

BUILDING EQUITABLE TRADES

A PHOTO-RESEARCH EXHIBIT OF DIVERSITY IN THE SKILLED TRADES

LAURIER CENTRE FOR
WOMEN IN SCIENCE (WINS)

CONESTOGA COLLEGE



2024

KRISTA HEGGIE, ROOFING PROFESSIONAL

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FROM THE EDITOR

In academic contexts, we often use language related to **building** and **constructing** inclusive spaces, yet there is a lack of research focusing on the people who **build** and **construct, literally**.

So, why have we neglected inequities in this context (vs. academic research) when gender disparities in skilled trades are even more pronounced than in the natural and physical sciences?

Data show that less than 5% of those in papered skilled trades are women (Buildforce Canada, 2018).

While it is problematic to see persistent gender imbalances in any field, the shortage of participation in the trades has particularly detrimental consequences. According to the Government of Canada, approximately **700,000 skilled trades workers** are expected to retire by 2028, leaving a massive shortage of skilled labourers.

The full participation of all people in trades is therefore a matter of extreme importance to educational institutions, government, and society.

This photo-research exhibit is the first of its kind - that is, a unique collaboration between women and gender diverse people who are underrepresented across fields ranging from academic research, to arts, to the skilled trades.

We collaborated to produce this interactive photo-research exhibit that explores identity, representation, and experiences of ex+inclusion in the skilled trades.

Join us in:

- Celebrating women and gender diverse people
- Learning about research evidence about gender imbalances and experiences
- Sparking actions to build an inclusive community

Want to get involved?
Interested in hosting the exhibit?
Please contact us via email at
wins@wlu.ca

Eden Hennessey PHD

Research and Programs Director
Laurier Centre for Women in Science (WinS)

A TOKEN OF SUCCESS?

Beverly Roach, Machinist



Bev, a Black woman in the skilled trades, is a successful and highly-skilled machinist. Despite her achievements, Bev is seldom taken seriously, often being told that her “token” status is the main factor contributing to her success. This is not an uncommon experience for Black women in fields composed mostly of White men. The combined barriers of sexism and racism create a complex series of obstacles that block entrance to and success in a skilled trades career (Hunte, 2012; 2018).

In a group composed of a majority of one “type” of person, those outside the norm are viewed as “tokens,” treated as symbols and representatives of their social category.

Usually described by visual characteristics such as gender or race, assumptions



and stereotypes are assigned to tokens based on common social themes (Kanter, 1977). Those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (such as Black women, who experience both sexism and racism), experience a unique combination of those phenomena that are greater than the sum of their parts (Malcom, 1976; Crenshaw, 1989; 1991).

The normative demographic characteristics for a skilled trades worker are usually 'White' and 'men' (Smith, 2013; Wulff et al., 2022). When people challenge this norm they may experience intense scrutiny on the job, as well as aggression from coworkers (Bridges et al., 2020). It is possible that this hostile environment contributes to the absence of Black women in the skilled trades, making them even more likely to be tokenized.

As a machinist, Bev is motivated by her love for her craft, and enjoys the challenge of different kinds of machining jobs. Though she faces significant societal barriers, Bev's passion and skill have set her up for success.

A CHILLY RECEPTION

Brandi Ferenc, 313a Refrigeration Mechanic/Gas Fitter 1, HVAC Instructor



Brandi is a highly sought after specialist (one of just 40 Ontario women with 313a certification), but her experiences in a field of mostly men have been difficult. Indeed, there is a well documented chill in the air that attempts to freeze women out of academia (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Flam, 1991; Walton et al., 2015), and the skilled trades (Burczycka, 2021). The hostility, resentment, harassment, and assault Brandi has experienced is far from unusual (MacIsaac & Domene, 2014; Bridges et al., 2020).

From questioning women's abilities, to social isolation created through hostile working conditions,



sexual harassment, threats, and intimidation, women in skilled trades are likely to encounter abuse.

Not surprisingly, the culture of aggression and conflict is a significant contributing factor to the low number of women in the skilled trades (Maclsaac & Domene, 2014).

Brandi faced discrimination in her first job interview twenty years ago, and still faces it today, comparing her time in the skilled trades to an abusive relationship or a battlefield. Women are often discouraged from reporting workplace harassment in fear of retaliation and are expected to accommodate abusers to keep men comfortable (Denissen, 2010). Verbal and physical harassment are so common that it is almost an industry tradition and forms a key part of the culture of the skilled trades (Fielden et al., 2000).

Despite a hostile culture, Brandi is inspired by women in the trades. She is motivated to change the chilly culture for the next generation of women in skilled trades by speaking out about injustice.

Collectively, it is up to the community in trades to hear her voice, and lessen the chill in the air.

FIX THE SYSTEM, NOT THE WOMEN

Kerry Manahi, Small Engine Mechanic/Heavy Equipment Technician



Kerry appreciates the intricacy of fixing machines, and loves the financial stability gained by working in the skilled trades. However, women skilled trades immigrants like Kerry, who began her career as a mechanic in New Zealand, have lower median earnings than other economic immigrants. However, Canada's workforce depends on the contributions of these immigrant women to fill empty job positions (StatsCan, 2022a; Gatti, 2023).

Over 50% of immigrants to Canada enter the country as “economic immigrants” – those who are entering to fill a need in the labour market (StatsCan, 2022b), with skilled trades immigrants making up about 7% of these economic immigrants. Over 90% of these skilled trades workers are men (Hou et al., 2021).



The idea of women’s ability to “fix the world” has shifted focus towards women’s development (e.g. the idea of “Leaning In”) and away from challenging the structural discrimination women face (Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

Although providing women with training and education is a good thing, it caters to a harmful narrative (Ely & Meyerson, 2000), that women need to be “fixed” to thrive in their careers and are deficient in necessary qualities for success.

The responsibility is then theirs to make up these perceived deficiencies, rather than being the responsibility of society or culture to examine structural biases (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; O’Connor, 2011; Burkinshaw & White, 2017).

Kerry loves her work as a mechanic, enjoying the challenge of taking machines apart to diagnose their problems and then putting them back together. She is skilled at fixing the problems of engines. However, it is not her responsibility, or the responsibility of women in general, to fix systems that have been designed to exclude diverse people.

The system needs fixing, not the women.

SHATTERING THE GLASS ROOF

Krista Heggie, Roofing Professional



Krista has had a storied career as a roofing professional that has allowed her to provide for her menagerie of “six rescue horses, three llamas, two pet cows, twenty-four peacocks, and one belligerent donkey.” However, the glass ceiling has been a constant presence in a field considered ‘men’s work.’

The ‘glass ceiling’ is a metaphor often used to describe the invisible barriers preventing people from accessing organizational success (Loden, 2017). The construction industry presents women with countless glass ceilings, preventing them from ascending to their potential heights. These glass ceilings range from barriers to entry into the labour market,

problems with recruitment and retention, hostile work environments, and the difficulty of continuing professional development (Clarke, 2021; Rivera, 2021).



The prevailing attitude is that women are incapable of performing construction jobs (Wulff, 2022). When Krista started roofing, she faced skepticism and dismissal and had to constantly prove herself to be taken seriously. Now, Krista sees the new generation of women facing similar barriers. Though women make up around 12% of those employed in the construction industry, on-site women employees (such as carpenters, bricklayers, and roofers) make up only about 4% of the workforce (BuildForce Canada, 2018).

In addition to the underrepresentation women face, the construction trades can also be dangerous. Jobs in construction are among the most dangerous in Canada based on fatality rates per 1,000 employees (Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada, 2021). Working in a stressful, commission-based career where mistakes can be costly takes its toll on roofing professionals like Krista. However, passion and resilience drive many women to pursue the trades irrespective of the potential harms they will encounter (Gatti, 2023). Krista has spent the last 25 years shattering the glass roof.

Will you help her shatter what's left?



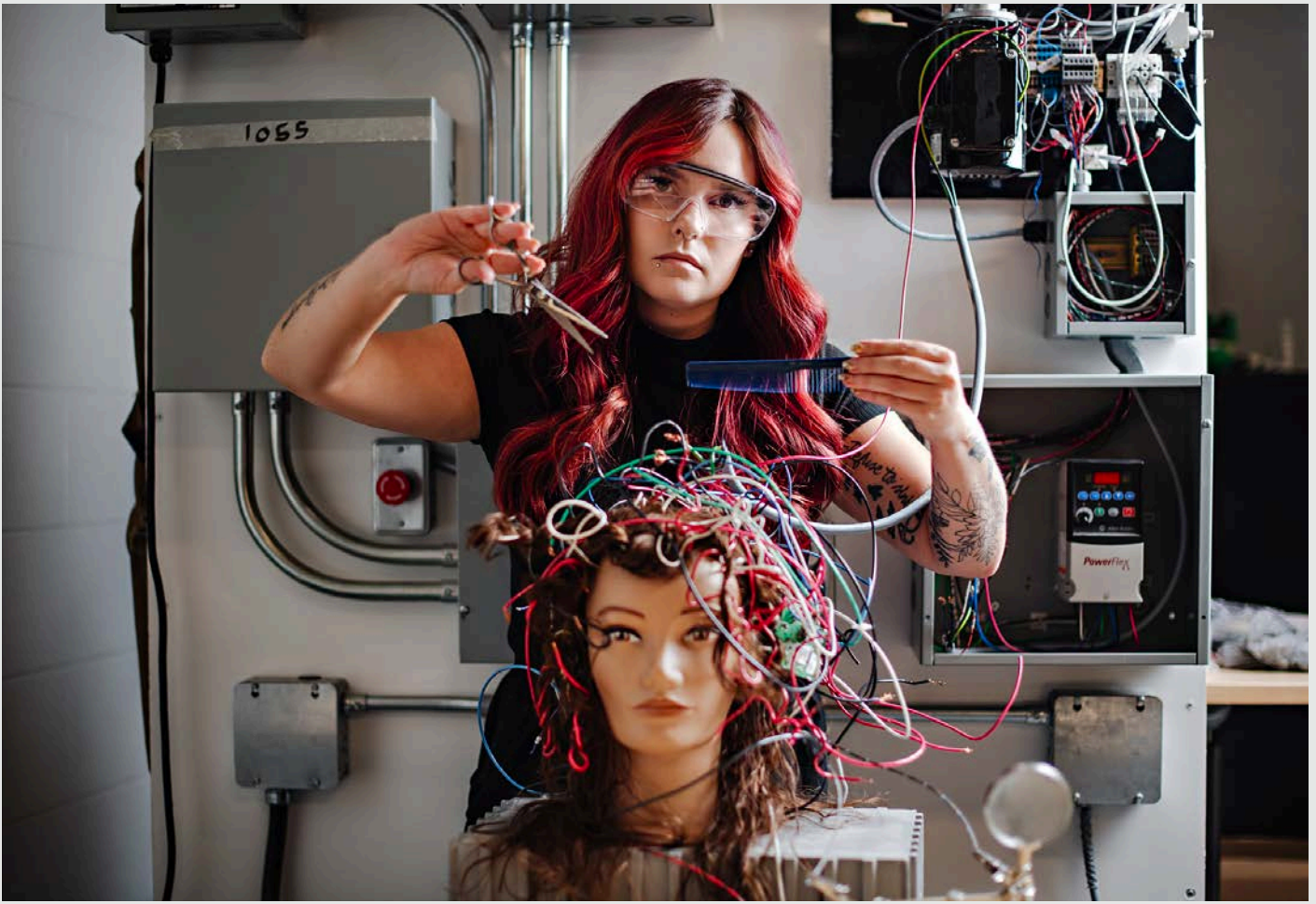
A Cut Above (Below) the Rest

Tori Azevedo, Artist Level Stylist



As a talented, in-demand hairstylist, Tori works long, gruelling days and is constantly on her feet. Fine motor control is key, and upper body stamina is required. She also invests an enormous amount of mental and emotional energy into her clients.

In general, hairstylists devote a great deal of unpaid and uncelebrated mental and emotional labour to their clientele, often acting as de facto therapists (Cohen, 2010). It's true that most skilled trades workers are men. However, among the top ten Red Seal certified trades in Canada, there are two trades where the workers are mostly women.



These are cooks and hairstylists (Statistics Canada, 2017), who by no coincidence, also have the lowest average salaries of the trades. Statistics show that people employed in majority women trades make significantly less money.

Hairstylists consistently have the lowest reported median income over multiple reports from various years, making roughly a third of what those in majority men trades like electrician earn (Statistics Canada, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2018; Dubois & Miyairi, 2021). In the 2021 report, which compared income in broad categories of trades, women in the group of trades including hairstylists earned only 59% of what men in the same grouping earned.

In a world focused on appearance, the work of hairstylists is incredibly important to most people's self-image. Despite the physical, emotional, and mental labour hairstylists invest into their clients, they remain underpaid and undervalued. Tori became a hairstylist because she has a passion for making people feel beautiful.

While Tori invests time and energy into her clients,
who is investing in Tori?

REALLY A LEAKY PIPE?

Vikki Schlonies, Plumber/Fitter



Vikki is fulfilled and successful as a plumber, yet she is only one of a few women plumbers in Canada. For every single woman plumbing apprentice, there are thirty-five men (Statistics Canada, 2019). Can this lack of representation be blamed on a leaky pipe, or is it time to move beyond this basic metaphor?

You've probably heard the term "leaky pipeline." This is a commonly used phrase to describe the loss of women in science fields and academia (Berryman, 1983; De Laat & Lu, 2022). The term can also be used to explain the lack of women in the skilled trades, and seems an apt description for the scarcity of women plumbers.



The path to the skilled trades is difficult for everyone, but women face challenges that men do not. Unlike boys, girls are often not presented with the option of skilled trades, and/or are not comfortable considering trades for their future (Agapiou, 2002; Maclsaac & Domene, 2014). Once women decide to enter the trades, there are many reasons they might choose to leave, ranging from extreme hours impacting family responsibilities, to departing because of hostility or harassment (Fielden, 2000; Gatti, 2023). These could all be viewed as “leaks” in the pipe that girls move through from school to a career.

However, the leaky pipe metaphor implies that women passively leak out of careers, stripping women of agency (De Laat & Lu, 2022), and does not address the complicated societal issues that result in underrepresentation (Cannady, Greenwald, & Harris, 2014). It has also been recognized that the ‘pipeline’ metaphor is problematic for some Indigenous peoples because of the harm done by physical pipelines on Indigenous lands (Canadian Astronomical Society, 2021).

As a plumber, Vikki flourishes in a career with good wages, good benefits, and a solid pension. While Vikki’s passion motivates her, the scarcity of women in trades begs the question:

Is there just one leaky pipe, or should we replace the whole system?

SHE DOESN'T FIT



A prevailing explanation for the lack of women in the skilled trades is that women are physically not strong enough to do the work; only men have the strength and aptitude for these jobs (Connell, 1995; Fielden, 2000;

Agapiou, 2002; Ness, 2012; Smith, 2013; Maclsaac & Domene, 2014; Bridges et al., 2020; Wulff et al., 2022). Workplace commentary in the skilled trades constantly mentions women's incapability of physically performing the required tasks (Byrd, 1999). Despite the widespread and deeply held nature of the belief in women's lack of capability, it is not always true.

While working on-site in roofing, Krista had to constantly prove herself to the men around her as they always had doubts about her physical capabilities. As a Black woman who is also less than five feet tall, Bev faces discrimination due to her physical



Kerry Manahi, Small Engine Mechanic/Heavy Equipment Technician



Beverly Roach, Machinist

aptitude than a man (Denissen, 2010; Dever, 2021; Wulff, 2022). However, even if a woman does not have the same physical build as a man, she is more than capable of performing the same tasks through a variety of different means (Smith, 2013; Wulff, 2022). Those who say “she doesn’t fit” are narrow-minded.

body, and is often told that her size will prevent her from being successful as a machinist.

In plumbing, Vikki has a difficult time finding workwear that is sized for a woman’s body. Vikki acknowledges that she may not have as much upper body strength as her men colleagues, but that has not stopped her from being a successful plumber. She simply exercises her mind to come up with different ways to perform physical tasks (Conestoga News, 2024).

It is entirely possible for a woman to possess the same or greater physical

Vikki Schlonies, Plumber/Fitter



HER FULL SELF



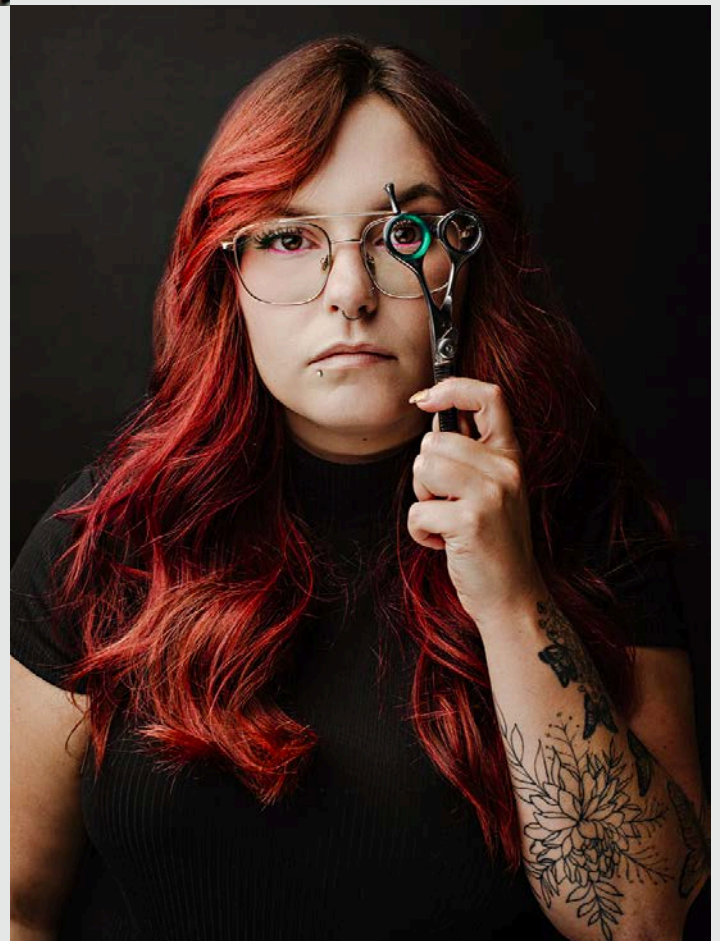
Beverly Roach, Machinist

queer, or racialized (Employment Equity Act, 1995). In turn, women may select to ‘save face’ when it comes to revealing their full selves in the skilled trades.

The widely accepted meaning of saving face is to attempt to avoid losing the respect of others, and is something that women in the skilled trades must work overtime to accomplish. The stress of saving face weighs on women in the masculine environment of the trades (Fielden et al., 2000; Whittock, 2002; Agapiou 2002).

Do you bring your full self to work? Imagine a world in which women in the skilled trades could bring their entire selves to work without fear of retaliation. What could be accomplished if the climate in the trades was truly inclusive of all identities?

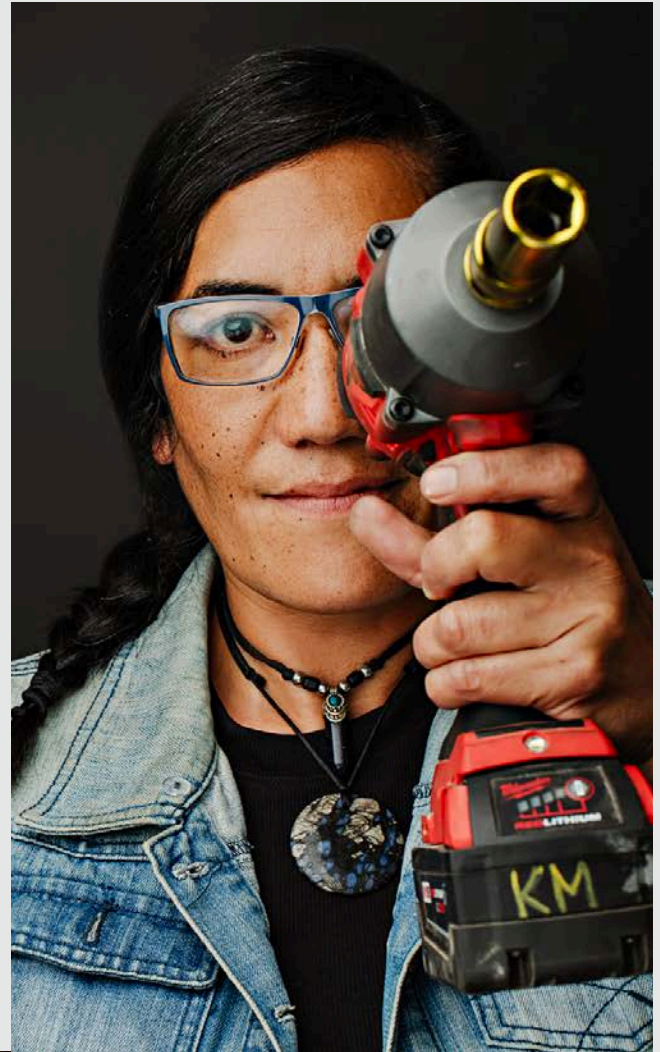
It is often unsafe for women in the skilled trades to disclose all parts of themselves at work. Being a woman is already a marginalized identity, not to mention the additional barriers introduced by being disabled,



Tori Azevedo, Artist Level Stylist

There is an impossible expectation to simultaneously be both masculine and feminine; to fit in with the men of the workplace without losing feminine characteristics (Denissen, 2010; Smith, 2013; Bridges et al., 2020; Wulff et al., 2022; Gatti, 2023). The women featured in this exhibit describe having to “put on a face” daily, concealing their innermost thoughts and emotions. They have selectively hidden aspects of their identities throughout their careers, and have had to prove themselves constantly to gain basic respect.

Many tradeswomen face harassment and assault, and hide their pain to



Vikki Schlonies, Plumber/Fitter

Kerry Manahi, Small Engine Mechanic/
Heavy Equipment Technician

not ‘upset’ their working environments. In reality, the skilled trades remain a realm wherein women and marginalized people are often unsafe to bring their full selves to work, and must constantly save face.

As we strive for the skilled trades to be more inclusive, ask yourself how you can be a part of the change, so that women and marginalized people can participate fully.

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In Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge, and Brantford, we are on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnaabe, and Haudenosaunee Peoples. Learn more at: <http://www.inspirg.org/knowtheland>.

Research labels were co-created with the tradespeople in the images and the WinS Team (lead author Margie Christ). Set design and creative direction by Eden and Skye Hennessey of WinS. Sets crafted by Kelsie Brown.

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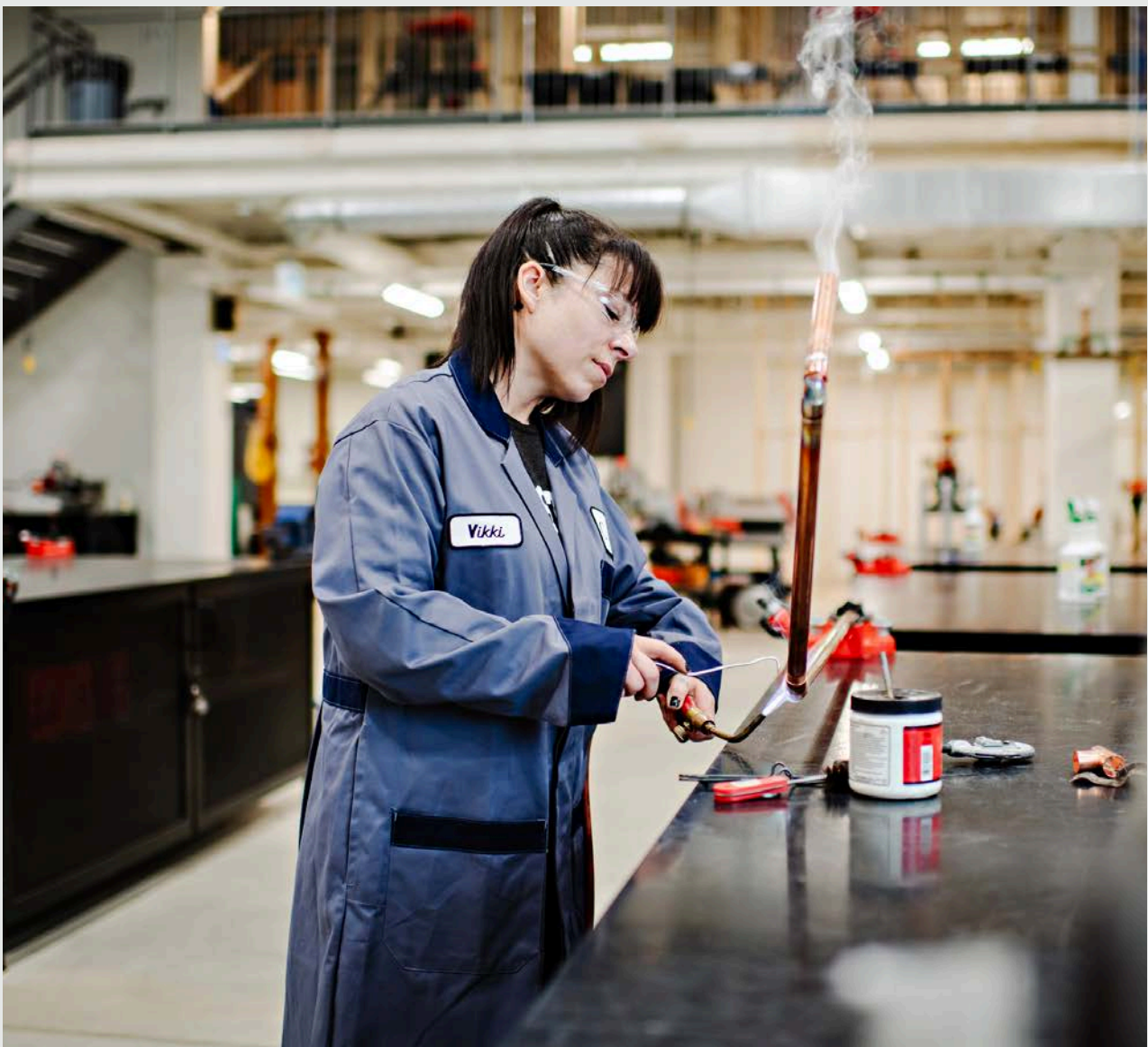
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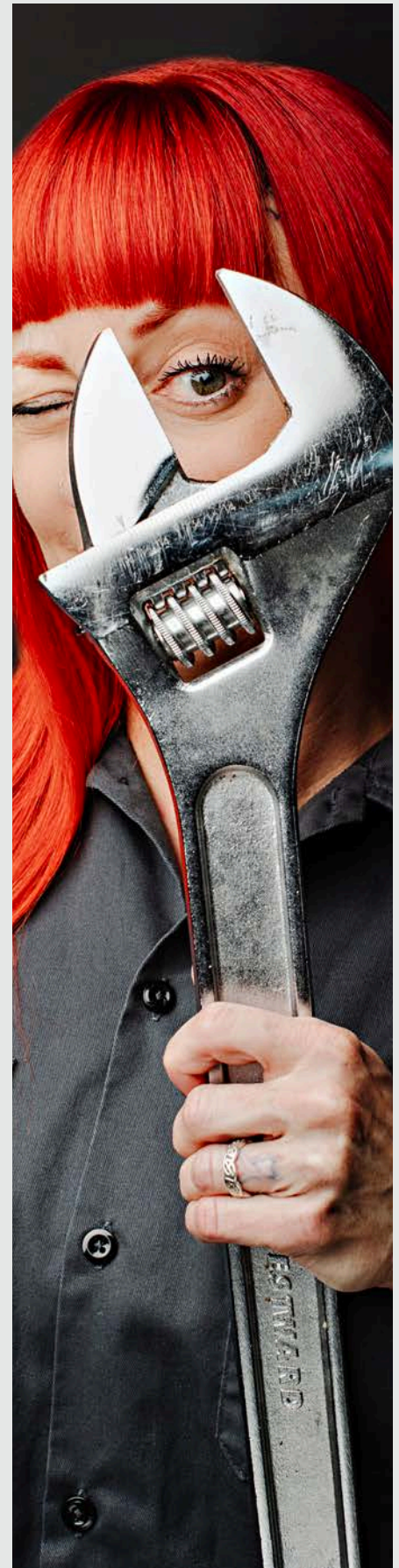
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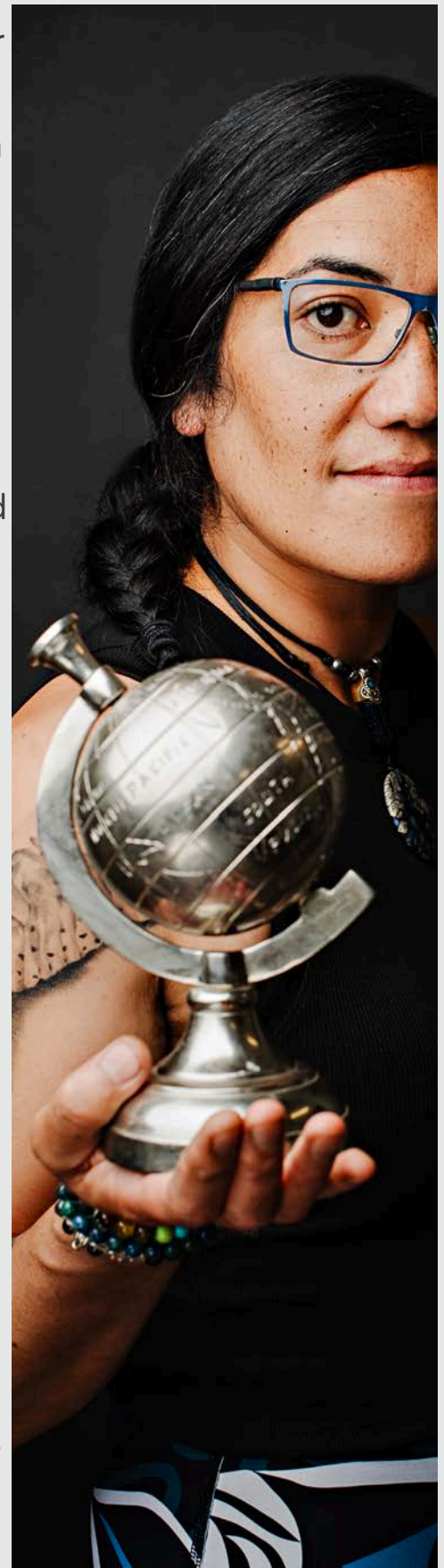
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