



Insight

Women and Apprenticeships

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Executive Summary

- Women make up 57 percent of the U.S. labor force, but only 9 percent of all active federal apprenticeships.
- The reasons for this disparity are worth exploring, and one likely explanation is that women typically do not choose to work in industries that most commonly use apprenticeships.
- Expanding apprenticeship programs into industries that women often choose to enter, potentially through the use of the newly created Industry-Recognized Apprenticeship Program, could lead to more women reaping the benefits of apprenticeships.

Introduction

Apprenticeships are a proven way to increase labor-market mobility, boost earning potential, and provide workers with valuable, in-demand technical skills. Significant progress has been made with diversifying apprenticeship programs related to race and ethnicity, but women's participation in apprenticeship programs is lagging behind their participation in the labor force as a whole. Exploring why women participate in apprenticeships at lower rates could provide insight into how to expand apprenticeship programs and the benefits they provide to workers.

Women in the Labor Force

In 2019, women made up over [57 percent](#) of the workforce and have seen fairly stable labor force participation. When it comes to apprenticeships, however, women made up 9 percent of active participants and 10 percent of apprenticeship completers in 2019. For a demographic that makes up such a large percentage of the total labor force, the involvement in work-based learning is significantly lagging. To better understand why, it is useful to take a closer look at which industries make the most use of apprenticeships.

Industries

The construction industry is most often associated with apprenticeships due to its well-established and widespread use of such programs. Construction alone accounts for 68 percent of all federal apprenticeship programs, with the next four industries combined making up 22 percent of federal apprenticeships. Within the construction industry, only 10.3 percent of apprentices are women.

Below are the five largest industries by the number of apprentices. Taken together, they account for 90 percent of all active federal apprenticeships.

Percentage of women in apprenticeships by industry

Industry title	Percent of All Active Federal Apprenticeships	Percent of Apprentices that are Female
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Construction	68	10.3
Public Administration	7	45.7
Manufacturing	6	29.4
Transportation and Warehousing	6	24.8
Utilities	3	19.9

The lack of women in the construction industry and consequently in apprenticeships is likely more a question of choice rather than one of lack of or barriers to access. The fact that few women are in apprenticeships may not be a problem in itself. If women are pursuing and getting the types of jobs they want, the answer is not to push more women into apprenticeship-heavy roles; rather the goal should be to explore apprenticeship expansion in other industries.

Expanding Apprenticeships

The success of apprenticeships in the construction industry shows that these types of programs can have a significant and positive effect on skill building in certain circumstances. Such a high concentration of federal apprenticeships in a few industries, however, suggests that there are more workers in other industries who could benefit from work-based education. That said, it is important to consider that there are likely several industries where a traditional apprenticeship style model won't work. Any work-based training program must be tailored to the needs of the industry and job. In addressing the small percentage of women involved in apprenticeships, the goal should be making effective high-quality apprenticeships available across multiple, ideally high-growth, industries. Attempting to simply increase the number of women participating by starting generic apprenticeship programs modeled on the construction industry could lead to low take-up of low-quality programs that do not work in the interest of the labor market or the women involved.

There are promising areas for expansion of apprenticeships that would likely lead to greater participation from women. The health care industry is a good example. A study by [McKinsey & Company](#) found that over 60 percent of workers entering the health care industry are women. Developing a stronger, more widespread apprenticeship system in this industry would help fill high-demand roles such as paramedics, nurse aides, and pharmacy assistants while also bringing the benefits of higher wages and greater labor mobility to women.

Start-up Costs

Increasing the number of apprenticeship opportunities in industries that have historically not made much use of them is not an easy task. While more industry diversity in apprenticeships would likely be beneficial to women, employers in those spaces could be reluctant to start programs. High regulatory and compliance burdens and the costs associated instruction and in-person training would likely discourage employers from experimenting with work-based education. The recent creation of [Industry-Recognized Apprenticeship Programs](#) (IRAPs), however, offers a new way forward. IRAPs relax some federal regulation and oversight, and place more control in the hands of employers to design programs that suit their specific industry needs. Assuming IRAPs can and do lower the cost of program creation, women's participation percentage in apprenticeship is likely to rise as new industries start programs.

Conclusion

Women play a crucial role in the U.S. labor force, but data show that women do not represent a large number of participants or completers of apprenticeship programs. Assessing which industries have the most apprenticeships gives a clearer picture of why few women participate. The obvious solution is to bring apprenticeships to industries with larger percentages of women. The result of such an expansion could be that more women could reap the benefits of work-based training, but policymakers must keep costs and specific industry needs in mind when crafting policy to encourage apprenticeship creation and participation.