

WomanACT Podcast Series - Episode 4: Construction

Caption-based transcript

Aakanksha Mathur [00:00:09]: In this fourth episode of our “Women in STEM Podcast Series,” We're exploring the construction sector through a conversation with Tanesha Bloomfield from the Toronto Community Benefits Network. Together, we look at what it means to build a career in an industry that was not always designed with women in mind.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:00:30]: Today, we are joined by Tanesha Bloomfield who is a Manager of Union and Employer Partnerships at the Toronto Community Benefits Network — leading workforce development initiatives that connect apprentices to mentorship, training and career pathways in the skilled trades. She oversees programs like the “Community Benefits Pathways to Red Seal,” “Her Path Forward,” “Stepping Up Beyond The Tools” and “Parlons Métier,” advancing equity, inclusion, and community benefits across the construction sector.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:01:07]: We want to start with kind of grounding into your career journey. Can you tell us a little bit about your path into construction?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:01:16]: Thank you so much, Aakanksha, for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. What drew me to my choice of work? So initially I wanted to go into I mean, construction, of course. Being on site, thinking about carpentry, you know, doing the hands-on work and all of that.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:01:32]: So after completing our pre-apprenticeship program I found it a little bit difficult landing an apprenticeship. After, you know, volunteering with Toronto Community Benefits Network, I was offered a role. And it turns out that role fit perfectly with my background as a licensed paralegal. Because it offers me an opportunity to do more of supporting apprentices, supporting women, providing advocacy for women.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:01:59]: And it's so interesting that you were able to find that connection to your other qualification. I want to ask, there is often certain expectations about a sector — be it STEM or construction when you start off. When you first entered this space, were there any unspoken expectations that you had to kind of learn once you had actually entered the sector and these construction-related spaces?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:02:28]: For women in the trades, you have to overperform. You have to — always having to prove yourself, right? There are biases that you have to deal with. You know, navigating whether it's sexism and being a woman of colour, racism. That sort of thing. And I'm not saying that it is like that right across the board, but that is some of the things that I have noticed.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:02:53]: And funny enough, you know, like, men don't have to prove anything. They don't have this pressure of being perfect — of being good and things like that.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:03:05]: That “prove-it-again” bias piece is something that comes up so much. Can you tell me a little bit more about that and specifically about how it disproportionately impacts women, racialized women, about how credibility can sometimes be withheld from women and how we have to respond differently to it.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:03:25]: Right after completing my pre-apprenticeship program So I was placed at a location to do on-site field experience. It's like — so the men were the ones who like, “Oh, grab the hammer. I know how to use the hammer.” “Grab this. I know how to use this.” And they were kind of like, “You know what? You can just watch.”

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:03:44]: But on the other hand, there are different persons, whether men or women, who are more — look at things more of a mentor And they would step in and like, you know, kind of show you how to do this. Kind of it — you know, so they're not coming at you from a place where you're not capable. But more coming at you from a place where “Let me show you how to do this well.” Right?

Aakanksha Mathur [00:04:10]: That dichotomy in responses that you talked about is so powerful. It's a choice when people decide to enact certain microaggressions. Those seem like small incidences, but over time, they lead up to something much bigger.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:04:24]: These patterns of microaggressions Tanesha described can shape much bigger career outcomes. In a study of 12 women construction professionals, 92% said that they were repeatedly assigned simpler tasks. Even when they held the same role as their male colleagues. So we spoke to Tanesha about the barriers that women face when entering construction and building sustainable careers in the industry and what needs to change to improve retention.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:04:54]: Out of coordinating the NextGen Builders mentoring program, Providing the kind of wraparound support for apprentices. We realize that for women, there is this added barrier. At TCBN, we try to figure out like how can we mitigate this? How can we provide this additional support? So we did the Women in Construction Survey.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:05:16]: We gathered some women together from different unions, From different careers within the trades, and asked them a series of questions. And some of the things that they came up with in terms of barriers, We look at harassment, bullying, being (around) you know the unsafe work environment culture. They look at childcare as a barrier. They also talked about upskilling, not being able to pause work and go to school To do that transition, say, from first year apprentice into second or third year kind of thing.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:05:51]: Not having separate restroom on site. We look at not having proper fitting PPE, right? So we've talked about how we can get changes. It's as though the industry wasn't set up for women. It wasn't designed for women at all. And so everything is more geared towards men. But we are here, right? And we're doing a fantastic job in the industry. So we feel like we're supposed to be here. We've earned our space and we should be accommodated. Right?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:06:23]: And so we feel that with the PPE issue, I'm seeing where more organizations, more companies, more unions are, you know making an effort to first and foremost, have more women's groups. There is more of an effort to have fitted PPE. You not having comfortable or fitted PPE, that in itself is a hazard. Not being able to afford childcare, that's a barrier. You know, there are some single fathers too who struggle with childcare, right? So how can we ensure that if I have to leave for work early in the morning, how would I drop my child off to the daycare? Can employers institute an on site daycare?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:07:10]: Having fitted PPE, I am seeing efforts. I am seeing greater efforts. I'm seeing more entrepreneurs coming up with different ideas, for, you know, fitted PPE. We know that these ones they have now were not designed for our bodies, right? And if they don't fit well then that's a safety hazard. And that's something that we really have to look to eliminate. We can also look at even cost, right? With the PPE coming on stream for women. Sometimes a bit costly. So of course we can look (to) employers or unions can I think, try to subsidize a cost for this.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:07:46]: We've realized that the cost for some things within the industry, whether it is the tools or equipment or the PPE, is costly. And that is a part of the wraparound support that we provide. When we talk about the washrooms on site, oftentimes I'm told there's one washroom, One washroom on site. And when you have a site with, you know, Even if you have up to five persons, I feel that we still need specialized washroom for women. We know that women's bodies go through different changes You know, at different points. I mean, not relieving yourself all day or for most of the day. That's dangerous. Right? And that piles on additional health hazards.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:08:31]: What I feel that we can do to mitigate the cost is to, I mean, provide some incentive, whether it's more incentive to get more persons to produce or cost effective.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:08:44]: And like you said, that it's always a numbers game. Like everywhere. It's a numbers thing, right? It was like, how much will it cost versus how much we'll save? The cost of not having well-fitting equipment. There are real physical costs to physical safety, right? Like if there's injuries that happen, if you're not wearing the right equipment Or it's not fitting you, you can't do your job properly. That's lost productivity. That's lost potential workforce entering and remaining and greater turnover happening. That's

potential workplace hazards and injuries happening, right? So I think that's important to think about as well when trying to make this pitch to these unions or workplaces about like their potential savings, as well, that comes from making this investment like, it's like, it's an expensive upfront investment, but has long-term benefits.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:09:29]: When it comes to women who are racialized or minorities — coming from different backgrounds. Whether they're immigrants into this country. Is there a very different experience that they have in addition to these barriers that we just discussed?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:09:44]: Yeah, there is very different experience. One of the culture shock. What you're accustomed to at home versus What you've come into, the environment might be totally different, right? And so you having to navigate that. For racialized women, this is a added barrier because the high expectation, The bias, the microaggression. Even with, say, language barrier, All of that pose, you know, additional challenge to women.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:10:19]: I think that one of the things that we would recommend in terms of dealing with these — (is) for employers to have specific training for supervisors, for managers, right? So that they're able to (deal with) the changes, deal with the women who are coming in. Deal with a different cultural background, right? So we talk about diversity, equity and inclusion training For managers and supervisors so that they're aware of, you know, cultural differences that happen.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:10:50]: And that's one of the things that is hampering the retention process. So we've been doing a lot of things to lure women. To get women to come into the industry. But one of the things that we've not been so good at Is the retention piece; is to keep the women here, right? And aside from the washroom, the PPE, the childcare — that sort of thing, That causes them to leave. The system change is one of the things that will cause to want to stay, Because I don't feel like it is not that women are not attracted to the industry. So all of our programs, we've seen a lot of applications from women, But when they transition aspect of it is not happening, right? The retention part of it is, is not happening. And I think that's where policy need to focus a little bit more, not focus on just getting the women in. But what can we do to let them stay?

Aakanksha Mathur [00:11:46]: In construction, retention is also inseparable from safety. Stats Can has data that shows that 47% of women in trades, transport and equipment-operation occupations reported inappropriate sexualized behaviour at work in the previous year, Compared with 19% of men. Tanesha further reflected on why women may hesitate to report Harassment on worksites, including fears of retaliation, not being believed and having to continue working alongside the person they reported.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:12:21]: Tell me a little bit more about, what are the policies Or safety mechanisms in place? If they do exist, why do women maybe hesitate to use those resources if a case like that happens on site?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:12:37]: It is retaliation. I think, a lot of women are fearful of the blowback. And aside from that, it I feel it's a lengthy process. Some women may feel like if I report this, nobody's going to believe me. They're always going to take The male side, are always going to believe the male versus, you know, Believing a woman. It's a reporting process that you have to go through. And reliving the experience over and over. You know, for telling the story, for writing it in a report. For doing the, you know, even though that has to be done. But I feel like, women just feel like — Is it worth it? Is it worth me putting myself through this trauma again? Is it worth me reliving this experience? What is going to come of it?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:13:25]: But if you're not seeing — or you're seeing women making reports. You're seeing women saying that, “Hey, this is unsafe.” “Hey, you know, I was exposed to certain types of behaviour.” Certain types of aggression, harassment. I was exposed to this. If we're seeing more actions happening, Then I feel like there will be more reporting. But we're not seeing the end result and that is it. And some of these can drag on for months. For years. Nobody wants that, right?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:13:56]: And I feel like if our allies, our wonderful allies, I feel like if they don't take the bystander approach, If they don't just not say anything, I think that if they speak up at the point when things are happening, Then that creates more of confidence for women.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:14:15]: So I think that talked about even the retaliation process, Because if I'm going to report somebody who's senior to me, I'm thinking about — alright after this person sees That there's a report, how are you going to treat me on the job site? What is going to happen, right? How are you going to apportion the work? Are you able to work with this person? And why should I be made to work with this person too, right? So that is something in and of itself where when I make a report, I should not be made to still work with this person While there's an investigation ongoing. So once there's any kind of report, we have to remove the person from the situation. That is the first thing, right? Because we don't want is a true report. And then we keep allowing that person to relive the trauma. Because that has additional effects and it creates disunity on the job site. It lends itself to continuation of the abuse. Or different forms of abuse on the site.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:15:18]: If you're working for a smaller organization, I know that can be challenging because if you're not able to say To the person, “All right, stop working for a while, but you'll still be paid.” They may not be able to do that, which that would be an ideal situation. You're working for a larger organization, They can move you to another job site, right? So you don't have to come in contact with this person all the time.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:15:42]: In terms of limitations, I'll just kind of rule that out right off the bat because we talk about investing in human resource. You need people to do your work. The developers, the employers, they need people to do their work, right? I feel that human resource is your greatest resource. And so we have to invest in that. So that's first and foremost. So with

having a third party, I feel that's important. And that's something that needs to happen. And looking at even smaller organizations where the person doing the investigation may know both party very well. Your biases may come in play, you know, for one person versus another person. So I really feel that third party, independent third party who has nothing to do with this. But if I'm reporting this on independent third party, if I have to relay my story To an independent third party, then that allays my fear because I don't have to think about, "oh my God, you know, what do they think of me?" Or, you know, what are they saying about me? Or am I going to lose my job? Is this person going to retaliate against me kind of thing?

Aakanksha Mathur [00:16:52]: Formal reporting systems are one part of creating safety. But workplace culture matters before a complaint is ever made. Research on women in construction identifies mentorship, visible role models, and supportive organizational culture As important strategies for retention and advancement. And that brings us back to the people on site and what meaningful allyship looks like in practice.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:17:20]: What does allyship need to look like?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:17:23]: You know, I'm very big on allyship. Because I really feel That because it is a male-dominated space, it is important for the males to speak up. Yes, women have to speak up and stand their ground, stand up for themselves. But I feel that is more important for the males to speak up. To hold your other male counterparts accountable. And so I feel like allyship is so important. And that could look like mentorship. That could look like you taking a woman under your wing, Mentoring her, showing her, you know, The ins and outs of the industry. That could also look like sponsorship.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:18:08]: And I really feel like organizations need to do more in terms of creating a culture of allyship. In terms of changing the current culture, you know, shifting the current atmosphere. So that women feel supported, whether it's through, you know, Mentorship, creating an inclusive space where they can thrive.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:18:30]: The final question that I wanted to ask you is If you could give advice to young women and girls or young individuals in general who are considering entering this space, but maybe have reservations or fears about it for the reasons that we've discussed. What advice would you give them?

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:18:50]: I would say don't come in the industry with any kind of fear, any kind of reservation. Take up space. Be bold. Be brave. I know the challenges, right? And as I said, there are efforts to mitigate the challenges. There are changes that are taking place, Not taking place at the rate that I would like them to happen, but changes are taking place. So I really would encourage women to come into the industry. We have so much to give. This is a space where you can have an absolutely great career. You can grow, you can learn, you can thrive.

Tanesha Bloomfield [00:19:25]: So I say don't self-isolate. Find your community. Find women who share your ideals. You know, and I feel that mentorship is an absolute important part of it. So seek out women leaders who are able to mentor you.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:19:45]: Tanesha reminded us that creating safer and more equitable workplaces means looking beyond recruitment. It means addressing the everyday conditions that shape Whether people feel respected, protected and supported. From proper equipment and facilities to workplace culture, Reporting systems, mentorship and allyship. Building a more inclusive construction sector requires more than individual resilience. It needs workplaces and systems that are willing to change.

Aakanksha Mathur [00:20:19]: Thanks for listening to this episode from WomanACT's "Women in STEM Podcast Series." If this conversation resonated with you, be sure to share it and follow along For more episodes exploring women's experiences across STEM.