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ASIA PACIFIC GATEWAY  
SKILLS TABLE

***Executive Insights:***

**Women's Participation in Transportation Careers —**

**Moving Beyond the Status Quo**

## Acknowledgements

A special thank you to all who gave their time to be interviewed for this project. We value the personal experiences you shared and respect your anonymity.

# Canada

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***We've come a long way since the days of overt sexism in the workplace. Even in male-dominated industries, such as transportation, great progress has been made. Yet there is more work to do. Women still experience challenges due to gender in the workplace. From situations with no female washrooms to missed opportunities because of family responsibilities, to being excluded from networking events – women are underrepresented in transportation careers overall and at the most senior levels.***

***How much is conjecture and how much is fact? What we know is out of 30 interviews conducted, almost every woman has experienced challenges associated with being female. The institutions in place do not necessarily support equalization across genders. The next phase of gender equality may require deliberate tactics to ensure more women achieve leadership roles. This is a real opportunity for the transportation industry to show leadership and to shed the undeserved reputation of being old-school, lacking in innovation.***

# 1. INTRODUCTION

*1 In this report, the term 'transportation' is used interchangeably with supply chain and logistics.*

*2 The figures in this paragraph are drawn from the 2011 National Household Survey and presented in Figure 3 in "Women in Transportation: Analysis of Support Programs" prepared by Izen Consulting, January 2017.*

*3 For further info see "Women in Transportation: Analysis of Support Programs" prepared by Izen Consulting, January 2017.*

Women are underrepresented in transportation-related industries and occupations across Canada<sup>1</sup>. The Asia Pacific Gateway Skills Table's (Skills Table) recent research determined that female participation in the transport industry is only 27.3%, compared to 48% for all other industries. Women are particularly underrepresented in the rail sector (12.8%) and in truck transportation (14.6%). The only industries with fewer women than transportation are utilities, mining and construction<sup>2</sup>.

The Government of Canada has made it a priority to increase the opportunities for women. Prime Minister Trudeau appointed a gender balanced Cabinet and his government introduced Bill C-25 which will require a publicly traded corporation to report on the diversity of its Board of Directors and senior management.

The Skills Table is exploring options to support more women being employed in the Canadian transportation industry. This project is a first step to identify strategies and initiatives to increase women's participation in transportation and its key occupations. Separately, a review of the effectiveness of programs and initiatives intended to increase the participation of women in transportation careers was also conducted<sup>3</sup>.

WESTAC interviewed 29 senior executive women in the transportation industry to:

- understand career pathways and success factors
- validate the challenges and barriers that exist for women entering and advancing in transportation careers
- gain insight on how to address these challenges and barriers

Many of the women interviewed are trailblazers – they were among the first women to hold various occupations within their organization or within the industry in Canada. These women are currently in positions including Terminal Manager, Traffic Manager, Director of Transportation, Assistant Vice President and Vice President of Transportation, President, Chief Executive Officer or Chief Financial Officer and on corporate Boards of Directors. The interviewees were from across the industry – airports and airlines, ports and terminals, railways, trucking firms, logistics firms and freight forwarders, shippers and government. They ranged in age from the mid-30s to mid-60s.

“  
It would be nice to get to the point in time where a woman is in charge and that fact is not commented on and is not even noticed.  
”

This report synthesizes the insights and experiences of these women. The experiences of women currently working in other parts of the industry, i.e. more operational roles, may be different. The report is qualitative – it is not data driven. In the future, it may be helpful to do a quantitative analysis of experiences to measure how they differ by generation, by sector, and by occupation. All interviews were anonymous.

The interviewees have had a range of experiences in the industry from those who state that gender has not impacted their career to others who continue to have negative experiences, which they attribute to gender.

While the number of women working in the industry has grown over the last 30 years, gender diversity has not increased significantly. In December 1986, 20.78% of the workforce was women, compared to 22.34% in December 2016<sup>4</sup>. Interviewees did report that in some entry-level positions, they see more gender balance. It remains to be seen whether the balance will continue as these workers are promoted.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Statistics Canada, Table 282-0007. Labour Force Survey estimates, by North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), unadjusted for seasonality, monthly

Some common themes emerged from the interviews:

- most women inadvertently 'fell' into the industry
- gender diversity is increasing and some women have reached the C-suite, but progress is slow. For example, in the 1990s at one large employer there was only one woman in senior management (out of 30) and now there are four.
- it is important for women to see other women in roles they aspire to hold – whether in their organization or in other organizations.
- there are many opportunities for advancement in the industry, particularly since many employers are large.

***As a society, we need to recognize that "a woman being strong and independent are not negative traits".***

“

A cultural transformation is occurring within transportation – it is generally a more respectful workplace, is no longer an old boys club, and is a more professional environment.

”

## 2. ENTERING THE INDUSTRY

### A. Starting a Career in Transportation

***"We are all accidental tourists in transportation."***

#### Questions

*Are the experiences of women different?*

*How many male executives planned to work in the industry when they graduated from university?*

Nearly all interviewees 'fell' into a career in the industry, and a few sought out a career in the industry because of friends or family working in transportation.

Some women started their career in administrative and clerical positions after graduating from high school. Others began working after graduation from university in related and unrelated programs such as business, finance, accounting, engineering, law, history, psychology, and hospitality/tourism.

A couple of women were recruited from unrelated fields, either because they were known within their community or because of customer service skills.

Since starting their career, many women have continued their education and have obtained Bachelor degrees, professional accounting designations or MBAs.

“  
I had no intention of joining a transportation company – I wanted to work with information.  
”

“  
I had never heard of supply chains – I wanted a job in a big city.  
”

### B. Barriers and Challenges

***"Women won't get ahead if they don't play by the rules that men have set for them."***

There are differences in gender balance between office and field workplaces. Today when looking at entry-level jobs within office environments, women believe there is more gender balance. Within skilled trades, there is much less gender diversity.

#### Question

*Is it only women shying away from transportation or is transportation not attractive to job seekers?*

Women may not be seeking careers in transportation for several reasons:

- lack of awareness about the existence and breadth of transportation careers in general
- perceived as boring and unattractive
- erratic hours; not all jobs have fixed work schedules
- many parts of the industry operate 24/7 which is difficult for families
- physical requirements of many skilled trade positions (for example, ability to lift an 80 lb. knuckle on railcars or lift the ropes to tie a vessel)
- language & lingo is not well-known or female-friendly (what is a chassis? how do you deal with greasy nipples?)
- outdoor work environment (unpleasant weather)
- male-dominated industry, many women are unaware that they can be successful in non-traditional jobs

# 3. CAREER ADVANCEMENT

## A. Challenges

***"No one ever said I couldn't do anything."***

### Question

*As more men take on the caregiver role, will their experiences differ?*

A few women interviewed did not experience any gender-based challenges in advancing in their careers. However, the majority spoke about some challenges that they faced moving into middle and senior management. The two challenges most often mentioned were: family responsibilities and confidence.

### Family responsibilities.

Whether due to maternity leave, elder care and/or having on-going family responsibilities, women's careers are often impacted by family responsibilities more than men's. Women may not pursue advancement opportunities if significant travel or relocation is required. These decisions can lead to the perception that women are not as committed to the job.

Maternity leave (or the possibility of it) often delays or reduces advancement opportunities. This impact may be caused by the employer, or by women themselves. For example, some women spoke of purposefully not pursuing new opportunities that arose because they were thinking about having a baby in the next two years.

Once women return to work, there is pressure to demonstrate their continued commitment to the organization. Society seems to consider it more acceptable or easier for a mother to stay home with a sick child, regardless of her position, than the father.

### Confidence.

Many women reported that a lack of confidence has impacted their career advancement. Often, it was mentors or other company executives that encouraged them to apply for new positions, knowing that the woman was capable of performing well.

Despite rising to senior roles, many women are occasionally intimidated by the male-dominated environment and feel it is difficult to be accepted.

Some women did not pursue opportunities as they were unsure whether men reporting to them would take instructions from a woman.

“  
I was progressing in my career, despite being the only woman in management. Everything changed once I became pregnant. Even my champion turned on me. They were not supportive of me becoming a working mother and pressured me to return from maternity leave early (which I did not do). As a woman, why would I want to advance further in this company?  
”

“  
It feels like I am the token woman on the Board of Directors.  
”

### What's helping to reduce challenges?

- communication tools are widely available - can easily do more work after hours at home
- men who were gender-biased have mostly retired

### Are Women the Problem?

Some interviewees commented that women are the problem – either that they are not supportive of one another or because of their individual behavior.

Women should be supportive and not put other women down or make disparaging remarks. For example, when some women moved into non-traditional roles, other women told them, 'you can't do that.' Or, if they worked long hours to get ahead they were told 'you work too much, you are a poor role model for your children.' Some cautioned others to avoid workplace drama and not hold grudges.

Regarding personal attributes, women may be holding themselves back by not recognizing what they are capable of and not asking for new opportunities. Also, women must become better negotiators. Perhaps there is pay inequity because women don't negotiate as well as men (or negotiate at all).

Other challenges included:

- not having well-developed informal networks like men where they can make meaningful career connections
- having to 'prove' themselves; women are often promoted based on past performance whereas men are often promoted based on the potential to do well
- being overlooked for advancement if they are not well-known within the company
- expectation that long hours that must be worked for advancement – doing a good job within an 8-hour day is not sufficient

“

**My operations team 'tests' me from time-to-time. I am not sure if it is because of my gender or because I am new to the position.**

”

## SEX. THE PINK ELEPHANT.

Men and women struggle with how to develop appropriate relationships with one another, without sex getting in the way. Women and men should be able to be social with one another outside of the workplace, especially since many parts of the transportation industry are built on relationships.

Women's careers are negatively impacted if they do not have the opportunity to build business connections or participate in decision-making that may take place in social settings (such as drinks after a business meeting or a round of golf).

Men may also be reluctant to promote women to positions that require significant travel with them. They fear that others will perceive that something 'is going on' between them.

As recent as the early 2000s, a female manager was invited to a golf tournament for an association by her [male] manager. She took lessons before going into the tournament and was the only woman participating out of 145 people. She found out later that the association had held a Board of Directors meeting to discuss whether she should be allowed to play. Their golf tournament had never included women before.

**“Going to industry events always used to bother me – I would be the only woman speaking at a conference or would be one of a few in attendance. This industry is very relationship based. I had to find appropriate ways to build relationships. If you are not present, you miss conversations and decisions that get made.”**

## B. Getting Promoted: Insights from Successful Women in Transportation

*"When a door opens, go through it, even if you don't know what is on the other side."*

- take risks, push yourself, do something that scares you, even if you think you don't have the qualifications
- learn the business and build credibility within your organization
  - ask lots of questions and don't be afraid others will view them as stupid
  - don't be reluctant to go out in the field to gain a better understanding of the business
  - seek roles in different departments to get a broader perspective of the business to understand the strategic context
- don't stay in a job too long– it is important to seek different experiences and work outside of your comfort zone
- have a reasonable sense of humour – don't get emotional but do be direct if you hear inappropriate comments
- build trust and respect with superiors and direct reports
- don't passively wait for your hard work to be recognized – use your track record to actively seek opportunities
- if conversations are taking place without your presence, ask to be there or position yourself so you are there

### Success Factors

Interviewees identified several factors which have enabled their success including:

- having a champion – someone who recognized their talent and capabilities early on and encouraged, pushed (and sometimes cajoled) them into new opportunities and positions
- working with a group of men who did not have any gender biases
- working long hours to get recognized
- strong work ethic
- excellent business acumen
- people skills
- courageousness
- curiosity



## 4. HAS THE "MAD MEN" ERA PASSED? SOME DIFFICULTIES REMAIN

Overt instances of sexual harassment and gender discrimination were more prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time few university graduates were women and there were few women in management positions. Gone are the days when two-thirds of direct reports quit because a woman becomes their supervisor. Gone are the days when men leave the lunchroom when their female co-worker enters. These examples are actual experiences of interviewees.

*5 Instances of sexual harassment and gross indecency are rare. However, they do still occur.*

While such clearly inappropriate behaviour rarely takes place in the workplace, there are still situations and biases that women experience which impact their ability to be effective<sup>5</sup>:

- Difficulty being heard
  - in a meeting one woman would suggest a course of action and the idea is glossed over until a man suggests the same idea (which is then embraced)
  - in meetings with male customers or suppliers, they tend to speak to the male colleague accompanying the woman, even if the woman is the one with responsibility for that area or is the superior.
- Differing behavioural expectations
  - some women are viewed as being too direct and have been criticized for being too aggressive; one female manager has a derogatory nickname because of her 'toughness'
  - in comparison, a man who displayed more aggressive behaviours including yelling and hanging up the phone received praise
  - women are sometimes viewed as too emotional
- Lack of equal treatment
  - not provided opportunities to attend business conferences
  - not having washroom facilities on site for all genders – a washroom for women was just recently installed in one workplace

# 5. ACHIEVING A MORE DIVERSE INDUSTRY

## A. The Employer Matters

### Pay equity

Many women stated that they are or believe they are earning significantly less than their male counterparts.

Statistics Canada data shows that in 2016, women in full-time transportation jobs earned on average 75.4% of men's earnings. [See Izen Consulting report for the Skills Table January 2017 "Women in Transportation: Analysis of Support Programs]

One person suggested that women need to be bolder when negotiating their salary. They should not expect that their employer will automatically pay them what they are worth. Being bold worked for one respondent – each time she asked for more than she thought she was worth she received it.

Some of the women interviewed worked in the same organization. Based on the similarity of experiences, the following observations were made by the author:

- some organizations highly value operational or field experience – if no females are in these positions then they will not reach the executive ranks
- other organizations value general business acumen and believe that organization and industry-specific knowledge can be acquired
- an organization's culture and track record of promoting women, can quickly shift (for better or worse) after a change in leadership

The height of the 'glass ceiling' varies by organization. In some organizations, the ceiling has been shattered. However, in other organizations, the 'ceiling' is very low as no woman has advanced beyond middle management, despite having similar qualifications and experiences as their male peers. Of the employers included in this study, about 75% were proactive in building gender diversity within their organization.

Companies with diverse workplaces seem to have a champion at the executive level. Without a strong corporate culture and desire to achieve diversity, it will not happen.

## B. What Employers Can Do

Interviewees identified actions that employers can take to increase the number of women working in their organization and advancing to senior leadership positions:

- job shadowing
  - allow women to learn first-hand what is involved in various roles
  - rotate new hires through different departments and/or positions to gain an understanding of the business
- less emphasis on sectoral or industry experience – focus on the skill sets required for each position

“  
Letting evolution happen is not sufficient – you must be deliberate in hiring and promoting to achieve a diverse workforce.  
”

- flexibility
  - location: allow more employees to work from home
  - schedules: focus on outcomes, not hours of work
- mentoring and networking
  - structured groups such as Women in Leadership, coaching circles, lunch and learn sessions with external speakers; sometimes encourage male executives to participate
  - provide opportunities for women to network with senior management
- recruiting and hiring
  - update recruitment materials to show women working in male-dominated roles
  - be realistic in describing the realities of each job (amount of travel, hours of work, scheduling)
  - ensure hiring pool is adequately diverse: interview men and women for each position
  - beware of unconscious biases; review language in job postings
- build overall awareness of the industry and its career opportunities
  - transportation industry requires more than people who can drive trucks, operate trains and work on ships – there are jobs in marketing, finance, business development, law, environment, information technology, etc.
  - break gender stereotypes by sending diverse representatives to classrooms and career fairs
  - participate in mentorship groups or luncheons for young people
- equal opportunities
  - ensure equal opportunity for advancement but also equal opportunity for education, training, networking and conferences
- pilot projects
  - consider a program to encourage existing corporate employees to "try out" an operational position for a fixed amount of time with the ability to return to their current job
- supportive culture
  - have a diversity policy, report on it and demonstrate continuous improvement
  - listen to your employees – hold 'women in management' meetings and ask what is and isn't working well for women in your organization
  - ensure there are consequences and implications for inappropriate behaviour
  - provide conflict management training so managers can have the difficult conversations and effectively address such behaviour

## C. Is there a role for government?

When asked whether there is a role for government in increasing gender diversity in the workplace overall or within senior management, there was no clear consensus. Some women said that if the right conditions don't exist (such as flexible work schedules, longer maternity leaves), the number of working women will not increase.

Women struggled about the appropriateness of whether governments should set gender quotas or targets. Most women were opposed to such regulation, stating that the successful candidate should be the best person for the job regardless of gender and regardless of race, religion or sexual orientation. However, many women recognized that perhaps government intervention is required since gender diversity has not changed significantly during their career.

Women suggested that governments:

- market and promote opportunities – have a program focusing on women in transportation, similar to initiatives promoting women in trades
- encourage diversity on Boards of Directors
- when promoting trade and exports, governments could simultaneously build awareness of the careers in transportation which support trade
- require employers to report on diversity and explain why if they are not diverse
- mandate pay equity
- produce public education campaign on what is and is not acceptable workplace behavior, akin to a 'behavioural dress code'
- support families – not just women
  - help employers have on-site childcare
  - create flexibility within employment laws (such as 4 days on/4 days off, work from home)
- reward employers with diverse workplaces rather than punish those that are not diverse
- strengthen existing federal employment equity legislation to require higher representation of identified groups in the workplace and enact such legislation at the provincial level



**This Study was led and the following report prepared by:**



WESTAC (Western Transportation Advisory Council) is a council of transportation leaders in business, government and labour, from across Canada, with an interest in the long-term competitiveness of Western Canada's trade and transportation network. A neutral and trusted platform for over 40 years, the WESTAC forum hosts conversations on important issues in transportation and encourages collaboration on supply chain challenges.

#### **About the Asia Pacific Gateway Skills Table**

The Skills Table is a non-profit, federal-provincial partnership between labour, business and education/training institutions. Our 19-member stakeholder Board works to ensure the Asia Pacific Gateway (APG) has enough people with the right skills and training to meet its needs. The Skills Table is a trusted source for labour market information (LMI) and offers a unique voice on workforce issues and solutions, having delivered over 35 projects.



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