

Supporting Indigenous Women and Gender Diverse People in the Skilled Trades

A Keepers of the Circle Report

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Keepers of the Circle



Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades
A Keepers of the Circle Initiative

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Introduction

Indigenous women and gender diverse people remain notably and significantly underrepresented in the skilled trades across Canada, despite growing labour demand. There is clear evidence that diverse and culturally safe workplaces improve recruitment and retention outcomes. This report examines the structural, cultural, financial, and workplace barriers that limit entry, progressions, and long-term success for Indigenous women and gender diverse people in the skilled trades in Canada. Key challenges include; limited awareness of the various trades pathways and opportunities, inadequate access to training and wraparound supports, experiences of racism, sexism and discrimination, geographic and transportation barriers, and a lack of culturally grounded mentorship and employer practices. We will highlight the need for coordinated action among employers, training providers, unions, Indigenous communities, non-profit and Indigenous organizations, and governments to create inclusive pathways and placements into apprenticeship and skilled trades experiences and careers. This points to practical strategies such as culturally relevant outreach, mentorship, safe and respectful workplaces, flexible supports for childcare and transportation, and partnerships with Indigenous organizations to improve both recruitment and retention. Strengthening these systems will help expand opportunities for Indigenous women and gender diverse people while also supporting workforce development in Canada. The report also includes anecdotal evidence and case studies to support the findings of focus groups, and Indigenous women's lived experiences.

Throughout this report we will identify and share main gaps in recruitment and retention from real experiences of Indigenous women and gender diverse folks in the skilled trades. We will also recommend practical, culturally informed actions that increase access, participation, completion, and career advancement. The report aims to support employers, unions, educators, policy makers and Indigenous partners in building and providing safer, more inclusive, and sustainable pathways into the trades. The goal is not to exclude Indigenous men from this work, but to highlight and raise the profile of Indigenous women and gender diverse folks in traditionally white, male dominated spaces to address a real workforce and labour force gap in Canada. We will point to solutions to problems of workforce and labour force shortage as well as provide practical ways to address gaps.

Keepers of the Circle

Keepers of the Circle (KOTC) is a nonprofit organization that was established in 1997 as the Temiskaming Native Women's Support Group (TNWSG). KOTC is mandated to support the social, cultural, and economic equity of Indigenous women and the wellness of their families and communities through a holistic approach, incorporating traditional knowledge, cultural teachings, and on the land learning. The programs and services offered are grounded in the Medicine Wheel and the Seven Grandfather Teachings.

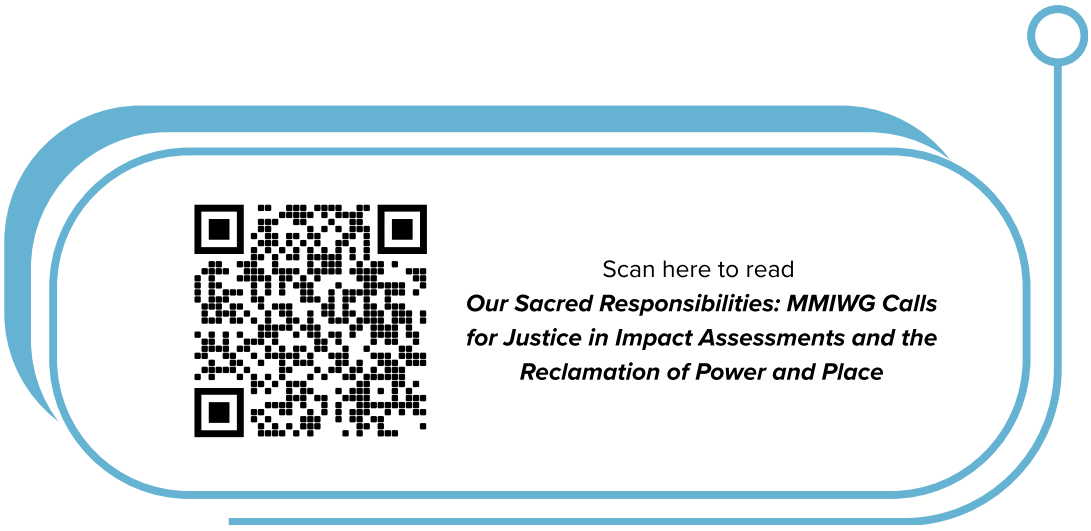
KOTC is family focused and community oriented, and our programs are designed to support the whole person – spiritually, emotionally, mentally and physically through cultural connections, traditional teachings, and practical support. Programs and services are operated across several areas including Family and Community Services, Childcare and Early Learning, Employment and Economic Development, and Community Engagement and Policy Work.

KOTC as an organization has always had the priority to ensure that Indigenous women and gender diverse folks have access to gainful employment. We have a long history of job readiness programing and connecting Indigenous women and gender diverse folks to employment. Our Culture, Confidence and Competence (CCC) program is an 8-week pre-employment training program for primarily Indigenous women and gender diverse people. Currently we run this program in partnership with both Indigenous groups and employers. Additionally, we run the CCC program virtually and in person to ensure that this program can have a national scope and remove geographic barriers to accessible training.

Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls

In 2016 the government of Canada commissioned a formal Inquiry into the growing crisis of Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people being murdered and going missing. In 2019, the National Inquiry on Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) was released. The National Inquiry included quotes from survivors and family members who were impacted by this tragedy. Additionally, it provided evidence of this crisis that made it impossible for law enforcement, legal systems, governments, industry, healthcare providers, social services, and every Canadian to ignore and deny the reality of MMIWG in this country. If you have not yet read the National Inquiry, we strongly encourage you to do so. The National Inquiry included Calls for Justice targeted to different workplaces including all workplaces connected to resource development industries, this includes many skilled trade workers. It also provides Calls for Justice for every Canadian. If you are a Canadian citizen or reside in Canada it is your personal responsibility to uphold these personal Calls for Justice. Your engagement with this report is a good step to upholding the Calls for Justice that we all need to engage with.

At Keepers of the Circle, we have already conducted significant work towards addressing the crisis of MMIWG. In the fall of 2024, we published a report titled *Our Sacred Responsibilities: MMIWG Calls for Justice in Impact Assessments and the Reclamation of Power and Place*.



The report specifically focused on mitigation measures to be applied to resource development projects however many of the recommendations from that report can be applied more broadly to workplaces in the skilled trades.

This work addresses the MMIWG crisis by creating pathways for Indigenous women and gender diverse folks to achieve gainful employment. Considering MMIWG is important in all workplaces but especially in the skilled trades. As you read this report, please reflect on the National Inquiry on MMIWG and ask yourself how each recommendation we provide can relate to the crisis of MMIWG. Ask yourself how the stories we share were complicated and impacted by the reality of being Indigenous and a woman or a Two-Spirit person.

Unique Position of Indigenous Women and Gender Diverse People in the Skilled Trades

Indigenous women and gender diverse people in the trades occupy a unique position in the workplace. There are many barriers for women and gender diverse people in the skilled trades, and these barriers are complicated and often amplified when considering Indigeneity. Indigenous women and gender diverse people bring a unique perspective to the workplace that no one else can bring. Improving the workplace for

Indigenous women and gender diverse people will not only benefit the Indigenous women and gender diverse folks in your workplace but also all other employees will benefit as well.

In Canada women account for nearly half of the workforce but only 14.8% of Red Seal trades workers in 2021 (Figure 1) (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2023). When you remove select service trades (i.e. cook, baker, hairstylist, etc.) the share of women in the trades workforce falls to 5.2% (Figure 2) (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2023). Further, from 2016 to 2021 there was a 4.7% decline of women in the Red Seal trades compared to a decline of 2.4% of men (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2023). In 2021, Indigenous people accounted for 5.3% of the workforce across Canadian Red Seal trades, this is two percentage points higher than the share of 4.2% in the overall workforce (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2023). When considering these stats, it is clear that Red Seal skilled trades are an important sector for Indigenous people in Canada when it comes to gainful employment. However, with the preexisting underrepresentation of women in the skilled trades and the alarming decline of women in Red Seal trades, the trades do not appear to be a welcoming environment for Indigenous women and gender diverse folks.

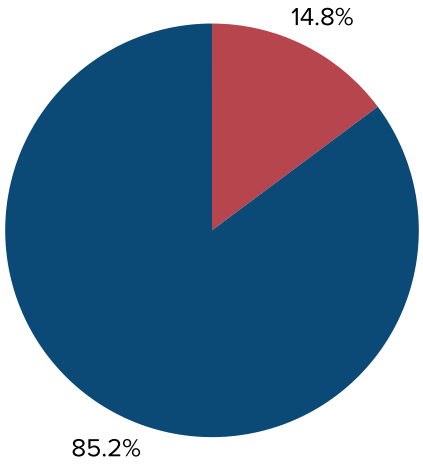


Figure 1. Percentage of female Red Seal trades workers in 2021.

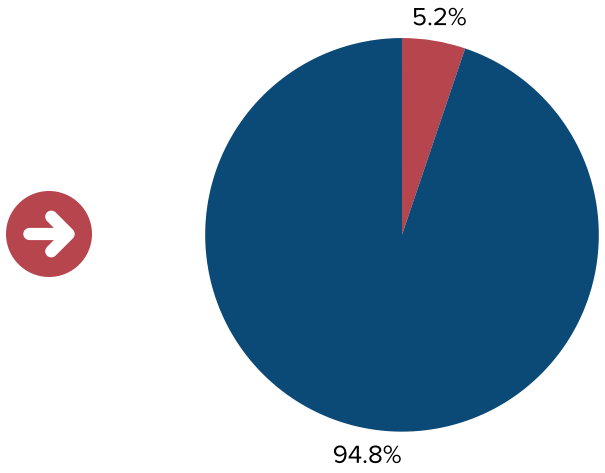


Figure 2. Percentage of female Red Seal trades workers in 2021 removing select service trades (i.e. cook, baker, hairstylist, etc.)

I would love to see more women in trades, we are fully capable and there is slowly more and more women but still very out numbered.

Collaboration is the Key to Success

Increasing the participation of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in the skilled trades requires a collaborative approach. While employers play an important role in recruitment and retention, meaningful change cannot be achieved by any one organization acting alone. Governments, employers, unions, training providers, Indigenous organizations, mentors, and community partners all have a role to play in creating pathways that are accessible, culturally safe, and responsive to the unique experiences of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).

Research and national calls to action have consistently highlighted the importance of partnership and shared responsibility in advancing reconciliation and improving outcomes for Indigenous Peoples (MMIWG, 2019). In the skilled trades, collaboration helps address barriers that extend beyond the workplace itself, including access to training opportunities, mentorship, transportation, childcare, cultural supports, and community connections. When organizations work together, apprentices are more likely to receive the support needed to enter, progress through, and complete their training.

Throughout the Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades (IWST) Project, collaboration was identified as a key factor in supporting participant success. Partnerships between Indigenous organizations, employers, training providers, unions, and community agencies created opportunities for participants to access training, build professional networks, and connect with culturally relevant supports. These relationships demonstrated that recruitment and retention are not individual responsibilities but shared commitments that require ongoing communication, trust, and collective action.



Case Study:

Inconsistent Collaboration Between Partner Organizations in an Indigenous Trades Training Initiative

Madison* heard about a skilled trades training program for Indigenous people that was running through an Indigenous organization, a training centre, and an Indigenous Skills and Employment program through a Facebook ad. She had been considering a career change and wanted to try the skilled trades. This was a great opportunity for her to try a trade with pretty low stakes. After she was accepted to the program, Madison travelled to the site of the training and was far enough from home that she needed to stay in the accommodations provided through the training program. This meant that she was not home to take care of her children. She was not too concerned about this because the program had committed to reimbursements for childcare. Further, the program boasted to place participants in a work placement with the training centre's union.

The program was 12 weeks long and while Madison enjoyed the program she experienced some stress around the funding that was promised. The childcare reimbursement requests required proof of childcare expenses and the childcare provider's direct deposit information. The payments were supposed to be processed on a bi-weekly basis, however, approximately 6 weeks lapsed before the first reimbursement was received. After the first submission for the reimbursement the process changed several times without clear communication. This caused unnecessary stress for Madison and a lot of her mental capacity was directed towards her childcare situation.

Despite the stress around childcare, Madison excelled in the program and learned many new skills. She was excited about her future in the trades and was told by the training centre representatives that there were plenty of jobs available and that the union would be reaching out with more information so that she could start her journey. However, communications from the training centre were very delayed. Around 3 months after the training concluded Madison finally received an email from the training centre outlining the process for pursuing apprenticeship opportunities. Instead of coordinating a work placement, Madison was instructed to independently prepare a resume and cover letter for submission to the union and copy the training centre on the correspondence.**

This case study examines collaboration challenges experienced during an Indigenous skilled trades job readiness program delivered through a partnership between an Indigenous organization, a training centre, and an Indigenous Skills and Employment program.

The Indigenous organization served as the host site for a twelve-week trade readiness program. The training centre was responsible for delivering the technical training, supplying instructors, tools, materials, and equipment. The Indigenous Skills and Employment program partnered in the initiative by providing participant financial supports and accommodations while also providing participant policy development and program coordination.

Impact on Participants

The identified collaboration challenges had several impacts:

- Delayed financial supports increased financial stress for participants requiring childcare.
- Changing administrative requirements created confusion for both participants and support staff.
- Delayed communication resulted in participant uncertainty regarding employment opportunities.
- Participant confidence in the transition from training to employment may have been affected due to the absence of timely placement outcomes.

Lessons Learned

This case highlights the importance of clearly defined partnership responsibilities and consistent communication throughout collaborative workforce development initiatives.

Future partnerships would benefit from:

- Clearly documented partner roles and responsibilities.
- Standardized administrative procedures that remain consistent throughout program delivery.
- Service standards for responding to partner communications.
- Defined timelines for participant funding and reimbursement.

- A documented post-training transition plan outlining placement responsibilities, timelines, and communication expectations.
- Regular partnership meetings throughout both program delivery and post-program follow-up.
- A shared accountability framework to monitor participant outcomes and employment placements.

Conclusion

The partnership demonstrated a shared commitment to supporting Indigenous participants entering the skilled trades; however, inconsistencies in communication, administrative processes, and post-program coordination reduced the effectiveness of the collaboration.

While the training itself was successfully delivered and participants benefited from significant wraparound supports, delayed decision-making, changing administrative requirements, and prolonged placement timelines created unnecessary barriers for both participants and frontline staff. Strengthening governance, communication protocols, and accountability measures would improve future collaborative initiatives and better support successful transitions from training to employment.

*All names of individuals and organizations have been changed for anonymity.

**This story is based on real events but not an exact representation of the situation.



Methods

Throughout this report you will find quotes that have been taken directly from Indigenous women and gender diverse people in the skilled trades in Canada. For this report we took the learning from the extensive experience of Keepers of the Circle in employment, training, and gender safety and developed a research plan to further understand the experiences of Indigenous women and gender diverse people in the skilled trades. This research was conducted for a year between the Summer of 2024 and Summer of 2025.

The primary data used in this report includes survey data and focus group quotes. We conducted a survey focusing on the perceptions of skilled trades from the perspective Indigenous women and gender diverse people. We also conducted two focus groups, one in person and one virtual. The focus group conducted in person was run at a local friendship centre.

The findings of this report draw on this data as well as the lived experience of the women and gender diverse folks we work with through our programming. Our program is national in scope, and we have gathered input from Indigenous women and gender diverse people across Canada as well as representation from First Nations, Metis, Inuit, and Two-Spirit individuals. We also draw on our lived experiences as practitioners in the education and training space.

Demographics of Participants

In 2024, KOTC conducted a survey titled “Perceptions of Indigenous Women about the Skilled Trades” where Indigenous women and gender diverse folks were asked to answer questions regarding their perceptions about the skilled trades in Canada. The respondants of the survey were asked several questions such as, “What supports do you feel are needed for Indigenous Women and Two-Spirit to succeed in the Skilled Trades?”, “Could you please share with us any barriers or challenges to getting into the trades or succeeding in the trades we may have overlooked?”, and “Can you recall challenge(s) that you faced in the trades that you'd like to share here?” The respondants were also asked to identify what trades they have previous experience with or knowledge of. The majority of the respondants were women who identified as status First Nations. However, there were respondants who identified as Two-Spirit, non-binary, non-status First Nation, Inuit, and Metis. The age of respondants was highly dispersed across ages 18 to 65 and older.

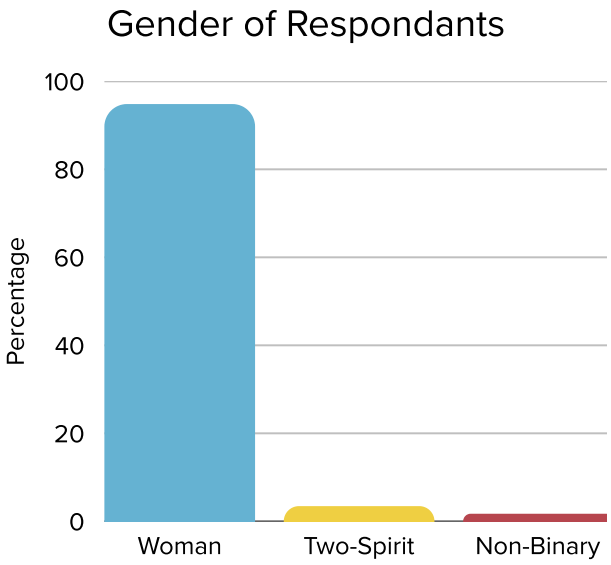


Figure 3. Gender of the respondants of the Perceptions of Indigenous Women about the Skilled Trades survey.

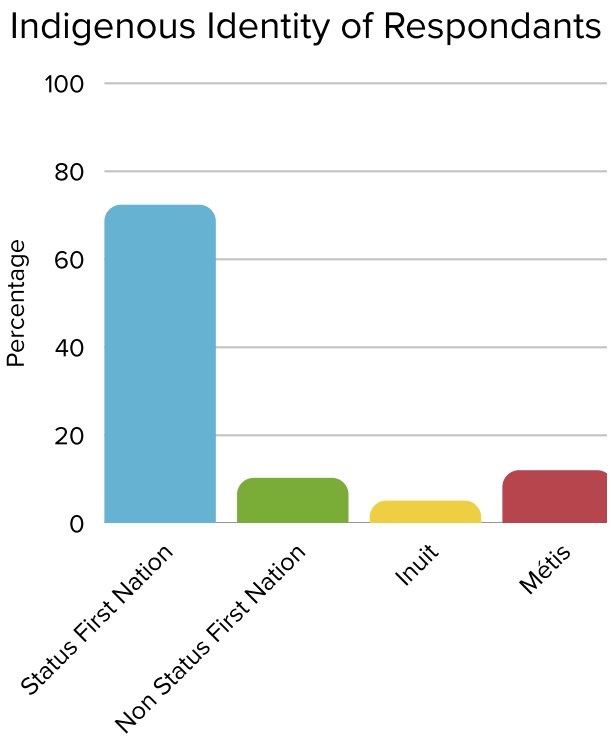


Figure 4. Indigenous identity of respondants of the Perceptions of Indigenous Women about the Skilled Trades survey.

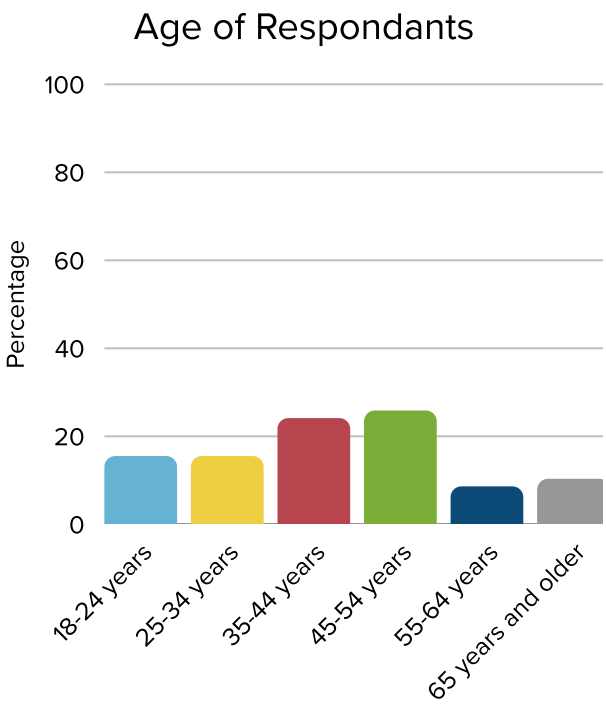




Figure 5. Age of respondants of the Perceptions of Indigenous Women about the Skilled Trades survey.

The Gaps: Recruitment and Retention

This section is dedicated to commonly referenced blind spots that KOTC members raise when they discuss their futures in the skilled trades. This section showcases where the gaps lie in recruitment and retention of Indigenous women and gender diverse folks in the skilled trades.

Psychosocial Safety

Creating safe and inclusive workplaces requires more than physical safety measures. While the skilled trades have made significant progress in improving physical health and safety, psychosocial safety remains an important consideration, particularly for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people. Psychosocial safety refers to workplace conditions that support an individual's psychological, emotional, social, and cultural well-being (Government of Canada, 2025).



For many Indigenous women and gender-diverse people, workplace experiences are shaped not only by the demands of the job itself, but also by the impacts of discrimination, exclusion, harassment, and systemic barriers that can affect their sense of belonging and safety. Research has shown that psychologically safe workplaces contribute to improved well-being, stronger workplace relationships, increased job satisfaction, and higher rates of employee retention (CSA Group, 2024).

Throughout the Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades (IWST) Project, participants identified several factors that influenced their workplace experiences, including workplace culture, access to support networks, cultural understanding, mentorship opportunities, and experiences of harassment and discrimination. These findings reinforce the importance of taking a holistic approach to workplace safety—one that recognizes that employees must feel psychologically, culturally, and socially safe to thrive and succeed in the skilled trades.

The experiences shared throughout the IWST Project highlight several key factors that influence psychosocial safety in the skilled trades, including workplace violence and harassment, cultural awareness and competency, access to meaningful supports, and opportunities for mentorship and connection.

Prevalence of Workplace Violence and Harassment

Workplace violence and harassment can have significant impacts on employee well-being, job satisfaction, and retention. These behaviours can take many forms, including bullying, intimidation, discrimination, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, racism, and other actions that create unsafe or unwelcoming work environments. While policies and

procedures are important tools for addressing these issues, fostering a respectful workplace culture is equally important in supporting psychosocial safety (Government of Canada, 2025).

For Indigenous women and gender-diverse people, experiences of workplace violence and harassment are often shaped by the intersection of gender-based discrimination, racism, and colonialism. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls identified systemic discrimination and violence as ongoing realities that continue to affect Indigenous women across many areas of life, including employment and economic participation (MMIWG, 2019). These experiences can impact an individual's sense of belonging, confidence, and ability to remain in a workplace or pursue long-term career opportunities.

Lack of Cultural Competency and Awareness

Creating inclusive workplaces requires more than good intentions. Cultural competency and awareness help employers, supervisors, and coworkers better understand the histories, experiences, and perspectives of Indigenous Peoples, as well as the ongoing impacts of colonialism that continue to influence workplace experiences today. Without this understanding, Indigenous employees may encounter misconceptions, stereotypes, or workplace practices that unintentionally create barriers to inclusion and belonging (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).

A lack of cultural competency can affect workplace relationships, communication, and an employee's sense of psychological and cultural safety. Indigenous women and gender-diverse people may feel pressure to educate others about their cultures and experiences or may be hesitant to express cultural needs for fear of being misunderstood or judged. While these experiences are not always intentional, they can contribute to feelings of isolation and disconnection within the workplace (MMIWG, 2019).

Building culturally safe workplaces requires ongoing learning, reflection, and commitment from organizations at all levels. Cultural competency is not achieved through a single training session but through continuous efforts to strengthen understanding, challenge bias, and create environments where Indigenous employees feel respected, valued, and supported. By investing in cultural awareness and competency initiatives, employers can help foster stronger workplace relationships, improve retention, and contribute to meaningful reconciliation in the skilled trades (CSA Group, 2024).

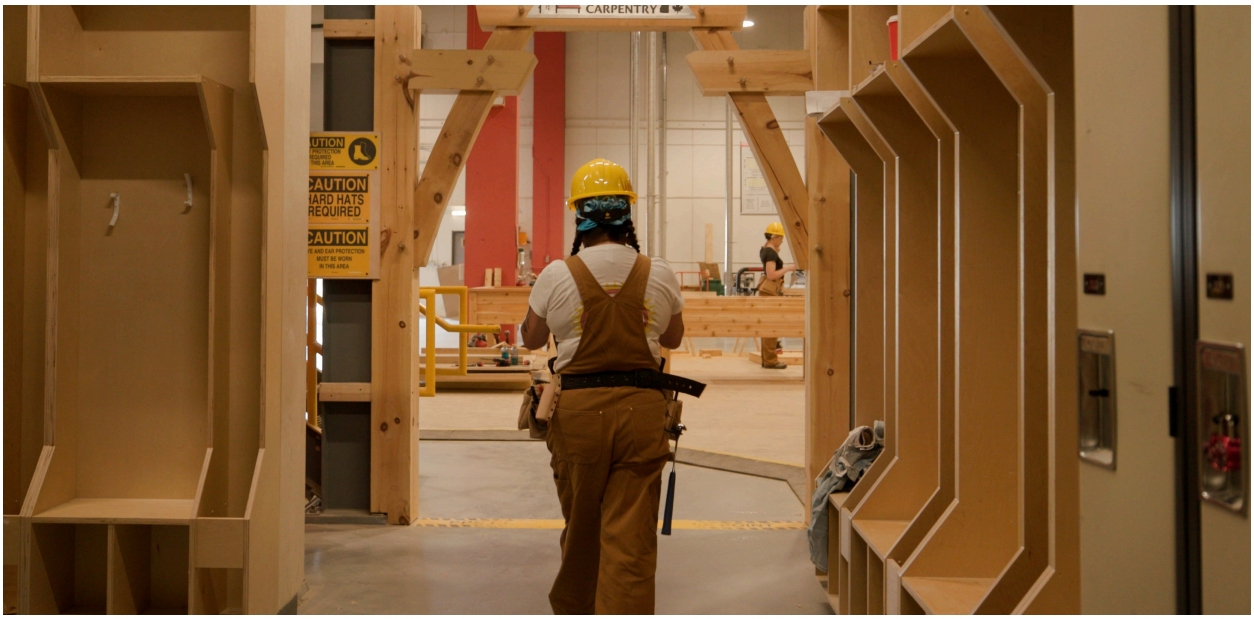
While cultural competency and awareness are important components of a psychologically safe workplace, meaningful support must extend beyond awareness alone. Indigenous women and gender-diverse people often face challenges that cannot be addressed through traditional workplace wellness initiatives or mental health supports in isolation.

Going Beyond Mental Health Supports

Mental health supports are an important component of a healthy workplace and can play a valuable role in supporting employee well-being. However, creating psychologically safe and inclusive workplaces requires a broader understanding of the factors that influence an individual's overall experience at work. For Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in the skilled trades, workplace well-being is often shaped by a combination of social, cultural, emotional, and practical considerations that extend beyond traditional mental health supports (Government of Canada, 2025).

Participants in the KOTC Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades (IWST) Project identified a range of factors that influenced their ability to participate and succeed in the trades, including access to childcare, transportation, mentorship, cultural connection, flexible workplace supports, and understanding from employers and coworkers. Experiences of grief, family responsibilities, community obligations, and cultural commitments can also impact an individual's workplace experience. While employee assistance programs and mental health resources may provide valuable support, they are not always designed to address the broader realities that Indigenous women and gender-diverse people may face (MMIWG, 2019).

Taking a holistic approach to employee well-being means recognizing that workers bring their whole selves to the workplace. Employers who invest in culturally safe practices, flexible supports, respectful workplace cultures, and meaningful opportunities for connection and belonging are better positioned to support recruitment, retention, and long-term success. Moving beyond mental health supports alone allows organizations to create workplaces where employees feel supported not only as workers, but as people, family members, and community members (CSA Group, 2024; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).



Case Study:

The Importance of Psychological Safety

It was Kasey's* first year as an apprentice. Kasey is an Indigenous woman who is hoping to start a new career in the trades. She was excited to start at her first union job with XYZ Constructors*. She told her friends, family, and the KOTC IWST team that she was enjoying her job and felt like she was learning new skills. There was one guy on site, James*, that kind of creeped her out but it was nothing that she couldn't handle. He would make odd comments and would follow her around the job site occasionally. At lunches she would laugh about it with the other women working on her site. They also confirmed that they felt James had odd behaviour around the job site.

One day James followed Kasey into an empty room while she was working. He approached her and tried to touch her hair and necklace. Kasey asked him not to touch her. James then asked Kasey to add him on Facebook. She informed him that she did not add coworkers on social media. On a different day Kasey was straddling a beam to do her job. James made a lewd comment about her body that made Kasey feel very uncomfortable.

Kasey and some other coworkers reported the comment and other behaviour to the site foremen. After this reporting Kasey reached out to the KOTC team to disclose what had been going on with James. The first recommendation that KOTC made was to hold a sharing circle since Kasey did not want to make a big deal out of the situation. She was worried that she would be singled out more on the site if she escalated the situation.

The week of the sharing circle the site foreman approached Kasey and communicated that the sharing circle was inconveniencing his schedule. Kasey shared this conversation with KOTC and a decision was made to cancel the sharing circle and escalate the situation to a sexual harassment investigation. When KOTC called their contact at XYZ Constructors to share this decision the representative from XYZ Constructors proceeded to argue with the KOTC team and raise his voice. At that point both Kasey and the KOTC team felt like this workplace was not a safe space for Kasey.

After the formal investigation took place Kasey felt like her experience on the job site changed. The other women on site stopped eating lunch with her, her foreman would make passive aggressive comments towards her, and the other men she worked with stopped joking around with her. Eventually she decided that the job was not a good fit for her and that she needed to move to another job to protect her mental health.**

During the Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades (IWST) Project, Keepers of the Circle participated in an investigation involving an Indigenous woman working on a Northern Ontario construction project. The apprentice reported ongoing sexual harassment from a coworker and described feeling increasingly isolated after raising her concerns. The investigation identified gaps in reporting procedures, inconsistent supervisory responses, and a lack of trauma-informed and culturally appropriate supports.

While the initial harassment significantly affected the worker's well-being, the organizational response further contributed to a breakdown in psychosocial safety. Concerns surrounding workplace culture, confidentiality, retaliation, and inadequate support left the worker feeling unsupported throughout the reporting process.

This case demonstrates that creating psychologically safe workplaces requires more than responding to incidents after they occur. It requires respectful leadership, clear reporting processes, cultural safety, and a workplace culture where employees feel safe to raise concerns and trust that they will be addressed fairly and respectfully.

*All names of individuals and organizations have been changed for anonymity.

**This story is based on real events but not an exact representation of the situation.

Distance from Community

For many Indigenous women and gender diverse people community is a central component of their lives, both the land and the people. In many situations people have to leave their community in order to go to school, receive training through an apprenticeship, and find work. This places strain on Indigenous peoples who are trying to achieve a career in the skilled trades. When there are ceremonies, funerals, harvesting/hunting times, etc., it is very difficult to get home and participate in community when there is an added barrier of distance. This creates not only a physical distance but also an emotional, spiritual, and social distance. Needing to leave their community in order to join the skilled trades causes a lot of hesitancy for Indigenous women and

gender diverse people. It also makes the beginning of their career in the trades more difficult.

Childcare

A lack of appropriate childcare is the most cited barrier for Indigenous women looking to achieve gainful employment and the skilled trades is no exception (Bridges et al., 2023; Bridges & Skelding, 2024; Gibson et al., 2017; Manning et al., 2018; MiningWatch Canada, 2004). In fact, childcare is complicated by the unconventional working hours in many trades. There are also very few culturally relevant childcare options available. Many Indigenous women and gender diverse people rely on family to provide childcare. While this is a more affordable and practical way to address childcare it can be unstable. It also leads to cumulative effects for the spouses and family members having to step up for childcare. Women are more frequently identified as primary caregivers for children and therefore the lack of adequate and accessible childcare services result in women being excluded from apprenticeships and employment in the skilled trades.

> So I have two children. I have a two year old and a month old baby. So when I first started, I had my mother take care of the child while I did training and did work. But if you accidentally pissed her off, she's like, “no, that's it.” You know, we have that kind of sister relationship. She's more like my sister than my mom. So any little thing that pisses her off, she'll know how to attack me, so she cut me off babysitting. So that was really hard. Because in the trades you work long hours, late nights, so it's really hard because the daycares are just nine to five and close family and friends have to step in.

Moontime/Perimenopause/Hormonal Changes

Workplaces are increasingly recognizing the importance of supporting employee well-being across all stages of life. However, topics such as menstruation (moon time), perimenopause, menopause, and other hormonal changes have historically received limited attention in workplace policies, practices, and discussions. As a result, many women may experience challenges that affect their comfort, well-being, and participation at work without feeling supported or understood by their employers or coworkers (Government of Canada, 2025).

In the skilled trades, where work is often physically demanding and workplaces have traditionally been designed around the experiences of men, these challenges can be

further amplified. Symptoms associated with menstruation, perimenopause, and hormonal changes may include fatigue, difficulty sleeping, changes in concentration, temperature sensitivity, and physical discomfort. Without awareness and understanding, workers may feel hesitant to discuss their needs or seek support, contributing to feelings of isolation and stigma (Government of Canada, 2025).

Creating inclusive workplaces requires recognizing that employees may have different experiences and support needs throughout their lives. Simple measures such as fostering open dialogue, increasing awareness, providing flexibility where possible, and encouraging respectful workplace cultures can help create environments where women feel supported and valued. By acknowledging and addressing topics that have traditionally been overlooked, employers can contribute to healthier workplaces, improved retention, and a stronger sense of belonging for all workers.

Lack of Visibility

Since there are so few women in the skilled trades there are even fewer Indigenous women represented in the skilled trades. Many of the women that we speak to about the skilled trades are uncertain and hesitant to start their journey as a tradesperson because they do not know anyone like them who has been successful in the trades. A very important piece for recruitment of Indigenous women and gender diverse folks in the skilled trades is to spotlight successful Indigenous women and gender diverse people already in the trades. For this reason, KOTC has developed a film series dedicated to shining light on incredible role models in the skilled trades. The people we highlight in our film project are incredible Indigenous women and gender diverse people that have established themselves in many different trades all over the country.

> Thinking about educational institutions, a lot of skilled trades are offered in colleges as a way to get started. And luckily, when I was in high school, I was able to tour a few colleges through a program. I can't remember the names of them, but I did one at [college] where we spent a week in the dorms. We got used to dorm living, and we were able to check out all programs throughout [the college program] we did little demos to see what we liked, and that actually did help in my decision to take powerline at [college]. So having those options for Indigenous youth is a good way to get them involved in seeing what trades or even programs they might be interested in. And then once they get to the college step, having some sort of a room that you can go to to smudge. And there's different people there for you to talk to and connect with, and you can get additional support, especially being away from your community for education.

Lack of Mentorship

Mentorship plays an important role in supporting recruitment, retention, and success within the skilled trades. For many apprentices, mentors provide guidance, encouragement, and practical knowledge that can help navigate workplace expectations, training requirements, and career development opportunities. Beyond technical skills, mentors can also offer support in building confidence, overcoming challenges, and fostering a sense of belonging within the industry.

> I think that having outreach groups for whether it be Indigenous women as a whole, or for Indigenous tradespeople and then women separately, are very good resources. It allows you to connect with other people within the company. Like I said, I work at [company], which is a fairly large company, and they do have those outreach programs which I am very grateful to be a part of and be able to participate in, but in smaller companies that may not have the numbers and people it might not be something that is is on their mind, right? So including those to have somewhere to go, for people to talk is, is a good resource, I believe, and I think it could contribute to making them feel welcome in the career that they're in.

For Indigenous women and gender-diverse people, mentorship can be particularly valuable. Representation matters, and having access to mentors who understand the realities of working in the trades can help individuals feel supported and connected throughout their apprenticeship journey. Mentorship can also help address feelings of isolation that may arise when individuals are underrepresented within their workplace, training environment, or trade (MMIWG, 2019).

Throughout the KOTC Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades (IWST) Project, participants highlighted the importance of supportive relationships and trusted networks. Creating opportunities for mentorship, peer support, and community connection can help strengthen retention and contribute to positive workplace experiences. By investing in mentorship initiatives and fostering supportive workplace cultures, employers, unions, training providers, and community organizations can play an important role in helping Indigenous women and gender-diverse people succeed in the skilled trades.

> For me, with even with the men back in my community, by me sharing on Facebook about the skilled trade that I'm doing. I did not realize it at the time, but I was an inspiration, not only to other women, but to men also, because of the skilled trade that I'm doing right now. My community and

> my family have been very supportive, and they've been rooting me on and seeing how proud they are, how proud they are of me, and it just keeps motivating me more to keep going in this trade.

NITAC

Recognizing the importance of mentorship, support networks, and collaboration in improving outcomes for Indigenous Peoples in the skilled trades, Keepers of the Circle played a key role in bringing together partners to establish the National Indigenous Tradeswomen Advisory Circle (NITAC). NITAC was created to strengthen relationships between Indigenous organizations, employers, unions, training providers, and community partners while advancing opportunities for Indigenous participation in apprenticeship and skilled trades careers. The development of NITAC reflects a shared commitment to addressing gaps in support and creating pathways that foster long-term success for Indigenous workers in the trades.



NITAC Members attending the Securing Equity in the Trades Conference 2025 by the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum.

Recommendations

Culturally Responsive Bereavement Leave

For some Indigenous workers and communities, the loss of a community member may result in a collective pause to honour the person who has passed. Programs,

services, events, and governance activities may be postponed. Ceremonial practices may include wake services and, in some communities, a sacred fire that can be maintained for several days requiring workers to be away from work for longer than standard bereavement leave allows.

> Being Indigenous means we have a big family most of the time, like extended family. And getting bereavement leave for funerals, is hard to come by, like, I know I couldn't get a lot of time off because I had multiple funerals in one year, and I couldn't attend like half of them, because, no, you have to be at work. Is it your immediate family? But in native culture you're so close to extended family, like it's your immediate family, so that doesn't qualify for me.

Ontario's Employment Standards Act provides up to two unpaid, job-protected bereavement days per calendar year for the death of specified family members after two consecutive weeks of employment. This minimum standard often does not adequately support Indigenous workers whose bereavement responsibilities reflect the intersectionality of extended family, community obligations, ceremony, and the impacts of intergenerational trauma. It is also important to note that for many Indigenous folks their lost loved one might not be someone directly related to them that qualifies for them to access bereavement leave as dictated by a standard policy. Rigid application of standard leave policies may contribute to barriers in retention, workplace safety, and apprenticeship completion.

Employers seeking to recruit, train, and retain Indigenous workers should adopt trauma-informed and culturally responsive bereavement policies that allow flexibility for community-based grief and ceremony. Indigenous-led cultural competency and awareness training can help employers build cultural humility, address bias, and align workplace practices with reconciliation commitments.

KOTC Employer Engagement Sessions

Recognizing that employers play an important role in creating inclusive and supportive workplaces, Keepers of the Circle facilitated Employer Engagement Sessions as part of the Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades (IWST) Project. These sessions created opportunities for employers, industry representatives, unions, training providers, and community partners to engage in meaningful discussions about recruitment, retention, workplace culture, and the experiences of Indigenous women in the skilled trades.

The sessions encouraged participants to explore barriers that may impact participation and success in the trades while identifying practical strategies to support more inclusive workplaces. Topics such as cultural competency, psychosocial safety,

mentorship, workplace policies, and equitable employment practices were discussed through a collaborative and solutions-focused lens. By fostering dialogue and relationship-building, the sessions helped strengthen understanding and encouraged employers to consider how their organizations could contribute to positive change within the industry.

Employer engagement was identified as an important component of creating sustainable pathways into the skilled trades. Meaningful change requires ongoing commitment and collaboration, and these sessions provided a space for employers and industry partners to learn, reflect, and share promising practices that support Indigenous recruitment, retention, and advancement in the workforce (CSA Group, 2024).

The KOTC Employer Engagement Sessions incorporate several trainings and workshops that we have identified to be important for employers to implement in order to make their workplace safer for Indigenous women and gender diverse people. These training and workshops include Anti-Discrimination and Anti- Harassment training, Cultural Competency and Awareness training, CSA Z301A standard workshop, Reconciliation Action Plan development, and a workshop dedicated to the internal review of policies.

Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Training

In Ontario, similarly to other provinces and territories, it is not mandatory for employers to train their employees on matters related to sexual violence and harassment in the workplace. The Ontario Building and Construction Tradeswomen (OBCT) is hoping to fill this gap through their Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Training. This training focuses specifically on sexual violence and harassment in construction jobs. KOTC will be offering this training with an Indigenous lens applied during our Employer Engagement Sessions. The training is an excellent place to start when it comes to ensuring safety for women, especially Indigenous women, on site.

Implement Cultural Competency and Awareness Training

Going beyond ADAH training, it is important for employers to educate their staff on Indigenous histories to create a safe workplace for all employees but especially Indigenous employees. Hosting a Cultural Competency and Awareness training for all employees is an important step that an employer can make to move towards meaningful reconciliation. A primer on Cultural Competency and Awareness will be offered through our Employer Engagement Sessions.

Implement findings from CSA Z301 Standard: Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in Apprenticeship Programs

The KOTC Employer Engagement Sessions were informed by principles outlined in

CSA Z301: Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in Apprenticeship Programs.



The standard provides guidance for employers, unions, training providers, and apprenticeship stakeholders seeking to create more inclusive and accessible apprenticeship environments. By recognizing and addressing systemic barriers, CSA Z301 supports efforts to improve participation, retention, and success for individuals from equity-deserving groups, including Indigenous Peoples (CSA Z301).

Through KOTC Employer Engagement Sessions, participants can explore how equitable and inclusive practices can contribute to stronger workplace cultures and improved apprenticeship outcomes. Discussions emphasized that creating inclusive workplaces extends beyond recruitment and requires ongoing efforts to foster belonging, remove barriers, and support apprentices throughout their career journey. These conversations reinforced the importance of embedding equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility principles into workplace practices, policies, and organizational culture.

The principles reflected within CSA Z301 align closely with the goals of the Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades Project. By encouraging employers to examine workplace practices through an equity and inclusion lens, the sessions supported broader efforts to create workplaces where Indigenous women and gender-diverse people feel welcomed, respected, and supported to succeed in the skilled trades.

Internal Review of Policies

The Ontario Health and Safety Act requires that employers do an annual review of their policies and practices, this includes their policies and practices around sexual harassment and violence. This annual check is the minimum necessary to make sure that policies and practices are effective in the workplace. For many employers, reviewing policies and practices can be a daunting task. With the assistance of KOTC through the Employer Engagement Sessions employers will go through a workshop to break down

reviewing their policies and practices using an Indigenous lens to identify strengths, gaps, and weaknesses.

Reconciliation Action Plans as a Road Map to Results

Reconciliation Action Plans are a key component of making reconciliation measurable and actionable. Keepers of the Circle will work with employers through the Employer Engagement Sessions to create a Reconciliation Action Plan that the employer can use moving forward in order to meet their goals related to reconciliation and improving their workplace for Indigenous women and gender diverse folks.

> I think that we Indigenous women are capable of doing anything, and if we put our mind to it, we can do it.



Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades
A Keepers of the Circle Initiative

Success Story - Kellie Morin

Once a member, always a member. That statement would wind up being true in more ways than one. Keepers of the Circle, an Indigenous Hub in Northern Ontario offers an 8-week pre-employment and skills development training for Indigenous women and gender diverse individuals called Culture, Confidence and Competence (CCC). ‘Once a member, always a member’ signifies that taking training through Keepers of the Circle (KOTC), means a woman is always welcome to further herself, both professionally and personally with the support of the organization, who prides themselves on doing ‘whatever it takes’ to support an Indigenous woman’s journey.

“I hope my journey and my story can inspire more Indigenous women to consider this career path, and I hope that they know there are support systems out there that will help you achieve your goals.”



Kellie Morin, an Indigenous woman from Sault St. Marie took the Culture, Confidence and Competence Program with KOTC in May of 2023. She was first introduced to the Operating Engineers Training Institute of Ontario (OETIO) during Career Week of the CCC program, where Indigenous Relations Coordinator Jim Jacobs is a regular guest presenter. During Career Week Kellie heard about the Operating Engineers Local 793 apprenticeship opportunity with OETIO.

Once Kellie completed the 8-week pre-employment program and her career training plan one of the goals she identified for herself was becoming a Union Heavy Equipment Operator. With some previous experience under her belt, Kellie was now certain about

what she wanted to pursue, but she still had some struggles to overcome in her personal life.

In the summer of 2024, Kellie reached back out to her support system at Keepers of the Circle. The staff at KOTC encouraged Kellie to write the Heavy Equipment Operator trade entrance exam, which put her on track for the September intake at OETIO, Morrisburg Campus. She studied hard and passed the trade entrance exam on her first attempt, which helped her secure a seat in the fall Apprenticeship stream cohort. With just a few short weeks to prepare Kellie began the online self-study for the Heavy Equipment Operator Training at Morrisburg and met weekly with her cheerleaders at KOTC. With the right supports in place, Kellie embarked on her journey into the unknown, 10 hours away from home.

Over the course of the next 15 weeks Kellie overcame self-doubt and proved to herself that she can do anything she puts her mind to, and her dream of becoming a heavy equipment operator was within reach. The dedicated staff at KOTC kept regular tabs on Kellie, making sure she knew they were always just a phone call away. They considered themselves her cheer squad and were always in her corner. Shawna McKenzie, Kellie's primary contact at KOTC, had to say, "Kellie was easy to work with. If she was struggling with something and called us, she always took the advice and reassurance that was offered to her. She was highly coachable which was how we knew she was going to succeed."



Kellie is now a working member of Local 793 on a jobsite in southern Ontario after graduating in December 2024. She still can't believe that audiences are eager to hear her story of perseverance and overcoming personal challenges, and that as an Indigenous woman in the skilled trades, she receives requests for interviews and invitations to conferences to sit on trades panels.

Kellie is employed in her dream job and is helping to pave the way for other women and Indigenous people alike. Jim Jacobs with OETIO shared, **"I'm so proud of Kellie and her journey through OETIO and becoming a member of Local 793. I could sense her determination to succeed from the start. She is a definite role model to Indigenous women and will help inspire many from her story while enjoying a lifetime of meaningful work opportunities while earning the best wages, pension and benefits in the industry."**

Her next goal is to become a confident public speaker so she can feel comfortable sharing her story and articulating her journey to help inspire the next generation of Indigenous tradeswomen. Keepers of the Circle is proud of Kellie's accomplishments, not just for completing Heavy Equipment Operator training at OETIO, but for overcoming barriers and achieving the goals she set in her training plan during her time in CCC at KOTC. Keepers of the Circle's goal is to help create more success stories like Kellie Morin's and plans to invite her back, this time as a guest speaker for Career Week.

Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades
A Keepers of the Circle Initiative

Success Story - Lyla Lewis-Commanda

Before connecting with Keepers of the Circle and the Indigenous Women in Skilled Trades (IWST) team, Lyla was working under a contract with N'Swakamok Friendship Centre in Sudbury, exploring a career as an Administrative Assistant with R. Jeppessen Contracting Ltd. While she appreciated the opportunity, she quickly realized that office work wasn't where she wanted to be. She felt confined to her desk and knew she wanted to be out in the field, working alongside the crew. After expressing her interest in the skilled trades to her career counsellor, she admitted that she had no idea where to begin.

At the time, before starting with IWST, she told herself, *"I don't want to stress you out, but you are 23 years old. You need to start getting serious about some of the career decisions you've been making."*



Connecting with IWST became a turning point in her career. One of the aspects she appreciated most was finding the sense of community she had been missing since leaving her reserve. Being able to begin that journey from the comfort of her own home, starting with the CCC program at KOTC, made the experience even more accessible.

From her first connection with IWST, the team believed in her when others did not. While many people in her life told her that the trades were not the right fit, Shawna McKenzie and the IWST team encouraged her to trust a feeling she had carried for a long time—that she belonged in the skilled trades. Their encouragement gave her the confidence to pursue the career she truly wanted.

Through IWST, she gained valuable technical skills during her summer placement that continue to support her apprenticeship and Red Seal journey. Equally important were the life

skills she developed and rebuilt along the way. Finding her voice on site, networking, stepping outside her comfort zone, developing confidence, and even becoming comfortable being filmed while working have all become strengths that continue to propel both her career and personal growth.

One of her most memorable experiences was attending the first IWST focus group in Sudbury, where she had been invited to speak. Following several traumatic head injuries from previous vehicle accidents, her confidence in public speaking had significantly diminished, and she was extremely nervous. When she met Shawna and shared how anxious she felt, Shawna and the entire IWST team immediately created an environment where she felt welcomed, safe, and supported. They even offered her a stress ball to help ease her nerves while presenting. That simple act of kindness made a lasting impression and became the catalyst for her career transformation. Following the focus group, she enrolled in the CCC program, later completed Intermediate Entrepreneurship training, and went on to start her own business.

Today, she is employed with Anmar as an Apprentice Carpenter 1 through the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBCJA), Local 2486, working at Magino Mine in Dubreuilville. She is nearing the completion of her first year as an apprentice and recently completed her Mobile Elevated Work Platform (MEWP) training at the union's training centre in Sudbury. Within the next six months, she plans to begin her first block of trade school as she progresses into the second year of her apprenticeship.



In her current role, she is part of a construction crew contracted by Alamos Gold. Her primary responsibilities are labour-focused, preparing and cleaning work areas to support the carpenters on site. As a certified telehandler operator, she is often responsible for moving materials, supplies, and equipment throughout the job site and travelling to other work areas to retrieve necessary tools and resources. She also serves as one of the site's designated first aid attendants, regularly checking on the health and well-being of her coworkers and helping ensure everyone remains hydrated and safe throughout the workday.

Knowing she has the support of IWST has also strengthened her confidence in the workplace. Although she has found a work environment where she feels respected and supported, she knows the IWST team is always there to advocate for her should challenges arise. Walking onto a job site as one of the only woman can be intimidating but having that support system gives her the confidence to continue moving forward.

She credits IWST as being pivotal to her career journey. The program helped her rebuild skills and confidence she didn't even realize she had lost and reminded her that she was never alone. Knowing she had a team that genuinely believed in her and wanted to see her succeed has made a lasting difference in both her personal and professional life.



Looking ahead, she hopes to complete her apprenticeship within the next five years. Alongside her trade career, she plans to grow her side business into a thriving enterprise that attends markets, teaches traditional and modern crafting methods, and operates a successful online store. In the near future, she is excited to go to her first block of trades school, launch her online storefront, and prepare for holiday markets.

When asked what she would tell others about Keepers of the Circle and IWST, she highly recommends taking advantage of any training opportunities they offer. She believes the CCC program helps build confidence and create a meaningful career plan, the business courses provide valuable entrepreneurial knowledge, and IWST offers ongoing support and guidance throughout a career in the skilled trades.

She also encourages anyone considering carpentry to give it a try. From concrete formwork and scaffolding to finishing carpentry, she points out that there are many different career paths within the trade, both union and non-union. Beyond carpentry, she believes there are countless opportunities across the skilled trades, and that IWST helps participants discover the path that best fits their interests and goals.

For those who are hesitant to take the first step, her advice is simple: it's okay to be scared. Big decisions require time and effort, but IWST will meet people where they are, support them at their own pace, and help them find their place within the skilled trades. She believes their encouragement, guidance, and unwavering belief in participants' potential can truly change lives.

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