done," the red-haired single mother of two says of her high-school days. "I was in shop with the guys. The girls wanted nothing to do with me."

These students signal a tectonic shift for the B.C. skilled trades sector, which is still 95-percent male. In an industry with a reputation for macho bluster, on-site bullying, gender discrimination and inflexible hours, growing the number of women tradespeople will make workplaces better for everyone, advocates say. With support from recent efforts by government and business to attract more female employees to this profession, women can also help the province tackle its looming shortage of workers for major construction projects.

with classroom time, culminates in a trade credential, or ticket, from the Industry Training Authority BC (ITA). That designation can be a British Columbia Certificate of Qualification or an Interprovincial Red Seal Endorsement, which boosts job mobility in Canada for more than 50 trades.

Along with their leaders, the novices on this work site are "helping change the stigma of women in the trades," says Tracie Clayton, executive director of HeroWork Victoria.

Getting out of the locker room

With women now represented in almost every sector, from politics to medicine, law to architecture, film production to policing, why would they be stigmatized for picking up a hammer, wiring a building, laying pipe, digging a trench or pouring concrete? Because the trades continue to be "one of the last bastions of locker-room mentality," says Emelia Colman-Shepherd,

reluctance to treat them as equals, Colman-Shepherd says.

Over the past few decades, the 31-year-old explains, some tradespeople have been female, but women remain anomalies. Admittedly, it does take a tough cookie to endure a construction site—less because of the gruelling work than the hyper-masculinity. Colman-Shepherd's fellow BCCWITT coordinator, 56-year-old electrician Sandra Brynjolfson, recalls starting in the trades 20 years ago. Back then, it was "super rare to see another woman on the job site," says Brynjolfson, who is also here chatting with other female tradespeople.

In her "sexist" union panel interview, a process that all apprentices must undergo for union membership, one of the interviewers asked her, "If a guy says, 'Nice tits,' how are you going to react?" Taken aback, Brynjolfson replied, "Probably ignore them."

Still, the remark made the former competitive softball player squirm, especially because it came from a union boss who was

"What has happened in the past is, if you bring a woman onto a crew and she's not integrating well, they might move her to a different crew or a different project. Or she might quit.... So what we're struggling with is retention of tradeswomen, and that's one of the reasons for the Builders Code"

—Lisa Stevens, chief strategy officer, B.C. Construction Association



Our Place is project-managed by non-profit charity HeroWork Program Society, which organizes two Radical Renovations each year in B.C., helping other charities develop infrastructure for worthy causes. The 45 tradespeople range from electricians, carpenters, painters, plumbers and landscapers to flooring and heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) installers. Unusually, three of the six trade leads, or supervisors, are women, overseeing the landscapers, plumbers and electricians.

As the young apprentices drag cables, climb ladders, weld, rivet and bolt, they're following their older colleagues into a career that should see them earn well above the average Vancouver salary of \$57,000, without racking up debt from years of post-secondary studies. Their education, which combines on-the-job training

an electrician and a coordinator for the BC Centre for Women in the Trades (BCCWITT), which helps advance and retain female tradespeople.

Changing the work culture means taking a jackhammer to some deeply entrenched ideas and norms. The construction industry lags "20 to 50 years behind other sectors in gender equality," says Colman-Shepherd as she strides around the HeroWork site, stopping to talk to volunteers, helping build the mentoring network that women in the trades so crucially need.

It's long been assumed that women don't have the grit and muscle to take up construction work that is risky and even dangerous, with early-dawn starts on sites that are often exposed to the elements. But dismissing their ability to cope with such challenges masks a conservative-minded

supposedly protecting her interests. "I was 35 at the time and confident; I can't imagine how a young woman would have fared." Colman-Shepherd pipes up: "It would scare them—if not scare them off."

Brynjolfson also recalls being singled out on the job site because of her gender. Once, a drywall installer, known as a mudder, scooped up a large blob of plaster and gobbled it on her tool pouch, which was lying on the ground, perhaps out of malice or a misguided sense of humour. She responded by taking her linesman pliers and punching holes in the wall where the man had just plastered. "Guess you missed a few spots," she quipped.

But Brynjolfson also faced bullying, like when a male worker picked up her tools and threw them, then screamed in her face, fists clenched, for a perceived oversight. On

Pacific

M&A and Business Brokers Ltd.

SELL YOUR BUSINESS WITH CONFIDENCE
KNOWLEDGE. EXPERIENCE. TRUST.

WWW.CONSIDERSELLING.CA | 778-696-6111

CALL US FOR A CONFIDENTIAL, NO OBLIGATION CONSULTATION

a few occasions, overwhelmed by the animosity, she locked herself in a washroom and cried. Other times, she was one of many witnesses to men dropping their tool pouches and brawling. With similar stories abounding, one of BCCWITT's efforts is the Be More Than a Bystander program, which teaches men to speak out when they see female colleagues being mistreated.

Tradeswomen also complain that their resumé ends up in the recycling bin as soon as a hiring manager receives it. Some men in recruiting roles, especially if they're older, want to protect jobs for the guys—not see them handed out to ambitious young women, Colman-Shepherd says. To get around this, tradeswomen will often give only their first initial when applying for jobs, or take on masculine given names.

As a result, some women have had to quit the trades, unable to tally enough apprentice hours to earn their ticket, says Colman-Shepherd, a powerfully built 6'2" former national rower, who dealt with the

SkyTrain extension, expansions to ports and Vancouver International Airport, the twinning of the Trans Mountain pipeline—the current labour force will increase by 17,600 workers through 2028, Ottawa-based industry group BuildForce Canada predicts.

Provincial population growth of almost 1.3 million by 2041, if Statistics Canada is right, will also call for the construction of about 500,000 new homes, Vancouver-based data provider Rennie Intelligence forecasts. With BuildForce estimating that 44,200 baby boomer tradespeople will retire by 2028, who will fill all those jobs?

Just as hordes of Rosie the Riveters rolled up their sleeves during both world wars to work in the factories, today's dire need for tradespeople should open more

Workers (IBEW) in Port Coquitlam and president of the BC Tradeswomen Society.

Construction companies that hire women might find that their staff work better together, too. "Women are socialized to be more collaborative, and they bring that to the workplace," says Victoria's Lindsay Kearns, a HeroWork volunteer and electrician who is vice-president of the BC Tradeswomen Society.

Tradeswomen are also encouraging



NO NONSENSE

(Left) Electrician Emelia Colman-Shepherd, a coordinator with the BC Centre for Women in the Trades; (below) Volunteers at the Our Place Therapeutic Recovery Community job site



"Economically, [working in the trades] lifts women out of poverty. And because women are often primary caregivers of children, it lifts children out of poverty as well"

—Lisa Langevin, assistant business manager, Local 213, IBEW, and president, BC Tradeswomen Society

hiring hurdle by "showing up in person." The first-year retention rate for tradeswomen is less than 50 percent, the British Columbia Construction Association (BCCA) estimates, versus 70 percent for men.

Hire more women—now

The trades sector is a key economic driver throughout the province, employing about 180,000 workers out of a total of more than 242,000 in construction, according to BC Stats. What's wrong with its continued domination by men? Well, lots.

For starters, the B.C. construction industry needs all the help it can get. Partly thanks to big projects—think LNG Canada and its associated Coastal GasLink pipeline, Woodfibre LNG, a new Pattullo Bridge, the Site C dam, the Millennium Line's Broadway

doors for women. "The skilled-trades shortage is becoming a serious crisis," says France Daviault, executive director of Ottawa-based Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, which organizes national conferences, symposiums and webinars for women and youth.

Daviault cites B.C.'s low unemployment rate (4.5 percent in June) as proof that companies and unions need to take a fresh look at the female majority in Canada's workforce: "It makes good business sense for industry to tap into this 51 percent."

Recruiting women to the trades will also benefit men, by reducing bullying on work-sites and enhancing diversity. The latter is documented as a way to boost an organization's corporate intelligence, driving innovation, profits and morale, says Lisa Langevin, assistant business manager at Local 213 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical

more-flexible work hours to accommodate young children, since few child-care facilities open early enough for mothers to make the crack-of-dawn job starts on construction sites, Langevin says. Fathers stand to gain from these demands, given that many men are single dads facing the same child-care pressures, she adds.

On a macro scale, more tradeswomen will help fight B.C.'s high child poverty rates, contends Langevin, who is also a BCCWITT board member. "Economically, it lifts women out of poverty," says the electrician, who began apprenticing in 2002, following a career as a behavioural consultant. "And because women are often primary caregivers of children, it lifts children out of poverty as well."

Just ask men how lucrative the sector can be. In 2015, those with an apprenticeship

Photo courtesy of North Island College



Breaking down barriers for women in the skilled trades

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN A CAREER IN TRADES?

Trades offer good paying jobs, and workers are in demand. It's expected there will be about 71,000 job openings in the trades in B.C. over the next decade.

The B.C. Government is committed to building up a diverse and inclusive workforce for skilled tradespeople.

Apprentices can earn while they learn so now is the time to find out more about:

- ➊ Financial and other supports for women pursuing careers in the trades
- ➋ Government funded projects supporting mentorship and networking to build up the next generation of women in the trades

- ➌ Government funded projects supporting safe and respectful work sites
- ➍ 100 different trades programs through the Industry Training Authority

If you're a woman interested in pursuing a career in the trades, visit WorkBC.ca or a Work BC Centre near you.

ALL THE TOOLS YOU NEED | WorkBC.ca



certificate in the skilled trades had median earnings of \$72,955, Statcan reports, 7 per cent more than men with a college diploma and 31 per cent more than those with a high-school diploma.

A new code of conduct

To propel women into the skilled trades, Langevin supports quotas, even though she admits that most female tradespeople want merit-based hiring practices. Quotas would speed things up, she says, pointing to the Policy Group on Tradeswomen Issues (PGTI) in Boston, which has made them part of its push for a 20-percent female workforce in Massachusetts by 2020. The current share of women in registered apprenticeships is 8.5 per cent, with the number varying between trades, says Susan Moir, research director for PGTI.

By comparison, B.C.'s female representation has been virtually stagnant. It rose to 4.7 per cent in 2017, up from 4.4 per cent in 2015, 3.1 per cent in 2006 and 3 per cent in 2001, reports SkillPlan, a Burnaby-based provider of workforce development programs and training.

Moir says Massachusetts is well on its way to reaching the 20-percent goal, which 14 registered apprenticeship programs have already surpassed. PGTI considers government and industry its partners, with federal, state and municipal governments mandating legal targets for female participation in construction. On Massachusetts and federally funded construction projects, 6.9 per cent of the working hours must be tallied by women. The City of Boston has set a goal of 12 per cent of working hours undertaken by women on construction sites larger than 4,645 square metres, while one project is now at 16-percent women's hours, Moir says.

Perhaps most important, more female teens are beginning to consider the trades a worthy career. In 2018, Moir says, 18.5 per cent of students at the state's vocational-technical high schools were young women.

Achieving similar numbers in B.C. means addressing workplace culture, Langevin stresses. This includes tackling less blatant forms of sexual harassment such as lewd washroom graffiti, rude comments and bosses' refusal to allow a female tradesperson to join out-of-town work crews, because someone's "girlfriend would have trouble with that."

Sometimes the shortcomings of a past female worker are projected onto new applicants, Langevin relates: "One friend who was interviewed was told, 'We once hired a woman and she wouldn't go up a 12-foot ladder, so we won't hire women.'"

Although B.C.'s long-standing human rights laws explicitly protect against such sex discrimination, employers can sidestep

them. Complainers, men as well as women, tend to be blackballed—they're the first laid off and the last rehired, Langevin says.

However, she's hopeful that recent provincial legislation will make the trades more welcoming to women. Last year, the NDP government created BC Infrastructure Benefits (BCIB), a Crown agency that oversees the Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) cover-

Laying the Foundation

AFTER LAUNCHING THE PROVINCE'S FIRST FEMALE-LED CONSTRUCTION BUSINESS, KENDALL ANSELL WANTS TO HELP MORE WOMEN GO INTO THE TRADES

WHEN VANCOUVER

general contractor Kendall Ansell walked into one of the Big Five banks with her new business partner to discuss opening some accounts, the employee they met with directed all of her attention to just one of them—the man. Ansell was ignored.

Ironic, given that the business, Belle Construction, B.C.'s first female-led construction company, was Ansell's idea and long-time dream. Equally ironic: she created Belle, launched this past March, to help boost the number of women in the industry.

Ansell began work in construction as a seven-year-old stacking wood for the family's Cherry Homes construction firm in Maple Ridge. "The thought never came into my mind of being a general contractor," she recalls. Ansell went on to study interior design at BCIT, eventually opening an eponymous business.

While doing projects, she noticed that male trades workers sometimes made homeowners ill at ease: "The owners didn't feel comfortable asking questions." Women tradespeople created a

congenial atmosphere, she says, providing "more of a nurturing presence on job sites."

Before starting Belle, Ansell couldn't find any female contractors, but now they approach her for work. In May, she launched the annual Belle Construction Achievement Award, valued at \$500, for a top female student in BCIT's Construction Management program. "It's about equality and inclusivity," says Ansell, who hopes the award will encourage more young women to consider a trades career.

Tamara Pongracz, chief instructor for BCIT's Trades Access department, says the college has welcomed female trades students since the 1970s. And with gender roles becoming less regimented, more teens and young women are joining BCIT's programs.

To capitalize on this, BCIT offers high-school students a shortened version of its four-month Trades Discovery for Women, which facilitates hands-on experience in about a dozen trades disciplines. The

result? Trades Access grads are now 20-percent female.

Countering that achievement is a dismal statistic: at last count, women held just 4.7 per cent of trades jobs in B.C. What is going wrong?

It's all about retention, Pongracz says. Women still get passed over for jobs—just as she was when she entered the plumbing trade in the late 1980s. And many workplaces still don't welcome women, something she blames on employers, who bear "the responsibility for the health and welfare of their workers."

Pongracz is optimistic that the Builders Code, which sets standards of behaviour to eliminate hazing, harassment, bullying and discrimination for all workers, will make the trades more inviting to women, Indigenous people, youth and new Canadians. A growing number of construction companies have signed the code, pledging to uphold its equality tenets. But change is slow and incremental, Pongracz warns: "It's an evolution, not a revolution." —R.S.



Kendall Ansell, founder of Belle Construction.

Tamara Pongracz, chief instructor for BCIT's Trades Access department.

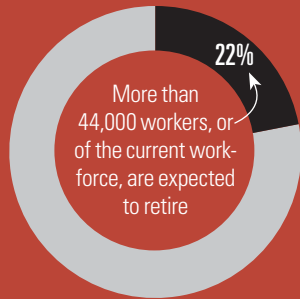
Photo: [unclear]

Workers Needed

B.C.'s labour forecast for 2019-28, according to Ottawa-based construction industry group BuildForce Canada:

Construction demands will grow the current labour force by

17,600 workers, or **↑9.4%**



Thanks to demand increases and retirement, the B.C. construction industry will need to hire **62,200** more workers

From 2019-28, an estimated **36,500** entrant workers—those under 30 who are new to the business—will join the construction labour force



If the industry recruits 36,500 new entrants, it will still be short **25,700** workers



Indigenous people make up **5.7%** of the construction labour force in B.C. and **4.9%** nationally

New Canadians comprise **24%** and **18%** respectively



ing key public sector infrastructure projects like the replacement Pattullo Bridge. Part of BCIB's mandate as employer is to handle hiring, with an emphasis on women, Indigenous people and youth, ensuring that workers receive training and apprenticeship opportunities along with union-level wages. This sparked a lawsuit, filed in B.C. Supreme Court in March, by a coalition of construction associations that oppose the CBA being the sole employer for public projects.

The construction industry is starting to take responsibility for discriminatory workplaces, says Lisa Stevens, chief strategy officer of the B.C. Construction Association, which represents 25,000 employers of union and non-union workers in the industrial, commercial and institutional sectors. This past March, the BCCA, in collaboration with the provincial Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, the ITA, WorkSafeBC, the Minerva Foundation for BC Women—which partners with organizations to advance gender parity—and four construction associations, launched the Builders Code.

The code, which covers all workers, sets standards of behaviour that go beyond physical safety and embraces the elimination of workplace distractions caused by hazing, harassment, bullying and discrimination. It's designed to make the workplace more inviting to women, Indigenous people, youth and new Canadians, Stevens notes. One goal is to raise the proportion of females in the trades to 10 percent from 4.7 percent over the next decade. "That 113-percent increase is an ambitious goal," Stevens says.

The biggest hurdle is retention. "What has happened in the past is, if you bring a woman onto a crew and she's not integrating well, they might move her to a different crew or a different project. Or she might quit," Stevens says. Although this might happen to a man, she adds, "the visible minority is more likely to trigger the move more quickly. So what we're struggling with is retention of tradeswomen, and that's one of the reasons for the Builders Code."

The architects of the code are also providing companies with human resources advisers who go to job sites to help employ-

ers and their work teams with dispute resolution, and coaches who help ensure best practices for worksite safety. The goal is to "work with the employer to succeed in retaining that tradesperson who is having an issue," Stevens explains. "What we're trying to do is drive this culture change by giving employers the tools, resources and information that they need to succeed, because they really need that extra assistance."

Young women are saying amen to that. Back in Victoria, at the Our Place Therapeutic Recovery Community job site, Maddy Smith, 29, of New Hazelton reflects on her work as a second-year apprentice plumber and Camosun College student. "Women who wear mascara every day—they're insane," she says with a grin. Smith, 5'5", is strong enough to heave a hot water tank into place by herself. On her own, she also does plumbing jobs at private residences, where she's amused by male homeowners "who hover," giving unwanted—and unneeded—advice. Women in the trades, Smith says resignedly, "have more to prove than a dude." ■



northcoal.ca

A NEW ERA OF MINING

Built on the latest globally recognized best practices, innovation, environmental and social responsibility.

FREE EVENT - TRI-CITIES

Build. Grow. Thrive.

Taking your business to the next level

Presented by
envision

IN PARTNERSHIP AND CO-PRESENTED WITH SMALL BUSINESS BC

NETWORKING, WORKSHOPS, EXHIBITS

EVERGREEN CULTURAL CENTRE

September 25th, 2019

8:30AM - 3:00PM

Register Now: sbbc.co/BuildGrowThrive