

Women Shaping Canada's Workforce

Progress, Barriers, and Leadership Gaps Across Industries

An industry insight report examining the current state of women in Canada's workforce, covering leadership representation, wage gaps, intersectional barriers, and participation in male-dominated sectors such as construction and infrastructure.

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About This Report

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Data Sources: Statistics Canada, Women and Gender Equality Canada, Canadian Women's Foundation, BuildForce Canada, OECD, World Economic Forum



Why This Conversation Matters

Introduction

Canada has made meaningful strides in advancing women's participation in the workforce over the past two decades. Labour force participation has reached historic highs, women now account for nearly half of all employed Canadians, and educational attainment among women continues to outpace that of men.

And yet, the data tells a more complex story. Despite near-equal participation, women remain underrepresented in leadership, earn less than their male counterparts across most sectors, and face structural barriers that compound across race, Indigeneity, disability, and other dimensions of identity.

For Canadian organizations, particularly in male-dominated industries such as construction, infrastructure, and engineering, these gaps represent both a challenge and an opportunity. Addressing gender inequity is not only a matter of responsibility, but a strategic imperative tied to talent, performance, innovation, and long-term competitiveness.

This report provides a clear, data-grounded view of where Canada stands, and what credible, practical action looks like going forward.

Record Participation

Women aged 25–54 have reached an ~85% labour force participation rate, a historic high for Canada

Persistent Gaps

Leadership and wage gaps persist despite decades of progress, structural barriers remain deeply embedded

Strategic Imperative

Gender equity is a business issue, not just a social one, with measurable impact on performance and growth

"The gender gap is not a pipeline problem. It is a structural problem, and it requires structural solutions."

— *Canadian Women's Foundation*



Women in Canada's Workforce

Current Landscape

85%

Participation Rate

Core working-age women (25–54) labour force participation, a record high (Statistics Canada)

~48%

Workforce Share

Women comprise nearly half of Canada's total employed workforce

60%+

University Graduates

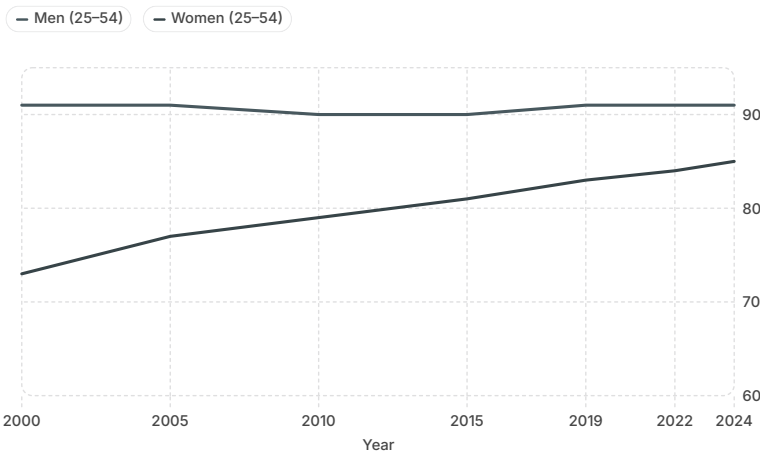
Women now earn the majority of university degrees conferred in Canada each year

2x

Wage Growth

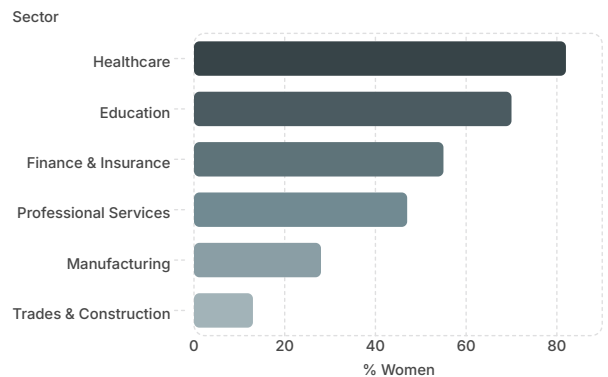
Women's wages have grown nearly twice as fast as men's over the past two decades

Participation Growth Over Time



Women's labour force participation has risen steadily over the past two decades, narrowing the gap with men significantly. The convergence is strongest among core working-age women, driven by increased educational attainment, childcare access, and shifting workplace norms.

Workforce Composition by Sector



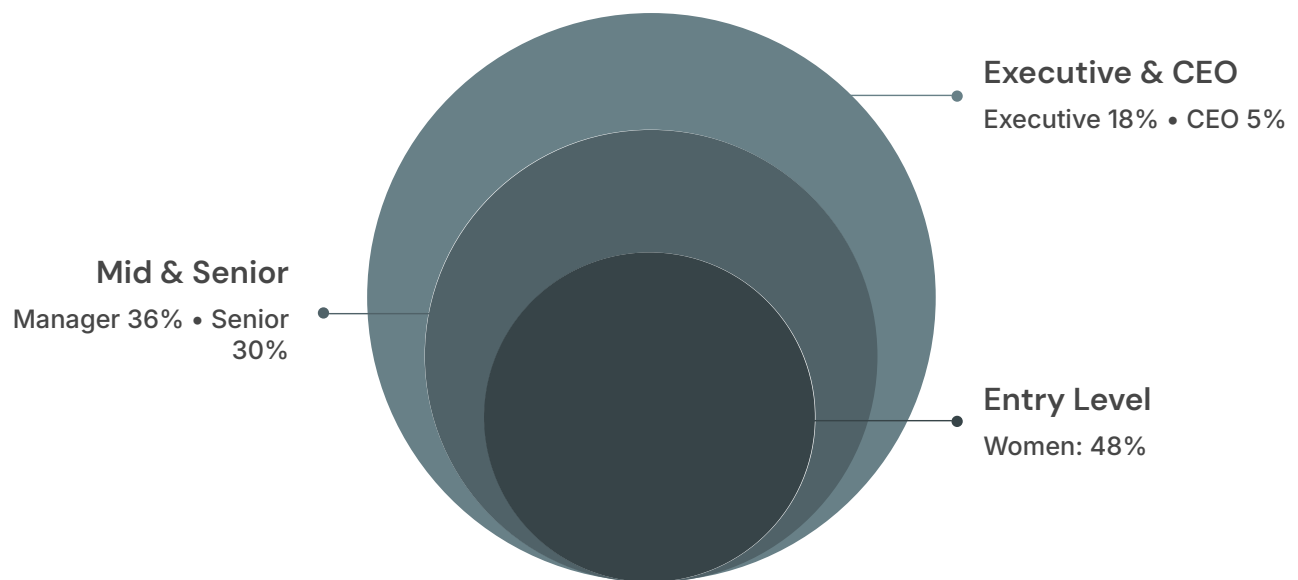
Sectoral representation varies dramatically. Women dominate healthcare and education but remain severely underrepresented in trades, construction, and heavy industry, sectors critical to Canada's infrastructure future.



The Leadership Gap

Representation vs. Reality

Despite women making up nearly half of Canada's workforce and outpacing men in educational attainment, representation declines at each leadership tier. This is not a pipeline issue — it reflects structural factors such as hiring bias, informal sponsorship networks, and organizational norms that continue to favour traditional leadership profiles.



The leadership pipeline shows a consistent pattern of attrition as women advance. While entry-level roles approach parity, representation declines at each stage, culminating in just 5% of Canadian companies having a female CEO. This reflects cumulative barriers, including limited sponsorship, rigid work structures, and exclusion from succession planning.

36% of Management Roles Below 48% workforce share	~30% Senior Management Declines at leadership level	Only 5% Female CEOs Severely underrepresented	Boards Improving Slowly Progress, not parity
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The Gender Pay Gap

Current State

\$0.88

Earnings Ratio

For every \$1 earned by men, women earn approximately \$0.88, a 12% wage gap (Statistics Canada)

\$0.89

Core Working Age

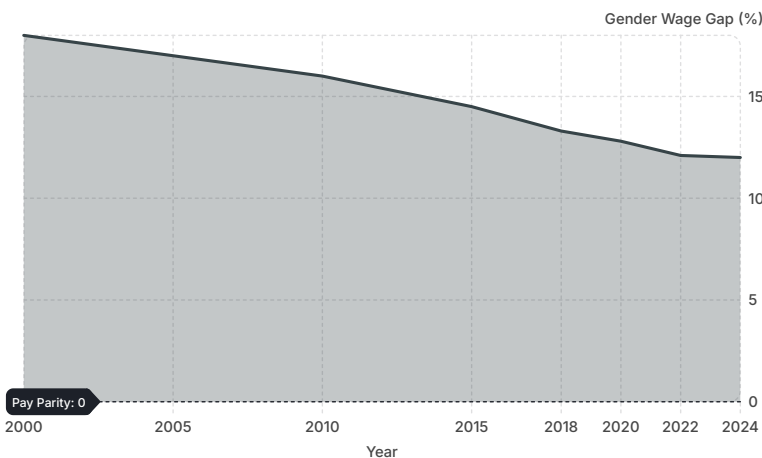
Among women aged 25–54, earnings reach \$0.89 per dollar, slightly better than the overall average

12–13%

National Gap

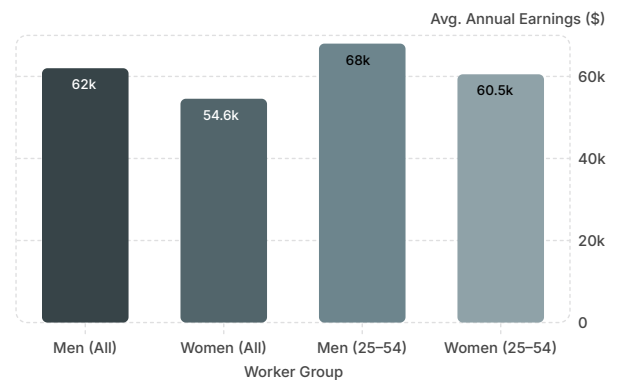
Canada's national gender wage gap remains at approximately 12–13% across full-time, full-year workers

Wage Gap Trend — Progress Over Time



The gender wage gap has narrowed meaningfully from approximately 18% in the early 2000s to around 12% today. While this trend is encouraging, the pace of progress has slowed — and at the current rate, achieving pay parity could take decades without deliberate organizational and policy intervention.

Annual Earnings Comparison



☐ The wage gap reflects more than hourly pay differences. It is shaped by occupational segregation, part-time work concentration, caregiving responsibilities, and systemic undervaluation of female-dominated roles.



Intersectionality

The Reality for Women of Colour

The gender wage gap does not affect all women equally. When race, Indigeneity, and other dimensions of identity intersect with gender, the barriers compound significantly. Canada's aggregate wage gap figures mask profound disparities that disproportionately disadvantage racialized and Indigenous women, groups that face a double burden of gender and racial discrimination in Canada's labour market.

\$100,000

Non-Racialized Man

Baseline annual earnings

\$78,000

Racialized Woman

Same role — \$22,000 less per year

Compounded Barriers

→ Systemic Bias in Hiring

Racialized women face documented bias at every stage of recruitment, from résumé screening to interview processes, reducing access to opportunities disproportionately

→ Exclusion from Informal Networks

Sponsorship and mentorship networks, critical for advancement, remain largely inaccessible to women of colour, limiting visibility and career progression

→ Concentration in Lower-Wage Roles

Racialized and immigrant women are overrepresented in precarious, part-time, and lower-wage employment, reinforcing structural income inequality

→ Underrepresentation in Leadership

Women of colour are nearly absent from executive and board-level positions in Canadian organizations, facing what researchers call the "concrete ceiling"



Women in Construction & Infrastructure

Industry Spotlight

13%

Construction Workforce

Women represent ~13% of the workforce, among the lowest across major industries.

<5%

Skilled Trades

Representation remains below 5%, highlighting a persistent gap.

300K+

Projected Shortage

Over 300,000 workers needed by 2032, expanding the talent pool is critical.

Barriers to Entry & Retention

Workplace Culture

Sites often lack inclusive culture and psychological safety, driving early attrition.

Lack of Mentorship

Limited access to mentors and sponsors restricts progression.

Recruitment Gaps

Hiring and apprenticeship pathways are not designed to attract or retain women.

Why Gender Diversity Is Mission-Critical

The sector faces a growing labour shortage. With 300,000+ workers needed by 2032, relying on 13% female participation limits the available talent pool.

Workforce Supply

Attracting women into trades is one of the most immediate levers to address shortages.

Innovation Capacity

Diverse teams drive stronger, more innovative outcomes.

Long-Term Sustainability

Inclusive environments better attract, retain, and develop talent.



Signs of Progress

Positive Trends Worth Recognizing

While structural barriers remain significant, the trajectory of progress over the past two decades is real and measurable. Women's wages have grown faster than men's, participation rates have hit historic highs, and more organizations than ever before have adopted formal gender equity commitments. Recognizing this progress is not a reason for complacency, it is evidence that deliberate action produces results.

Key Indicators of Progress

Labour Force Participation

Core working-age women's participation has risen from ~73% in 2000 to ~85% in 2024, a 12-point increase over two decades

Educational Attainment

Women now earn the majority of university degrees in Canada, including in fields traditionally dominated by men such as law, medicine, and business

Board Representation

Women held approximately 25% of board seats in Canada's largest companies in 2023, up from under 10% in 2010

Policy Momentum

Federal pay equity legislation, gender-based analysis frameworks, and voluntary disclosure requirements are reshaping organizational accountability

Industry Programs

Programs like BuildForce Canada's Women in the Trades are demonstrating measurable improvements in recruitment and retention in the construction sector



The Business Case for Gender Diversity

A Strategic Imperative

Gender diversity is not a compliance exercise, it is a competitive advantage. Organizations with greater diversity in leadership consistently outperform peers across key financial and operational metrics. For Canadian business leaders, the case is clear: advancing gender equity is a high-return investment.

Stronger Decision-Making

Broader perspectives reduce groupthink and improve decisions.

Better Governance

More robust risk management and accountability.

Financial Outperformance

25% more likely to outperform peers.

Broader Talent Pool

Attracts wider talent in a competitive market.

Return on Inclusion

25%

Financial Outperformance

More likely among gender-diverse leadership teams

30%

Innovation Revenue

Diverse teams generate up to 30% more revenue from new products and services

21%

Reduced Turnover

Organizations with inclusive cultures report up to 21% lower voluntary turnover rates



The Road Ahead

What Organizations Must Do

Progress on gender equity requires more than good intentions. It demands structured accountability, deliberate investment, and measurable commitments embedded into organizational strategy. The following recommendations are designed to be practical, scalable, and directly applicable to business leaders and HR practitioners across Canada's public and private sectors.

1 Set Measurable Targets

Set representation targets across leadership tiers and hold executives accountable through transparent reporting.

2 Invest in Sponsorship — Not Just Mentorship

Mentorship advises; sponsorship advances. Build formal programs that actively advocate for high-potential women.

3 Audit and Correct Pay Inequities

Conduct regular, disaggregated pay audits and take corrective action beyond minimum regulatory requirements.

4 Design Inclusive Recruitment

Use structured interviews and diverse panels to reduce bias at the entry point.

Maturity Assessment

These actions cannot be effectively applied without first understanding where the organization stands.

A maturity assessment provides a structured view of how leadership, culture, and processes operate in practice, identifying gaps between intent and outcomes.

Without this clarity, initiatives are often applied in isolation, leading to inconsistent impact and unintended behaviours.

Maturity is not an additional step, it is the foundation for applying these actions in a targeted, measurable, and sustainable way.

For Construction & Infrastructure Leaders

Partner With Trade Schools

Build structured entry points through partnerships with colleges and apprenticeship programs. Use bursaries, co-ops, mentorship, and early exposure to reduce barriers and support long-term retention.

Upgrade Site Facilities

Design job sites to support a diverse workforce, including properly fitted PPE, appropriate facilities, and safe environments. These are baseline requirements that directly impact retention and daily experience.

Celebrate Role Models

Visibility shapes perception. Amplifying women's success in trades challenges norms and creates pathways for the next generation.

Address Culture Directly

Culture cannot be addressed through policy alone, it requires active, ongoing management.

Conducting Culture Assessments

Structured evaluations of workplace experience through surveys, interviews, and site-level feedback to understand how workers actually experience the environment, not just how it is intended to operate.

Establishing Clear Standards of Behaviour

Defining what is acceptable and unacceptable on job sites through practical, enforceable codes of conduct, moving beyond generic policies to expectations that are understood and consistently applied.

Implementing Visible Reporting Mechanisms

Creating clear, accessible pathways for reporting harassment, discrimination, and safety concerns, with transparency on how issues are addressed and resolved.

Leadership Accountability

Ensuring supervisors and project leaders are responsible for maintaining culture on site, with expectations tied to performance, not treated as a secondary responsibility.

Culture is often cited as a barrier, but without structure, it remains unaddressed. These actions move it from abstract to operational.



Redesign Behavioural Frameworks

Representation does not shift meaningfully if the definition of leadership remains unchanged.

Many promotion and performance frameworks continue to reward a narrow set of behaviours, often prioritizing constant availability, assertiveness in specific forms, and uninterrupted career progression. These expectations can unintentionally disadvantage those with different lived experiences, including women and racialized professionals.

To address this, organizations must:

Re-evaluate Leadership Criteria

Assess how leadership potential is defined, and whether current criteria favour a single leadership style or career path.

Broaden Recognized Leadership Behaviours

Value a wider range of strengths, including collaboration, inclusive decision-making, team development, and long-term value creation, not just visibility or individual output.

Decouple Progression from Linear Career Paths

Recognize that career progression may include pauses, lateral movement, or non-traditional trajectories without penalizing long-term advancement.

Align Promotion Processes with Outcomes, Not Optics

Ensure advancement is based on measurable impact and leadership effectiveness, not proximity to leadership, visibility, or informal networks.

Without redefining what leadership looks like, organizations risk increasing representation at the surface level while reinforcing the same underlying structures.



Closing Reflection

Progress Made. Work Remaining.

"Progress has been made, but structural barriers remain. Advancing gender equity in Canada's workforce requires sustained commitment, intentional leadership, and measurable action across every industry, organization, and level of leadership."

Canada stands at an inflection point. The data shows progress, rising participation and narrowing gaps, alongside persistent structural inequities. The leadership gap and related disparities are not accidental. They reflect systems and behaviours that have remained largely unchanged.

Much of today's action focuses on visible interventions: targets and standalone initiatives that do not always address the conditions that shape progression. When success is defined by representation alone, leaders may prioritize the metric over the conditions needed to sustain it, leading to misaligned hiring and short-term gains.

Advancing equity requires examining how organizations operate, leadership, performance, progression, and culture. Without this clarity, efforts remain surface-level. For construction and infrastructure leaders, the stakes are immediate: labour shortages cannot be addressed without broadening access to talent. Progress is underway, but not yet embedded. Closing the gap requires moving beyond intention to structured, measurable, sustained change.

Key Takeaways

Women's participation is high, leadership representation still lags

The wage gap is improving, but progress remains uneven

Intersectional barriers create compounded disadvantage

Construction must diversify to address labour shortages

Targets alone are not enough, misapplied, they drive the wrong behaviours