

On the cover

Women make up just 4.7 percent of the construction workforce. A new initiative is trying to change that.



# Preventing bullying and harassment in construction

By Gail Johnson

When it comes to safety in the construction industry, practices such as protecting workers from falls and wearing personal protective equipment may be the first things to come to mind. Treating people with respect, however, can be just as vital.

Bullying and harassment can affect everyone on a job site, not just those who are directly involved. Threatening, demeaning, or unwelcome behaviour can create stress and distractions that lead to incidents at work, and affect productivity, morale, and employee retention. Women and visible minorities in construction are especially vulnerable to behaviours that are intimidating, humiliating, insulting, or verbally aggressive.

Positive changes are happening, however, thanks in part to initiatives like the The Builders Code, an initiative of the Construction Workforce Equity Project.

The Code brings together partners such as the BC Construction Association (BCCA), Industry Training Authority (ITA), WorkSafeBC, Minerva, and LNG Canada, among others, and it got started in response to the staggeringly low rates of women in construction with the goal of turning those numbers around.

## A significant skills shortage

Women make up just 4.7 percent of construction workers in B.C., according to the ITA. Two-thirds of the industry's workers are aged 45 and up. About 60 percent are white. Approximately 90 percent of business leaders are male and over 45.

"In construction, we're facing a significant skills shortage," says committee chair Lisa Stevens, chief operating officer of the BCCA. "The equity project is looking to bring more people into the trades. More women are coming into trades, but they aren't always staying. There are lots of reasons, but there is a higher incidence of women not staying in construction."

The partners of the Code see bullying and harassment as a key barrier to retention for all skilled workers in construction. If a crew has a single male member who's harassing a female worker, for instance, the other workers may be tangentially affected — they may feel unsure of what to say or do, lose confidence in

their team members and supervisors, or simply be distracted. Consequently, they're less safe and less productive, and they ultimately may seek work elsewhere.

"We want to put a focus on retention and productivity and safety," adds Stevens. "We're not here to lecture or wag a finger. Employers are ready, owners are ready, and people on the job sites are ready for positive change. It's the right time in our industry."

The ITA agrees that the timing is right for inclusion. The training authority works closely with post-secondary institutions, which are key partners in emphasizing the roles and responsibilities of employers and the rights of workers. They work not just to empower apprentices but also to raise awareness among supervisors and front line managers to take steps to stop or eliminate inappropriate behaviours in the workplace.

"We're very committed as an organization to advance a culture change in skilled trades, to create workplaces that are welcoming and inclusive for all," says Shelley Gray, interim chief executive officer of the ITA. "There are lots of barriers and potential biases that need to be broken."

Those biases include some outdated ideas that this is just the way things are.

"Some would say that bullying and harassment has been accepted as part of the job," says Shawn Mitton, WorkSafeBC manager, Prevention Field Services and manager of WorkSafeBC's bullying and harassment team. "But attitudes are changing."

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—Lisa Stevens, chief operating officer,  
BC Construction Association



Partners in the Builders Code stand with the Acceptable Worksite Pledge, which states that everyone has the right to be safe and protected at work.

## ‘Bullying is unacceptable’

Bullying and harassment gained formal recognition in the *Workers Compensation Act* in 2013. The regulations set out the general duties of employers, workers, and supervisors to clarify their obligations when it comes to preventing or minimizing workplace bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

In 2018, WorkSafeBC responded to over 4,800 inquiries and complaints directly related to bullying, harassment, and discriminatory action across all sectors.

WorkSafeBC has expanded its role in bullying and harassment with a dedicated team. With 14 occupational hygiene officers throughout the province, the team responds to workers who phone in with questions or concerns about bullying and harassment. The team assesses employer compliance with regulatory and policy requirements and, if a complaint has been filed, asks employers to investigate and take measures to meet their obligations. The officers also offer continuing education and consultation.

“Safety is more than making sure machinery is safe; it’s having workers feel they can go to work and be treated equitably and with respect,” says Mitton. “A lot of times, employers leave conduct or workplace behaviour to HR, when it’s everyone’s responsibility to treat each other with dignity.”

## Setting a standard for respectful behaviour

The Builders Code sets out a baseline code of conduct for every construction worksite. The code defines an “Acceptable Worksite” as a safe worksite. It’s the starting point for ensuring a safe, welcoming, and productive environment for all workers — a worksite free of bullying, harassment, and discrimination, where everyone can perform to the full extent of their ability.

In a project-based industry where multiple teams come together often on ever-changing worksites, people need to know what’s expected at all times. Until now, however, there has been no consistent code of conduct when it comes to the culture of a jobsite. The way construction workers treat each other can vary

tremendously from one crew to the next and from one job to the next.

The Builders Code is one way to change that. The ultimate goal is for all construction projects in B.C. to adopt it, so that all construction workers on any project in our province understand the behaviour that is expected of them and why it matters.

“What’s unique about what we’re doing is that this is an employer-focused project,” says Stevens. “It’s focusing on giving the employers the tools and resources they need to drive this change from the top down. In order to facilitate change, we need to bring everyone on board.”

**“It’s everyone’s responsibility to treat each other with dignity.”**

—Shawn Mitton, manager, Prevention Field Services, WorkSafeBC

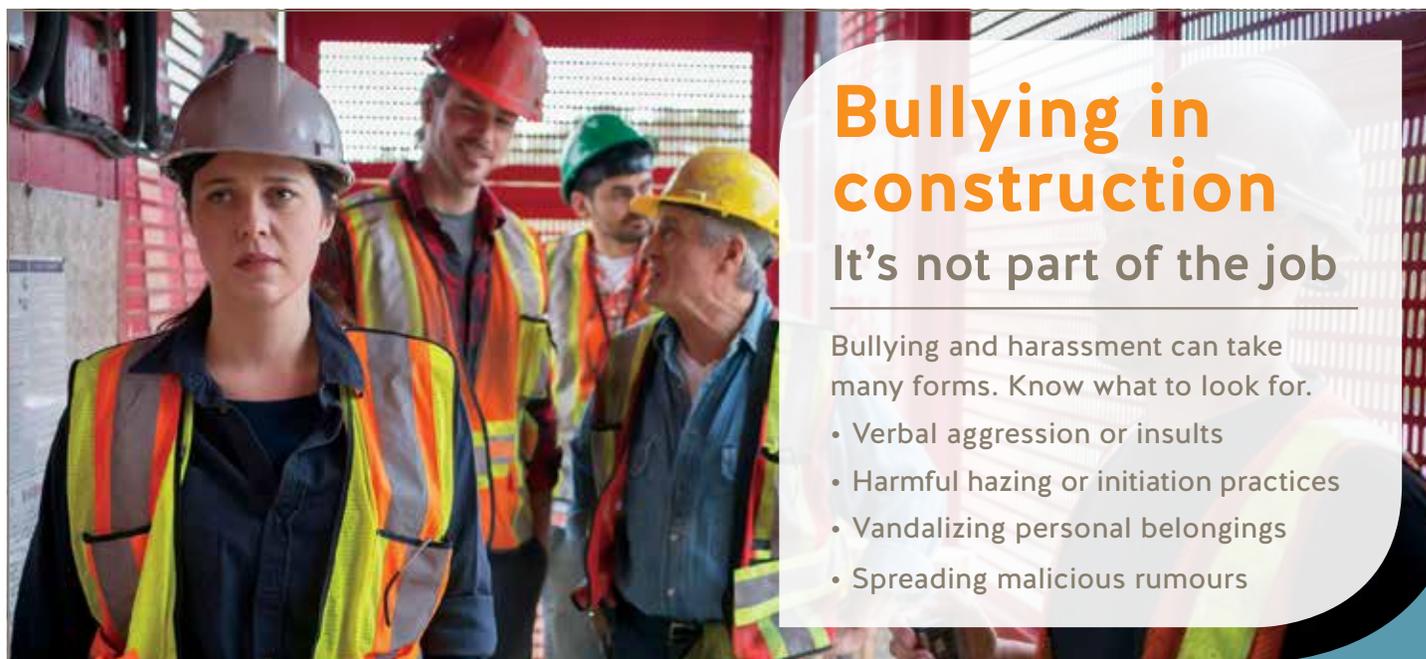
“The Code is setting a standard within a workplace of respect and equality and behaviour,” Mitton says. “It really helps the employer understand that it’s not just about training workers how to use the tools to build a building, but it’s setting a standard of conduct and treatment of each other.”

This in turn can improve worksite safety and the business’s bottom line.

“A respectful workplace makes a stronger workplace,” adds Mitton. “If everyone feels they have a voice and feels that they belong, that they’re in a place where they can grow, it’s a big win.”

### For more information

To find out more about the Builders Code, visit [builderscode.ca](http://builderscode.ca). If you want to lead a discussion on bullying and harassment at your workplace, check out [It’s Personal: Video Discussion Guide on Bullying and Harassment in Construction](#) on [worksafebc.com](http://worksafebc.com). ☺



## Bullying in construction

It’s not part of the job

Bullying and harassment can take many forms. Know what to look for.

- Verbal aggression or insults
- Harmful hazing or initiation practices
- Vandalizing personal belongings
- Spreading malicious rumours

Help prevent workplace bullying and harassment.

Find resources and view our video series at [worksafebc.com/preventbullying](http://worksafebc.com/preventbullying).

**WORK SAFE BC**