Stats show strange drop in women working in construction

IAN HARVEY | CORRESPONDENT

A
fter several years of gains, the number of women in trades dropped in 2019, according to a recent Statistics Canada Labour Force report.

In 2019 there were 182,000 women in the construction sector out of a total work construction sector workforce of 1.463 million. That’s down from 2018 when there were 186,300, women out of 1.437 million.

While there were fewer women — albeit only 4,300 — the number of men working also grew by 26,000.

It also comes on four years of growth in women in trades out of a total 1.409 million workforce. In 2016 it was 162,400, out of 1.385 million, in 2015, 158,200 out of 1.371 million.

It can make for depressing reading for those working to raise the profile and numbers of women in construction trades but the numbers, apparently, don’t tell the full story.

Nina Hansen, Executive Director at the British Colum-

bian Centre for Women in Trades up dem-

responded: “We have definitely not hit a wall. There are a lot of women that really want to pursue these careers — just like there are a lot of men that really don’t but may be stuck in them for various reasons. However, women are more likely to perceive barriers to entering, advancing and staying in the trades.”

Apprenticeships are rising steadily, she says, and regionally the number of learners in trades is growing strongly with large numbers of women in the trades though some areas like Alberta have experienced a construction slowdown.

“Further, women are leaving the trade for trades’ adjacent jobs, which is not at all a bad thing: management, union representatives, inspectors, trades instructors, etc.,” she says.

“Or, they take a short-term leave to go to school — founda-

tion programs are about 10 months long — or they have children.

Indeed, says Cheryl Parson International Representative, First District (Canada), International Brotherhood of Elec-

trical Workers, in B.C. 27 per cent of the union’s provincial membership are women.

“I also think those numbers don’t show women in the trades on tools but perhaps working in construction related jobs,” she says, echoing a concern among stakeholders that there simply isn’t enough data on the long-term progress of women in construction.

Jean-Claude Chartrand, president of the Canadian Association of Women in Construction, says their organization strives to attract women from across all trades to get involved with an industry not just because of the networking and support but to act as mentors and role models for other women in construction — or those considering construction.

“We need more women leaders because there are gaps in many industries. That is one of the reasons why we are,” says Chartrand.

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Outreach programs coupled with support and data prove successful

IAN HARVEY
CORRESPONDENT

Given the apparent drop in women in the trades reported by Statistic Canada, a lack of being done to attract women into the trades and keep them there? "We hesitate to say yes," Lindsay Kearns, a Red Seal electrician and outreach co-ordinator for the BC Centre for Women in the Trades (BCCWITT) says. "It means women in their mid-30s like me who find out what I do and say, oh, I never thought I could go into a trade like that."

Reaching out to kids in high school and getting them into shop class — especially all-girl classes — takes a lot of the stigma and embarrassment out of the picture, she says. "We can always do more," she adds noting she was a late starter and many women also enter the trades at a later age.

"There's all kinds of discussion from PPE that fits, dealing with pregnancy on the job and childcare," Cheryl Paron International Representative for the Canadian Electrical Contractors Association (CECA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, in B.C. says. "Sometimes it is just about having someone to talk to about a bad day."

The outreach programs have been working, she says, focusing on kids in Grade 9 and up is critical for both boys and girls in terms of flagging construction as a career path.

"One of the key things I think is to have more women in leadership positions in construction as role models," she says.

Lindsay Amundsen, Director of Workforce Development for Canada’s Building Trades Unions (CBTU), says data is essential and we just don't have the right data. "The data is so important she festers in a lack of basic human decency, they're like, oh, yeah, that's totally normal and talking to other women in the trade quickly clears up any misconception."

Sometimes toxic worksites are manifested in a lack of basic human decency, like having a clean, sanitary washroom so a woman — or a man — isn't so repelled and disgusted they have to leave the site to find a suitable toilet, Kearns says.

"We started a weekly meeting for women three years ago on the first Wednesday of the month," she says. "It's not run by the union, it's run by us. You can bring your kids and it has been wildly successful.

"Women are free to talk about challenges such as finding PPE that fits, toxic work cultures, social isolation and trying to find a peer mentor, she says.

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Duron Ontario Ltd. is Proud to Employ a Diverse Team of Women

Women at Duron hold roles such as Department Manager, Head of Sales and Marketing, Site Superintendent, Estimator and Project Coordinator.

This year, we are delighted to profile Elisa Gorniak, P.Eng., Department Manager of Waterproofing, Roofing and Mastic Department. As a former consulting engineer at WSP (formerly Halsall Associates), Elisa was recruited to Duron and became the first woman to manage a department. Today, she oversees a department comprising three sections. Elisa leads Duron’s high-profile commercial and residential projects. Two of her notable projects include the waterproofing and roofing of the Transit City complex in Vaughan and waterproofing one of the Eglinton Crosstown LRT stations. In Elisa’s personal life, she is a busy mom of 3 young boys and a fitness enthusiast.

Q & A with Elisa Gorniak, P.Eng.

What advice would you give a woman interested in working in construction?

As with any industry there are many attributes to success including being confident in what you know and being open to learn and grow. When it comes to any male dominated field, my advice to all women is to be confident in your abilities and to ‘sit at the table’.

What is the best part of your job?

I like the autonomy I have to manage the department including high profile projects. I also get to work with some great people.

Also, male or female, being an apprentice is hard. They tend to get assigned the dirtiest and most menial jobs and sometimes it feels like they’re being singled out. Women especially begin to feel they might be getting the raw treatment simple as a way to force them out.

"You feel the supervisor is not treating you with respect," she says.

"You're given a broom and told to clean out the basement or organize the materials. My journeyperson used to have me clean up the van."

For a rookie, it’s hard to know what’s normal and talking to other women in the trade quickly clears up any misconception. "They’re like, oh, yeah, that’s totally normal job for the apprentice and that’s your job," she says.

One of the recent, biggest breakthroughs was the government decree that Community Benefit Agreements be included in project contracts ensuring skilled trade jobs went to women and other vulnerable groups, says Karen Walsh, executive director and project consultant at the Office to Advance Women Apprentices.

Collaborating with the trade unions also produced a united determination to get women into the trade, and more importantly, help them stay through.

"It’s hard because your job is to finish the project and put yourself out of a job," she says. "Women were saying, I quit because I can’t take working four months and then not working. It is a cycle and they have bills to pay."

It’s the data which is so important she says and she’s setting up pilot projects in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia to add to the established cluster. B.C. also has a good data collection scheme in place.
Heavy equipment operation a family tradition for Roy

A young girl, Renee Roy would visit her dad on construction sites and watch in wonderment as he went about his job operating heavy equipment. She knew back then that one day she'd follow in his footsteps. Today, at 43, after working for years as a civil engineer and foreperson, she's finally living that dream. A few years back, she opted to pursue her passion, took the necessary training and became a heavy equipment operator.

"I just love the work and being outside, that's what it's all about for me," she says. "I just like being in an environment where I'm digging in dirt and constructing things. I always like creating something new." She's worked on just about every type of job involving heavy equipment, from pushing dirt on building sites in downtown Toronto to building pipelines.

"I don't want to live in dirt, but I like digging in dirt," she says. "I just like a big sandbox to me." In many ways, Roy was destined for the trade. While her dad, the late Emilien Roy, was an operator, two of her uncles also ran heavy equipment.

"I felt more at home, more at ease in that job. It was more of my calling than being a technician," Renee Roy, Heavy Equipment Operator

"It was always like a family thing and I always liked construction, just building things. I'd always rather be hands on. I was always fascinated by machinery and always wanted to run them. She didn't get into the trade, though. Her mother was against it because she was a woman, says Roy.

Roy did work on small construction projects as a teenager in New Brunswick. While working at a campground, she built trails around the park. She used a farm tractor to do the work.

She went on to college and took civil engineering technology, the next best thing to actually running equipment, and remained in that vocation for 10 years. Although it was an office job, she still got out on construction sites.

For a while, Roy worked on designing projects. She managed the build of a flea market. Later, she went to work as a foreperson at a diamond mine in Sudbury before moving to the U.S. for a few years.

"I've just kept telling myself I'm stronger than that and I'm not going to let them direct my life. You've got to keep going for it. You can't give up. Anything worthwhile having is tough to get," Roy says she loves operating heavy equipment because she likes 'digging in dirt and constructing things.' Her late father Emilien Roy was an operator as were two of her uncles.

"I'm digging in dirt, " she says. "I just like a big sandbox to me." Roy says she loves operating heavy equipment because she likes 'digging in dirt and constructing things.' Her late father Emilien Roy was an operator as were two of her uncles.

"It's just been a whole different experience," says Renee Roy, Heavy Equipment Operator.

Roy later separated from her husband and returned to Canada. All she had was a duffle bag.

She went to her uncle's house and slept on his couch for a while. She concluded it was time to do something for herself.

Eventually she enrolled in a heavy equipment training program and began her second career — she was hired to pursue all along.

"When I saw that I had an opportunity to get into that field, I felt more at home, more at ease in that job. It was more of my calling than being a technician.

"I went right to the pipeline with Clarkson Construction in Hamilton and I was there for a couple of weeks before I got a phone call to work in Toronto,' recalls Roy. "I was on the pipeline and I did a little bit of operating because I was an apprentice when I was there.'

She also worked as a rock truck driver with York excavating in Hamilton, hauling material in rock trucks for building a new subdivision.

"I don't want to get into a spot where it's too overwhelming and I don't know what to do. I just want to get more into it like digging and excavating," Roy says she'd like to work underground in a mine or tunneling job on her next venture.

"I'd like to get into the mining field, to be honest, or back to the pipeline. I want to get back into digging." Although she's worked on many jobs, Roy says she still has a lot to learn and wants to get more seat time on heavy equipment.

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The construction industry needs more women in leadership - and the industry deserves it. Women bring intelligence, ability, and work ethic to any workplace. The Ontario Association of Demolition Contractors is an advocate for Women in Construction, and we look forward to continuing to celebrate, hire, and train women in this field.

What’s our secret to success? **HARD WORK.**

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**WHEN WOMEN SUPPORT EACH OTHER, WONDERFUL THINGS HAPPEN**

Robin Priestly

Margaret Taylor
Women of Powerline Technicians opens lines to electrical careers

DAN O'REILLY  CORRESPONDENT

Employment in this country's electricity sector is no longer the exclusive domain of men, says the founder and executive director of Women of Powerline Technicians (Women of PLT).

Women are making strides in obtaining apprenticeships and securing employment. But they still have a long way to go, says Lana Norton, the second female graduate from a powerline technician program in Ontario.

Canada's electricity sector contributes more than $34 billion to the country's gross domestic product and approximately 89,000 Canadians are employed in the energy sector trade and technical roles. “And yet women only constitute about seven per cent of that workforce and female powerline technicians nationally represent less than five per cent of the available trade positions.”

Advancing the role and participation of women in the industry was the driving force for creating the non-profit organization in 2016, she says. “I couldn’t see anyone behind me,” says Norton, a 2011 graduate of Cambrian College’s powerline technician course. “By that she means there were no other women in successive courses and that realization help provide the spark for creating Women of PLT.”

“Women want to be powerline technicians because they enjoy being outside, working from heights and the pride which comes with installing infrastructure with their hands.”

Headquartered in Ottawa where Norton lives and works, the association is comprised of two chapters — one in that city and the second in Toronto where its far-flung members include attending a baseball game at the Rogers Centre.

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To create Women of PLT, the association is comprised of two chapters — one in that city and the second in Toronto where its far-flung members.

”We’re so excited Utilities Kingston was our first establishment partner for the bursary, says Norton, explaining the bursary’s purpose is to get students thinking about how diversity contributes to the services utilities provide. And diversity means not just increasing employment opportunities for women, but also for racialized minorities, aboriginals, and other marginalized groups, she stresses.

Two years later she became a field operator, a position she describes as being on the night. “I climbed poles and worked from heights to connect and repair overhead distribution lines.”

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Plans for a second bursary are underway and details will be released in the fall, she says. Last year the association also signed on to Natural Resources Canada’s Equal 30 which is designed to advance gender equality in the energy sector by 2030.

And earlier this year it also partnered with Skills Ontario and Kickass Careers to promote apprenticeships for youth in fields less high profile than easily identifiable ones such as plumbers, welders, and electricians. “This is where we see great careers such as meter technicians, substation electricians, powerline technicians, systems operators, and utility arborists.”

A planned Skills Ontario educational fair in Toronto, which would have included a Women of PLT booth, had to be cancelled because of COVID-19. So, it was presented online and one of the highlights was a talk by a recent female powerline technician graduate, she says.

Asked about her own entry into the industry, Norton says: “electricity always made sense to me. “I didn’t have to see each closed or open switch to understand if the power was going to be on or off within a circuit. I knew I wanted to be in electrical and working from heights and outdoors appealed to me. Once I knew that, powerline was the only option.”

There were other considerations as well. She became a mother at the age of 20 and entering an apprenticeship meant that she could earn an income, attend school and not take on debt.

That entry was not without challenges, although Norton downplays the struggles she had to overcome, notably failed attempts to land an apprenticeship. “I kept getting rejection letter after rejection letter.”

When one firm said it only hired powerline technician graduates as apprentices, Norton moved from her Ajax home to Sudbury to enroll in Cambrian’s powerline technician course. At the time, it was the only college in Ontario offering such a program.

After graduating she obtained employment as an apprentice powerline technician with a distribution company in Ottawa. “I climbed poles and worked from heights to construct and repair overhead distribution lines.”

Two years later she became a field operator, a position which required responding and investigating lost power occurrences and then restoring power. “I describe my time in that role as responding to everything that goes bump in the night.”

From there she took on her current role as a field technician where she supports the identification, development, and implementations of construction projects in the electricity sector and advises on technical issues to ensure those projects are completed safely, on time and on budget.

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Technician-Building Renovation program.

The joy of ‘building and creating’ helps O’Hearn achieve dream career

Women members in construction are role models

PCAs’ women members in construction are role models

DAN O’BRIEN CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

They bend pipe. They move earth. They juggle site logistics. No, they aren’t superheroes; they’re women who’ve made construction their chosen field at member companies of the Progressive Contractors Association of Canada (PCA). And more women are realizing it or not, they’re role models, driving a change in attitude and culture and proving there is a place for women in construction.

There’s no question that change has been slow. Of the more than one million tradespeople in Canada’s construction workforce, only a fraction of them are women, about 4.7 percent. But as Carol Anne DeNeve sees it, “this decade is the perfect storm; the stars are aligning and introductions are being made.”

DeNeve is the office and human resources manager at McLean Taylor Construction Limited and Stone Town Construction Limited in St. Marys. As demographics shift and baby boomers retire in large numbers, DeNeve says there’s a notable change in attitude.

“The female workforce is growing. Women are more widely accepted. Now, as more women come on board, it’s all about where workers are needed. It makes no difference whether they’re men or women.”

Miranda Van Rooyen started out as a summer student at Van Rooyen Earthmoulding Ltd. in Woodstock, Ont. Her dad is a foreman at the company and encouraged her to give it a try and see how it goes. Now into her ninth season in construction, she’s earned her way from driving a packer and rock truck, to becoming the company’s first female bulldozer operator.

“It took me a long time to admit to myself that I actually like it,” says the 24-year-old, who graduated from Mohawk College’s Construction Engineering Management program. “That’s when I decided to stick with it.”

Van Rooyen’s goal is to learn to run every machine. Her advice to other women considering a career in construction is to be positive. “I’m not tall or big, but I can drive a big machine. It’s not about brute strength. Everyone brings a different skill set. Just bring a good attitude.”

Madeleine Becke, who graduated with a mechanical engineering degree, is a project co-ordinator at JMR Electric Limited in Exeter. Always “really big on organizing,” she reviews shop drawings, organizes permits, equipment and sub-contractors before construction gets underway on public projects, like schools and hospitals.

“For as long as I can remember I wanted to be in an industry where I could prove myself,” says the 21-year-old. “I remember that every day.”

Brouwer, who started at JMR six months ago, worked for a while in retail and manufacturing before finding her calling in the construction trades, where she shapes metal as she builds and installs boilers in public buildings.

“I think if given the opportunity, a lot of women would enjoy construction. It makes you feel that you can stand with the rest of them.”

Women are wanted and needed in construction to counter a massive wave of retirements. Also, the door will open even wider for women, as construction plays a crucial role in rebuilding the economy from COVID-19.

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