

**Key dates
in the history
of**

**Canadian Women throughout
the 20th Century**

This document is not meant to be an exhaustive review of the history of women in Canada but rather a starting point for a study or deeper review of this subject

1907

- Marie Gérin-Lajoie and Caroline Béïque of Quebec found the Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste, the first association of francophone women interested in promoting women's civil and political rights.

1908

- Lucy Maud Montgomery of Prince Edward Island publishes *Anne of Green Gables*. More than a million copies of her bestseller were sold throughout the 20th century.

1912

- Carrie Matilda Derick of Quebec is the first woman to become a full professor in a Canadian University, at McGill University, in Montréal.

1916

- Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba become the first provinces to grant women the right to vote in provincial elections.
- Emily Murphy of Alberta becomes the first woman magistrate in the British Empire.

1917

- Women gain the right to vote in British Columbia and Ontario provincial elections.
- Nurses in the Armed Forces and women who have close relatives in the Armed Forces are given the right to vote, on behalf of their male relatives, in federal elections.
- Louise McKinney and Roberta MacAdams Price become the first two women of the British Empire elected to a provincial legislature (Alberta).

1918

- With the exception of Aboriginal women, women over the age of 21 who are Canadian citizens are granted the right to vote in federal elections.
- Women gain the right to vote in Nova Scotia provincial elections.

1919

- Women gain the right to vote in New Brunswick provincial elections.

1920

- E. Marjorie Hill, Canada's first woman architect, graduates from the University of Toronto.

1921

- Agnes Campbell Macphail of Ontario becomes the first woman elected to the House of Commons.

1921 (continued)

- Mary Ellen Smith of British Columbia is the first woman in the British Empire appointed Cabinet minister (BC's Legislative Assembly).

1922

- Women gain the right to vote in Prince Edward Island provincial elections.

1924

- Fifteen year old figure skater, Cecile Smith becomes the first Canadian female athlete to compete at the winter Olympic Games in Chamonix, France.
- Ada Mackenzie launches the Ladies' Golf and Tennis Club of Toronto, the first course in the world reserved exclusively for women.

1925

- Women, aged 25 and older, gain the right to vote in Newfoundland provincial elections.
- Lela Brooks of Ontario sets six world records in speed skating and wins the World Championships the following year.

1928

- Eileen Vollick of Ontario is the first Canadian woman to receive a pilot's license.

1928 (continued)

- For the first time, women are allowed to participate in track and field competitions at the summer Olympic Games in Amsterdam. The Canadian women's team, which included six athletes, wins a gold medal in the 4 x 100 metre relay, high jump and wins silver and bronze medals in the 100 metres.
- Anna Dexter becomes the first Canadian woman radio broadcaster.

1929

- Following a long political and legal battle led by Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney and Irene Parlby – also known as the “*Famous five*” – the British Privy Council renders a decision declaring that the term “*qualified persons*” in article 24 of the *British North America Act* includes members of the female gender and, as a result, women are eligible for appointment to the Senate of Canada.

1930

- Cairine Reay Wilson is the first woman appointed to the Senate of Canada.
- Mary Pickford is the first Canadian actress to win an Oscar as best actress for her leading role in *Coquette*.

1932

- Dr. Elizabeth Catherine Bagshaw from Hamilton, Ontario, opens the first family planning clinic in Canada (which was then illegal).

1934

- Elzire Dionne gives birth to quintuplets (Annette, Émilie, Yvonne, Cécile and Marie) in Corbeil, Ontario. The girls became known as the Dionne quintuplets.

1936

Reverend Lydia Emelie Gruchy of Saskatchewan is the first ordained woman minister in the United Church.

1939

- The very first female aeronautical engineer in the world, Elizabeth “Elsie” Gregory MacGill is the first Canadian woman to design and witness the construction of an airplane (the Maple Leaf II Trainer) based on her own design.

1940

- Women gain the right to vote in Quebec provincial elections.

1944

- Nurse Elizabeth Lawrie Smellie of Ontario becomes the first woman Colonel in the Canadian Armed Forces.

1947

- Canadian women who marry non-Canadians no longer lose their citizenship.
- Canadian athlete Barbara Ann Scott becomes the first North American World champion in figure skating at the World Championships in Stockholm and, the following year, to win the Olympic gold medal at the St. Moritz winter Olympics Games.

1948

- The United Nations General Assembly adopts the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which proclaimed that “*all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*”. Canada is one of the signatories to the *Universal Declaration*.

1949

- Nancy Hodges, Member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, becomes the first woman to be named Speaker of a provincial legislature in the British Empire.

1950

- Fanny “Bobbie” Rosenfeld is voted Outstanding Canadian Woman Athlete of the Half Century for her achievements in track and field.

1950 (continued)

- Ellen Louks Fairclough from Ontario is elected to the House of Commons and introduces a bill requiring “*equal pay for equal work*”.

1951

- Charlotte Whitton is elected Mayor of Ottawa, the first woman to become mayor of a large Canadian city.

1952

- Ontario becomes the first province to put equal pay legislation into effect.
- Elsie Knott, a member of the Ojibway band, is elected Chief.

1954

- The Women’s Bureau at the Federal Department of Labour is created.
- Marilyn Bell of Ontario becomes the first person to swim across Lake Ontario.

1955

- Restrictions on the employment of married women in the federal public service are removed.

1956

- Legislation is enacted guaranteeing equal pay for equal work within federal jurisdiction.

1957

- Ellen Louks Fairclough becomes the first woman federal Secretary of State and, in 1958, the first woman federal Cabinet minister, as Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

1958

- Blanche Margaret Meagher of Nova Scotia becomes Ambassador to Israel, the first Canadian woman to hold that rank.

1960

- Natives living on reserve are allowed to vote in federal elections without losing their registered Indian status.

1961

- Best known for her poetry celebrating her Aboriginal heritage, Emily Pauline Johnson — also known under the Mohawk name “Tekahionwake” — is the first Canadian Métis woman to be honoured with a commemorative stamp.

1966

- Jean Sutherland Boggs is named Director of Canada’s National Gallery and becomes the first woman in the world to head a national art gallery.

1967

- The Government of Canada establishes the *Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada*, chaired by Florence Bird.

1968

- Hilda May Torok Binns becomes Canada's first ever disabled Olympic gold medallist winning two gold medals (and a silver medal) in Tel Aviv at the Paralympic Games, then called the "International Stokes Mandeville Games for the paralyzed".

1969

- Canadian country singer Anne Murray releases her second album, which produced her first breakthrough hit single, "Snowbird". For the first time in the history of music, an American gold record is awarded to a solo Canadian female artist. Throughout her career, Anne Murray has stacked up a mountain of awards, including an induction into the Juno Hall of Fame in 1993. Her tremendous success paved the way for future female Canadian international performers like K.D. Lang, Sarah McLachlan, Céline Dion, Alanis Morissette and Shania Twain.

1969 (continued)

- The *Criminal Code* is amended so that prescribing contraceptives and handing out information on birth control methods as well as sexual acts between consenting adults of the same sex are no longer considered crimes.

1970

- The report of the *Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* is tabled and reveals disturbing facts about discrimination against women and women in poverty.

1971

- The federal government creates the Office of the Co-ordinator, Status of Women, within the Privy Council Office.
- Canadian Frances Phipps becomes the first woman to explore the North Pole.

1972

- Rosemary Brown becomes the first Black woman politician elected in Canada (BC legislature).
- Muriel McQueen Fergusson of New Brunswick becomes the first woman Speaker of the Senate of Canada.

1973

- The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women is created.

1974

- Thirty-two women from across Canada hired as officers in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) arrive at the RCMP Training Academy to become the first female troop in the history of the Force.
- The first *National Conference on Women in Sport* is held in Toronto and leads to the creation of Sport Canada's Women's Program.
- Studio D of the National Film Board is created and becomes the first women's English film studio in the world producing films from a woman's perspective.

1975

- The United Nations declares 1975 to be the *International Year of Women* and holds the first World Conference on Women in Mexico.

1976

- The Office of the Co-ordinator, Status of Women, becomes a federal department under the title Status of Women Canada with a mission to promote gender equality and ensure the full participation of women in economic, social,

cultural and political life of the country.

1977

- Parliament adopts the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex in employment and services in federal jurisdiction. It also strongly reinforces the principle of equal pay for equal work. The *Canada Labour Code* is amended to provide a 17 week maternity leave.

1978

- The Canadian Human Rights Commission begins operation based on the principle that every individual should have an equal opportunity to live without discrimination.
- The *Canada Labour Code* is amended to prohibit dismissal or lay-off because of pregnancy.
- Air Canada hires the first female pilot – Judy Cameron.

1979

- First female students enroll in Canadian Military Colleges.
- The *Governor General's Awards in Commemoration of the "Persons Case"* are initiated on the 50th anniversary of the *Persons Case* to recognize the outstanding contributions of individuals towards

improving the status of women in Canada.

1980

- Jeanne Sauvé becomes the first female Speaker of the House of Commons.

1981

- Diane Wright becomes the first female promoted to Corporal in the RCMP.

1982

- The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* comes into force.
- Bertha Wilson becomes the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada.

1983

- The *Canadian Human Rights Act* is amended to prohibit sexual harassment and to ban discrimination on the basis of pregnancy and family or marital status.
- The federal government adopts *Bill C-127* which acknowledges the notion of "spousal rape".

1984

- Jeanne Sauvé becomes the first woman Governor General of Canada.
- Daurene Lewis is elected Mayor of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, the first Black woman to hold this office in Canada.

1985

- Section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* comes into effect guaranteeing equality for all Canadians before and under the law and equal protection and benefit of the law.
- After a long legal battle led by the Aboriginal activist Jeannette Vivian Corbière Lavell, the *Indian Act* is amended restoring status and right to band membership for native women who had lost their status through marriage to a non-Aboriginal.

1986

- The *Employment Equity Act* is introduced, applicable to Crown corporations and federally regulated businesses, to correct historic and systemic discrimination against women, Aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities and members of visible minorities.
- Canadian Sharon Adele Wood becomes the first North American woman to scale and stand atop Mount Everest.

1987

- After a lengthy debate on the role of women in the Canadian Armed Forces, the Minister of National Defense announces that all air force combat roles are now open to women, including flying fighter aircraft (such as CF-18) and tactical helicopters.

1987 (continued)

- Sheila A. Hellstrom is the first woman to reach the rank of General in the Canadian Armed Forces as a one-star Brigadier-General.

1988

- The Supreme Court of Canada strikes down the provisions of the *Criminal Code* pertaining to abortion.

1989

- Audrey McLaughlin of Yukon becomes the first woman to lead a federal political party, the New Democratic Party.
- Heather Erxelben of British Columbia is the first woman to become an infantry soldier (combat soldier) in the Canadian Armed Forces.
- Deanna “Dee” Brasseur and Jane Foster are the first two Canadian women to become fighter pilots in the Canadian Armed Forces.
- Fourteen women are tragically killed at École Polytechnique in Montréal, Quebec, because of their gender.

1991

- Louise Fréchette becomes Canada’s first female Ambassador to the United Nations.

1991 (continued)

- Rita Margaret Johnston is appointed the first woman Provincial Premier (British Columbia).
- Manon Rhéaume of Quebec is the first woman to play in the National Hockey League (NHL).
- In commemoration of the tragedy of École Polytechnique in Montréal, December 6th is declared a *National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women* by the federal government.

1992

- Catherine Anne Fraser is named first woman Chief Justice of a provincial court (Alberta).
- The concept of consent is legally defined for the first time in amendments to the *Criminal Code* provisions on sexual assault.
- Roberta Lynn Bondar of Ontario becomes the first Canadian female astronaut to travel into space aboard the space shuttle Discovery.
- The federal government commemorates the first official *Women’s History Month* in Canada.
- Canada's women's wheelchair basketball team captures the gold medal at the Stoke Mandeville Games and at the Paralympic Games in Barcelona.

1993

- Kim Campbell of British Columbia becomes the first woman to hold the job of Prime Minister of Canada.
- Catherine Callbeck becomes the first woman elected Premier of a province (Prince Edward Island).
- Sheila Copps becomes the first female Deputy Prime Minister of Canada.
- Jean Augustine becomes the first Black woman elected to the House of Commons.
- The United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna reaffirms that “*the fundamental rights of women and girls are inalienable, integral and indissociable from human rights*”. Canada is an early signatory to the *United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Violence Against Women* in 1993.
- At United Nations sessions on Human Rights in 1993, 1994 and 1995, Canada is successful in submitting resolutions to integrate the rights of women to principal mechanisms of the human rights of the United Nations.

1994

- Following a resolution submitted by Canada, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, at its 50th session, agrees to appoint a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. This Special Rapporteur will gather information on violence against women and recommend measures to eliminate this form of violence. Beginning in 1995, the Special Rapporteur reports on activities each year to the Commission on Human Rights.
- Biathlete Myriam Bédard of Quebec becomes the first Canadian woman to win two winter Olympic gold medals with victories in 7.5 km and 15 km races at Lillehammer.

1995

- Parliament adopts a revised *Employment Equity Act* which is expanded to cover the federal public service.
- *Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality* is published. The Plan constitutes a framework for federal government action to advance women's equality in Canada.
- The federal government adopts a policy requiring federal departments and agencies to conduct gender-based analysis of future policies, programs

and legislation, where appropriate.

1995 (continued)

- *Bill C-72* changes the *Criminal Code* so that intoxication is no longer accepted as a defense in cases of sexual assault and battery.
- Christine Silverberg becomes the first woman police chief in a major city in Canada with the Calgary Police Services.
- The Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) initiates a Women's March Against Poverty (the *Bread and Roses March*) where three contingents of 850 women marched for ten days to the Quebec Legislative Assembly to win action on nine demands related to economic justice. Fifteen thousand people greeted them at the end of their ten-day walk.

1996

- The *Canadian Human Rights Act* is amended to include sexual orientation as a prohibited ground of discrimination.

1997

- At the Commission on Human Rights, the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women is renewed until the year 2000.

1997 (continued)

- The federal government launches the third *Family Violence Initiative*. The objectives are to: 1) increase public awareness to the risk factors of family violence and the need for public participation to improve the situation; 2) improve the capacity of the penal justice system and the housing system to act on the problem; 3) sustain a collection of data, research and evaluations with a goal to finding effective methods of intervention.

1998

- Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women release the *Iqaluit Declaration* reaffirming their commitment to ending violence against women.
- Louise Fréchette becomes the first Canadian appointed to the position of Deputy Secretary General – the second most important position in the United Nations.

1999

- Beverley McLachlin of Alberta becomes the first female Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada.
- Adrienne Clarkson, a Chinese refugee from Hong Kong, becomes the second woman to hold the post of Governor General of Canada.

1999 (continued)

- The Supreme Court upholds *Bill C-46* which restricts access to medical and psychiatric files of victims of sexual abuse. The federal law, adopted two years earlier, limits the rights of the accused in this type of situation.
- The Supreme Court of Canada unanimously affirms that “no means no” (*R. v. Ewanchuck*). The Court held that the idea of “implied consent” to sexual assault does not exist in Canadian law. The decision sent a strong message that consent to sexual activity must be voluntary and communicated. It cannot be given by a third party or motivated by fear or abuse of authority.
- Acknowledged as the “best-selling Canadian recording artist of the century”, French Canadian signer Céline Dion has sold more than 120 million albums worldwide since the beginning of her career – more than any female solo artist in the history of the music business – and earned several music industry awards from around the world such as Grammy Awards in the US, Juno and Félix Awards in Canada, and World Music Awards in Europe.

2000

- Initiated by the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) to mobilize women worldwide and to advance actions to end poverty and violence against women, the *World March of Women in the Year 2000* is officially launched on March 8, 2000.
- Nycole Turmel becomes the first woman and the first Francophone President of the Public Service Alliance of Canada.
- Canadian country/pop music singer Shania Twain’s third album, “*Come On Over*”, is certified by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) as the best-selling country album of all time. With sales of more than 17 million, Shania Twain can now lay claim to the best-selling album in history by a female solo artist.

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