

CARVING CHANGE: SHAPING SUSTAINABLE CAREERS



REFLECTIONS FROM OUR ANNUAL GENDER SEMINAR
10TH OCTOBER 2025

HELD ON 10TH OCTOBER 2025, CARVING CHANGE BROUGHT TOGETHER FIFTY MAKERS, EDUCATORS, AND INDUSTRY LEADERS SPANNING FURNITURE MAKING, HERITAGE WOODWORKING, AND RELATED CRAFTS TO CONNECT, SHARE INSIGHTS, AND TACKLE SHARED BARRIERS.

This year's seminar built on the findings of our 2024 Sector Survey – itself inspired by last year's Carving Change event – and centred on the themes of Recruitment, Representation, and Retention, with a growing focus on the intersecting factors that shape access and belonging across the sector.

Throughout the day, we heard stories of determination and community, explored revealing statistics, and discussed how small, local actions can create sector-wide change. From grassroots initiatives to individuals who were “simply longing to be part of a community,” the day made space for honest dialogue, new partnerships, and shared ambition – proof that change deepens when we look at the wider picture and paint it together.



“It was a great opportunity to meet other makers and creatives from across the industry. I especially enjoyed the brainstorming seminar, where we thought of ways to raise awareness and engage more people with woodworking.” - Jana Spence (Jana Spence Designs)



“Cat and her team at Sylva provide a generous and welcoming space for makers of all genders to connect and occasionally commiserate about the challenges of gender imbalance within the woodworking world. For such a creative industry famous for its problem-solving, it always surprises me to hear stories of entirely unsuitable workplaces and practices that seem so completely fixable! For the sake of everyone in the industry who faces challenges because of their gender, we need to be reminded to arm ourselves with hope, optimism and proactive approaches to change the world of woodworking for the benefit of all.” – Camilla McLean (Matthew Cox Furniture)

CROSS-SECTOR TALKS: SHARED LESSONS FROM CONSTRUCTION CRAFT EDUCATION & BOATBUILDING

Different crafts, same crossroads: visibility, pathways, and bias are everyone's challenge.

Hearing from Building Crafts College and Women in Boatbuilding showed that every making sector faces the same barriers to entry and retention, and that practical collaboration, transparency, and peer support make measurable change.

Key insights

- Start early, stay broad: Young people don't distinguish between trades yet. Promote making and creativity first, specialisation later.
- Build networks, not silos: Success depends on visibility, mentoring, and informal peer exchange across disciplines.
- Show the modern workshop: Clean and well-lit, inclusive and open workplaces attract talent.
- Make the case for inclusion: Diversity lifts quality and stability, "the workshop dynamic changes completely when women are in the workshop."



"There is immense value in bringing together like-minded souls with such breadth of experience - thank you to Sylva for this initiative. I truly believe what we do to improve the participation of girls and women in the sector will benefit all learners and workers in time!"
- Selina Bolingbroke (Building Crafts College)

EMERGING PRIORITIES

FROM THE DESIGN SPRINTS

Participants collectively tackled the barriers to gender equity in woodworking through three design challenges. Focussing on recruitment, representation, and retention, they imagined practical tools – from mobile maker spaces to national storytelling campaigns and workplace pledges – that set out to transform everyday practice. What united these ideas was a shared recognition that access, visibility, safety, and sustainability depend on community and infrastructure as much as individual will.

Across all three strands, the session revealed that access, visibility, safety and sustainability are inter-dependent:

- **Visibility without infrastructure:** Awareness campaigns risk hollow impact if not paired with funding, space, and staffing.
- **The care trap:** Parenthood and unpaid care responsibilities, rigid hours and a lack of part-time opportunities, remain a huge barrier to staying in the sector.
- **Small-business limits:** Many small workshops want to do better but lack capacity (time, money, opportunity), policy guidance, HR knowledge, or trust in support schemes.
- **Fragmentation:** Brilliant local efforts exist, but no shared platform or body ties them together.
- **Psychological safety:** Fear of discrimination, bias or tokenism deters people from seeking professional woodworking training and occupations.





“I was so pleased to see the terrific work at Sylva Foundation. Hearing the experiences of the guest speakers both filled me with dismay – as to some of the life experiences they’re still experiencing and so beautifully shared – but overwhelmingly with hope that the industry is in the hands of such resilient and skilled people. I look forward to following their paths in the future.” – Pip Soodeen (The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB))

01 Paving New Pathways

Access needs to move, not wait to be found.

Participants proposed mobile workshops, local hubs and school partnerships to make woodworking visible and accessible, especially for under-represented genders. The greatest risk lies in short-term funding and reliance on volunteer energy rather than sustained investment.

03 Open Doors Pledge

Culture change starts at the bench.

The group focused on practical tools like culture pledges, peer-to-peer mentoring and check-ins, better communication and feedback systems. Tools that make workshops fairer and safer. The main barriers remain low pay, lack of progression, and the isolation of small businesses with limited HR capacity.

02 Role Model Campaign

Visibility only works when it's supported.

Makers designed a national campaign with touring talks, ambassador schemes and storytelling platforms to showcase diverse makers – explicitly including mothers and carers. The challenge is ensuring representation without tokenism and building infrastructure so new faces can keep emerging.

PANEL REFLECTIONS

The closing panel reflected on the day's emerging themes of visibility, access and culture change. Katy Thompson, Fiona Davidson and Lynn Jones spoke about the power of grassroots initiatives like Women in Boatbuilding to model inclusive practice, the importance of visible role models across industries, and the need for employers to make their workplaces more attractive: ***"We've got to show employers there's a way of finding makers, and makers finding them."***

The discussion underlined the role of male-allyship and the urgency of engaging larger companies who remain disconnected from conversations. Hope centred on the growing willingness of individuals and organisations to act, the generational shift in attitudes among young makers, and the sense that change is now both expected and inevitable: ***"The ones who don't want to change will simply cease existing."***

AUDIENCE QUESTIONS

How can inclusion be measured beyond statistics?

Participants wanted to know how workplaces can demonstrate real inclusivity rather than "box-ticking." The consensus was that it depends on giving people a platform to speak, listening actively, and embedding feedback into culture.

How can larger, traditional companies be brought into the conversation?

The room recognised that "preaching to the converted" won't drive systemic change. Suggestions included employer open-door schemes, cross-company mentorship, and industry pledges to model transparency.

"My highlight was hearing from Women in Boat building and all they achieved in such a short time, as well as hearing from Selena Bolingbroke from the BCC who is so passionate about creating opportunities in woodwork and other crafts for everyone. It was great to see new faces and people I recognise from industry and past seminars, and I hope that we continue to see more and more new faces." - Katy Thompson (Matthew Cox Furniture)



FINAL THOUGHTS

“A rising tide will raise all boats” – Selina Bolingbroke

That quote captures what inclusion really means, but only if we’re looking at which boats are still stuck on the shore.

Throughout the day we heard stories that showed how barriers don’t just appear because of someone’s gender. Barriers build and overlap. Gender meets class, race meets age, disability meets caring roles. Those intersections are where a lot of the exclusion hides, and where we need to learn and adapt.

If we manage to uncover and address the complex barriers that sit at those crossroads, and if we keep listening and adapting as people’s lives change, we create not just fairer entry points, but workplaces where anyone can stay, grow, and lead. During the design sprints we already explored what this can look like: from bringing tools and workshops to young mothers and disadvantaged children, to celebrating diverse role models through podcasts, exhibitions, and social media. All these ideas create ripples which make the tide rise.

Looking ahead, we’ll build on that momentum: gathering stories from across the UK to make under-represented makers visible, and working with employers to co-create a pledge for safer workshops and sustained inclusion.

Because when we raise those most affected by intersecting barriers, everyone moves forward. The tide doesn’t just rise – it carries us all.

– Cat Poppensieker, Woodworking and Gender Project Lead, Sylva Foundation

“It was truly inspiring to be surrounded by so many likeminded individuals, all dedicated to driving change. Having attended the seminar since its inception, I felt a significant shift in attitudes this year, a real sense of hope that meaningful change is not just aspirational, but actively unfolding before our eyes.” – Alice Nerger-Jones (Make.with.Alice)

Alice Nerger-Jones (make.with.alice)
Belinda Joslin (Women in Boatbuilding)
Cat Poppensieker (Sylva Foundation)
Katy Thompson (Matthew Cox Furniture)
Lynn Jones (Lynn Jones Associates)
Selina Bolingbroke (Building Crafts College)

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AND OUR
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GET IN TOUCH

Email gender@sylva.org.uk

Website www.gender-project.sylva.org.uk

Phone 01865 408018