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Marilyn More talks with Irving Shipyard electrician Cassie Myra before a news conference on Friday announcing that the province will host a national conference on women in non-traditional careers in May. (ERIC WYNNIE / Staff)

When it comes to getting women into the skilled trades, there are lots of old stereotypes to overcome.

Workplace bullying can be an issue and rough language commonplace.

Let's not even talk about the washrooms.

These and a list of other issues will be grappled with at the upcoming conference in Halifax of the Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology.

"There are some obvious obstacles keeping women from entering the workforce as machinists, welders, electricians and plumbers," Nan Armour, national president of the coalition, said Friday.

"This is a huge untapped resource that can add vitality to the province's economy."

The bi-annual conference is being held in Halifax for the first time in its 13-year history on May 3-5.

It was no coincidence the conference was announced at Irving-owned Halifax Shipyard, where preparations are underway for the commencement of a \$25-billion shipbuilding program for the federal government.

"Less than three per cent of the skilled workforce at the shipyard is female and efforts are underway to increase that percentage significantly," said Armour.

There is a chronic shortage of women working in skilled trades in the province, with a recent survey putting the percentage at less than five per cent, she said.

Large-scale projects such as the shipbuilding program and offshore exploration are expected to trigger a huge demand for skilled workers, and this can translate into more opportunities for women in non-traditional careers.

The coalition works across Canada to encourage educational institutions to target women for training and to help employers overcome obstacles and attract more skilled female workers.

The organization also helps educators devise programs that encourage young women to add mathematics and science to their studies as a prelude to careers in engineering and the sciences.

Armour works in Nova Scotia with the Hypatia Association, a non-profit organization that promotes the participation of women in science, trades and technology.

She said women in this province comprise about 47 per cent of the workforce.

"Unfortunately, many of these women work for minimum wage at low-skill jobs."

Armour said the Hypatia Association has helped about 300 women get training and find jobs in skilled trades over the past five years.

"There are many women who are completely capable of working in the skilled trades but they've not been encouraged to consider this option. The reality is many employers want to add women to their skilled workforces."

She said the conference will be an ideal opportunity for potential employers to map out strategies for the removal of barriers that might prevent women from pursuing these non-traditional careers.

"Imagine the impact of the Nova Scotia economy if we could move more of the women currently living in poverty and on income assistance and so on into high-paying skilled jobs," Armour said.

Marilyn More, minister of labour and advanced education, said major projects are looming and the demand for skilled workers will increase.

"We have to work in partnership with industry, educational institutions, community organizations and unions to provide opportunities for women in non-traditional careers," said More in a news release about the event.

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