THE GENDERED IMPLICATIONS OF AN INFRASTRUCTURE-FOCUSED RECOVERY: ISSUES AND POLICY THOUGHTS

Alberta is banking on sizable investments in infrastructure as it looks to resuscitate an economy devastated by the double blow of an oil price crash and global pandemic. The fiscal injection announced in Alberta's Recovery Plan lifts infrastructure spending to $10 billion, and will fund what Premier Jason Kenney calls the biggest build in Alberta's history. Historic as it may be, the approach leaves women behind.
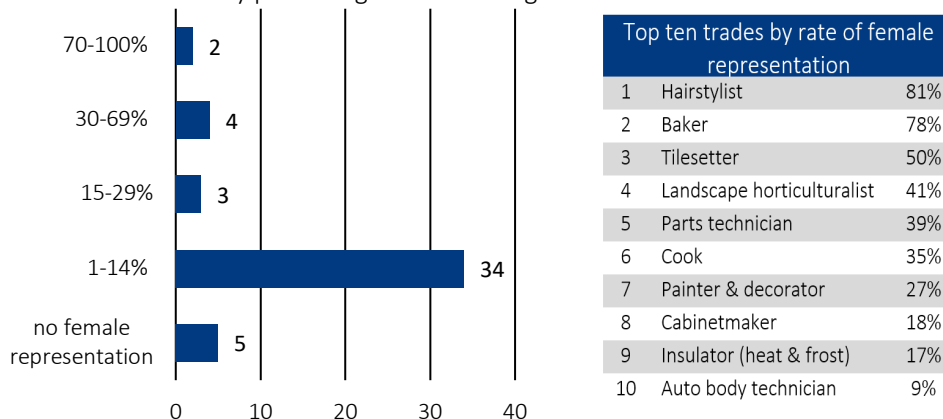
Many say the plan is ill-suited to the ongoing 'she-cession,' given it pays little mind to needs in both early childhood education and care and in female-dominated sectors facing large job losses. Such omissions aside, the decision to prioritize infrastructure-led job creation is itself androcentric. As it stands, women and men will not share equally in the benefits, as most jobs created by capital projects are in male-dominated sectors like manufacturing and construction.

Despite increases in labour force participation over the past several decades, women continue to face low rates of representation in the trades. In 2019, 10% of registered apprentices in Alberta were female. This is due to a range of factors: gender norms shape female attitudes about the trades, while bias and discrimination erect barriers for female apprentices and journeywomen seeking both job experience and career advancement. Not only do fewer women pursue trades careers as a result, retention and certification rates are also lower for women who do choose the trades.

Given a metric of 15% representation, 39 of Alberta's 48 skilled trades do not have a critical mass of women—that is, they are 'inaccessible' on a gender basis and women within them are considered tokens or exceptions. Trades that are gender balanced or which favour women—hairstylist, baker, and cook, for example—are less likely to see direct benefits from infrastructure investments.

Critical mass theory notes that to desegregate a sector—and thus to tackle the above issues—a certain proportion of women must be employed within it. Female representation of 15%–35% has been suggested for the construction sector. As shown in the chart, most of Alberta's skilled trades fail to meet even the low end of this standard. Some have no female representation at all.

Number of trades by percentage of female registrants

Top ten trades by rate of female representation		
1	Hairstylist	81%
2	Baker	78%
3	Tilesetter	50%
4	Landscape horticulturalist	41%
5	Parts technician	39%
6	Cook	35%
7	Painter & decorator	27%
8	Cabinetmaker	18%
9	Insulator (heat & frost)	17%
10	Auto body technician	9%

Source: Government of Alberta, "Apprenticeship and Industry Training Statistical Profiles 2019"

For all its shortcomings, an infrastructure-driven recovery is on-brand for a government that has long signalled that apprenticeship and training are among its top priorities. And recession or not, a labour shortage in the trades also looms large. Going forward, the province would serve itself well to consider what changes are needed to ensure women *can* factor into its trades-focused agenda—now and in the future. We offer the following suggestions as a starting point:

Funding – Programs focused on exposure are key to attracting women and girls to the trades, and thus the $10 million investment in Women Building Futures was a positive move. This must be supplemented with specific funding for retention and advancement initiatives, such as those aimed at building networks, expanding mentorship, and supporting women throughout their careers in the trades.

Critical mass – Rendering the trades safer and more inclusive hinges on attaining a critical mass of women. Quotas can be effective in such cases but may also produce unintended effects. For now, the province could implement a new classification tool based on workforce composition, as we use here. This would allow policymakers and leaders to identify where attraction and retention measures are most appropriate.

Data – Improvements to gender-based reporting (e.g., of enrollment, withdrawal, and certification trends) are necessary to understand the barriers women face in the trades. Better data will not only uncover issues encountered and pathways taken by women, it will also enable sector leaders to target initiatives to achieve critical mass.