
The Long March Forward

A History of Women's Rights

What is March 8, International Women's Day, meant to celebrate? Strikes by woman workers, the fight for women's suffrage, female solidarity? Women from different countries have different reasons to celebrate. Although the day seems to trace its origins back to more than one event, the true meaning of the March 8 celebration has always been clear to women down through the years. In Québec as elsewhere, International Women's Day is an opportunity to reflect on past progress and to plan future action in order that equality truly comes to pass.

Women have made exasperatingly slow, but steady progress on the march toward equality, suffering the occasional setback, but also making breakthroughs. This brief historical overview retraces the milestones that have marked the journey.

1608

At the time it was founded, Québec was no more than a trading outpost with virtually no European women. However, Europeans arriving in New France discovered native societies in which women played a very important role. In certain tribes, children's names and family possessions were passed down along the maternal line. When native men married, they moved in with their wives' families. Among certain native peoples, women held true political power.

1617

Marie Rollet, one of the first white women to set up permanent residence in Québec, was a true pioneer. She worked with her apothecary husband, Louis Hébert, the first colonist. She was followed by hundreds of other women who raised children while clearing and cultivating the land, and building their homes.

1639

Marie Guyart, who managed a shipping company in France, founded the Ursuline Convent in Québec City. Better known under the name Marie de l'Incarnation, she was the first in a line of founders of religious orders in New France who put in place what we call our educational and social service systems.

1773

Obstetricians began making their appearance in cities.

1791

The Constitutional Act of 1791 enfranchised all property owners. The threshold was rather modest and there was no distinction based on sex. Certain woman property owners were thus entitled to vote and exercised this right.

1845

An ordinance was issued prohibiting anyone who was not a physician with a university degree or who did not have the express authorization of the governor from working as an obstetrician in the cities of Québec and Montréal. Midwife training came under the control of the College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1847. The 1871 census listed approximately forty midwives. In reality, there were many more. Midwives were no longer included in the 1891 census. By the turn of the century, midwifery appeared to have disappeared completely.

1849

Women were disenfranchised. As early as 1834, the Patriotes, led by Louis-Joseph Papineau, showed they were men of their time by seeking to correct an historical anomaly and disenfranchise women.

1858

The Grey Nuns created the first day-care centers, in working class neighborhoods in Montréal, as well as in Longueuil, Saint-Jean, Québec, Saint-Jérôme and Saint-Hyacinthe. These rooms, called "asylum rooms", provided a sanctuary so that mothers could work for pay and families could survive difficult times.

1866

The loss of women's rights was confirmed in amendments to the Civil Code, which gave married women the same status, for all intents and purposes, as children and banished persons. They could no longer be the guardians of their own children, defend themselves or sue in court, or receive inheritances. They no longer had the right to a salary for work they performed. The new law would have a profound effect on perceptions and attitudes.

1869

In order to limit the transfer of Indian status, the Government of Canada decided that native women and their descendants would lose their Indian status should they marry non-natives. In addition, native women were deprived of the right to hold political positions in their communities.

1878

The teaching profession was home to increasing numbers of women, but men continued to teach advanced classes and occupy senior administrative positions. The salaries of women teachers were only 40% of those of their male counterparts.

1882

The Homestead Act provided some protection to women in certain frontier areas in the event of bankruptcy by their spouses. Husbands thus could not transfer family property without spousal consent. This law was annulled in 1909.

1887

The Knights of Labor, a union organization, published a manifesto demanding "(...) enforcement of the principle of equal pay for equal work for both sexes." The Socialist Worker's Party adopted a similar resolution in its 1894 manifesto and even demanded "(...) the right to universal suffrage without reference to religious beliefs, skin color or sex."

1888

McGill University awarded its first bachelor's degrees to women. However, the university only admitted women to its Teachers College and Faculty of Arts. Other faculties remained closed to them. Francophone universities refused outright to admit women, with one exception—they were allowed to attend lectures.

1891

By now, one woman in ten held paid employment. The most common line of work for women? Housekeeping. The choice of professions remained limited. If a woman was not a domestic, she was generally a factory worker or teacher. In cities, nearly one third of all workers were in fact women.

1892

Providing information on birth control, contraceptives and abortifacients became illegal. The government had already passed birth control and contraception legislation in 1869 making abortion a serious offense. People practicing abortions or undergoing abortions faced life imprisonment. Women who provoked their own abortions could be sentenced to seven years in prison.

1893

The first feminist organization in Québec was born. The Montreal Local Council of Women was an association with both francophone and anglophone members.

1899

On the educational front, legislation was amended to ban women from voting and running for the position of school trustee after a group of feminists attempted to have a woman elected to the Protestant Board of School Commissioners.

1900

Beginning in 1900, women could no longer attend medical school in Québec. Bishop University's Faculty of Medicine, which had accepted women, merged with McGill University's, which did not.

1902

Marie Gérin-Lajoie wrote a legal treatise for women presenting legal concepts in layman's terms, and became a resource person for feminists. With Caroline Béique, she founded the first francophone Catholic feminist organization in 1907, the Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste.

1903

Although no Canadian university accepts women in medicine, Irma LeVasseur is admitted to the Collège des médecins et chirurgiens in Québec after obtaining her doctorate in medicine in Minnesota and becomes the first Canadian woman to practice medicine in Québec thanks to a private bill.

1908

At the instigation of Mother Sainte-Anne-Marie of Notre-Dame Congregation, the equivalent of the first classical college for girls was created—the École d'enseignement supérieur (School for Higher Education). The institution changed names in 1926, when it became Marquerite-Bourgeois College. Justine Lacoste-Beaubien founded Sainte-Justine Hospital in Montréal.

1911

McGill University's Faculty of Law opened its doors to women. The first graduate, Annie Macdonald-Lagstaff, was unable to practice because the Québec Bar Association only opened its doors to women in 1941, and the Board of Notaries in 1956.

1912

Carrie Derick founded the Montreal Suffrage Association, the first organized movement devoted primarily to securing women's right to vote in federal elections.

1915

The first farm women's circle was created in the Chicoutimi region.

1918

Women obtained the right to vote in federal elections. Provincially, women received the right to vote in 1916 in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, in 1917 in British Columbia and Ontario, in 1918 in Nova Scotia, in 1919 in New Brunswick, in 1922 in Prince Edward Island and in 1925 in Newfoundland. In Québec, women had to wait another 22 years until 1940 before they could vote in provincial elections.

1921

The Comité provincial pour le suffrage féminin (Provincial Committee for Female Suffrage) took over from the Montreal Suffrage Association in rallying anglophone and francophone support for women's suffrage.

1922

McGill University's Faculty of Dentistry opened its doors to women, four years after the Faculty of Medicine.

1927

The Provincial Committee for Female Suffrage split in two, and the Alliance canadienne pour le vote des femmes au Québec (Canadian Alliance For Women's Suffrage in Québec) headed up by Idola Saint-Jean was created. In 1928, Thérèse Casgrain became the president of the Provincial Committee and, in 1929, changed its name to the Ligue des droits de la femme (League of Women's Rights).

1929

Women in Canada became "people." Under the British North America Act (Constitutional Act of 1867), the term "person" apparently did not include women. This situation had a number of consequences, including the exclusion of women from the Senate. In 1928, five women appealed to the Privy Council in London, which, after four days of deliberations, decided that the term "person" did indeed include the female sex.

Women succeeded in having a commission set up to look into their civil rights. The Dorion Commission tabled its report in 1931.

Few changes were made to the legal status of married women. The most significant reform involved married women employed outside the home, who finally obtained the right to receive their own salaries. Before this, the salaries of women married under the community of property regime could, under the law, be paid directly to their spouses, who were free to do as they pleased with the money.

1934

The needle trade experienced its first major strike, and women were at the forefront.

1936

Laure Gaudreault founded the Association des institutrices rurales (Association of Rural Woman Teachers).

1937

The Needy Mothers Assistance Act was adopted. However, women often had to take such humiliating steps as providing guarantees of their mothering ability to benefit from the Act's provisions.

1940

It wasn't until the world went back to war that Québec women obtained the right to vote in provincial elections—the result of fourteen years of efforts during which feminists travelled every year to Québec City to demand the vote.

The war forced governments to call on women to work in factories. They were told they could do any job they wanted. They were offered training in mechanics, welding and electricity. Three years later, housewives were encouraged to accept part-time jobs. In Montréal, six daycare centers were set up to make it easier for women to work outside the home.

1945

When the war ended, the government encouraged women to return home. Public daycare centers were closed. The Canadian government decided to start paying family allowances. In Québec, they were to be paid to the heads of households. Thérèse Casgrain fought hard to have the cheques sent to women, and won the battle.

1946

McGill University awarded a mechanical engineering degree to Mary B. Jackson-Fowler, the first woman admitted to the Faculty of Engineering.

1947

Beginning this year, Canadian women who married non-Canadians no longer lost their citizenship.

1951

Training in home economics reached unprecedented levels. Québec prided itself on the fact that it offered a complete educational system just for women.

1953

Mariana Beauchamp-Jodoin became the first Québec woman to be appointed to the Senate.

1954

The double standard under which a woman could not demand a separation for adultery unless the husband brought his mistress to live in the family residence was abolished. This restriction did not apply to husbands, who could obtain separations from their wives for adultery at any time.

Elsie M. Gibbons was the first woman mayor in the province of Québec. She was elected in the municipality of Portage-du-Fort (Pontiac) in 1954 and held the position until 1971.

1961

Following the death of Charles-Aimé Kirkland, the Member of the National Assembly (MNA) for Jacques-Cartier, his daughter Marie-Claire won the by-election. She became the first woman MNA and the first woman minister.

Classical colleges for girls finally received government funding. Boys colleges had been funded since 1922.

1964

Bill 16, moved by Marie-Claire Kirkland, was adopted. This famous piece of legislation ended the legal disability of married women, who no longer required the signatures of their husbands for everyday transactions. However, certain financial institutions continued to require husbands' signatures in addition to regular guarantees when women applied for loans. This practice is now illegal under Québec's Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.

The Parent Report improved access to education for girls. It recommended mixed classes and free tuition.

1966

The Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) (Québec Women's Federation) and the Association féminine d'éducation et d'action sociale (AFEAS) (Women's Educational and Affirmative Action Association) were founded.

1967

A royal commission on the status of women in Canada (Bird Commission) was set up. It brought troubling information to light on the discrimination and poverty suffered by women. For example, at the time, the average income for men over 65 was \$3,044, while that of older women was only \$1,596. In 1970, the Bird Commission tabled a report calling for institutional and de facto equality.

1968

It was the Government of Québec's turn to begin paying family allowances. The federal parliament adopted the Divorce Act, which would remain virtually unchanged for eighteen years.

1969

The Social Aid Act was adopted. This law, which came into force on November 1, 1970, made it possible for single mothers to receive benefits without undergoing the humiliations of the old Needy Mothers Assistance Act.

Hospitals could legally perform abortions when a woman's physical or mental health was in jeopardy. Abortions had to be performed in a hospital setting and be authorized by a therapeutic abortion committee, or they were considered illegal.

The Montreal Women's Liberation Movement was founded, and supported the opening of Dr. Morgentaler's first clinic. Promoting contraceptive products was no longer illegal.

The Front de libération des femmes (FLF) (Women's Liberation Front) was founded. The revolutionary feminist group argued that women could only be liberated if society underwent sweeping changes.

1970

The legal regime of community of property was replaced by a regime of partnership of acquests combining the benefits of separation of property during marriage and the community of property when a marriage ended.

1971

Women obtained the right to serve as jurors after a demonstration organized by the Front de libération des femmes during the trial of Paul Rose. The FLF also published the first issue of *Québécoises deboutte !*, a feminist newsletter that would become the mouthpiece of the Women's Centre the following year.

To celebrate March 8, the FLF launched a Québec-wide campaign for free abortions on demand.

1972

The Montreal Women's Centre was created. It set up an abortion clinic and published a planned parenthood manifesto in conjunction with other groups.

Despite winning the right to sit in the House of Commons in 1920, it wasn't until 1972 that Quebecers Monique Bégin, Albanie Morin and Jeanne Sauvé were elected.

1973

The Conseil du statut de la femme (CSF) in Québec and the Council on the Status of Women in Ottawa were created.

1975

The United Nations declared 1975 International Women's Year.

In Québec, the adoption of the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms made sex-based discrimination officially illegal for the very first time.

1976

Family planning clinics were gradually set up in community health centers (CLSCs).

1977

Funding was provided to shelters for battered women.

1978

The Conseil du statut de la femme drew up a comprehensive policy on the status of women containing 306 recommendations: *Pour les Québécoises: Égalité et indépendance* (Equality and Independence for the Women of Québec). A number of the recommendations were implemented by the Québec government.

Since 1971, the federal unemployment insurance program had provided fifteen weeks of maternity leave to working women. In order to better protect the jobs of working women, the Government of Québec amended the Minimum Wage Act in 1978 to provide eighteen weeks of maternity leave.

1979

Lise Payette became the first woman minister responsible for the Status of Women. The Office des services de garde à l'enfance (Child Daycare Board) was created.

Claire L'Heureux-Dubé became the first woman judge appointed to the Québec Court of Appeal.

1979–80

Regional seminars on violence against women and children were organized throughout Québec. They provided a first opportunity to raise awareness among stakeholders.

A support payment collection service was created. Collection, however, was not automatic.

Following pressure from AFEAS and the Association des femmes collaboratrices (an association of wives in family businesses), salaries paid to women in family businesses owned by their husbands became eligible for income tax deductions. Such salaries, which had to be privately negotiated, remained relatively uncommon.

1981

Bill 89 amending the Civil Code came into force. Spousal equality was recognized. Women would henceforth keep their maiden names and pass them on to their children. The family residence was protected. The reform also recognized the exceptional contribution that one spouse makes to the enrichment of the other by introducing the compensatory allowance. However, courts rarely recognized the value of work performed by homemakers.

A grid for assessing discriminatory stereotypes in new school textbooks was developed and put into effect.

Under the Act respecting occupational health and safety, pregnant and breastfeeding women with hazardous working conditions could ask to be transferred to another workstation or, if this was impossible, to take time off while receiving CSST benefits.

1982

The Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms was amended to include, among other things, the prohibition of discrimination based on pregnancy. A new article of the Charter prohibited all forms of harassment. In 1982, 179 cases of sex-based discrimination were brought before the Commission.

Bertha Wilson was the first woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada.

1983

The Canadian government adopted Bill C-127. Sexual aggression would henceforth be judged on its aggression aspect under the section of the Criminal Code dealing with offences against the person and reputation. Spouses could also be charged with sexual aggression.

The Conseil du statut de la femme organized the Forum sur la force économique des femmes (Forum on the Economic Power of Women) in Montréal.

The Cinema Act led numerous women's groups to issue statements and take action to denounce pornography.

1985

The articles of the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms authorizing the introduction of affirmative action programs were enacted. The Charter forced the Québec government to implement such programs in its own departments. However, private enterprise was exempted from such strictures unless discrimination could be proved.

The Conférence nationale sur la sécurité économique des Québécoises, Décisions 85 (National Conference on the Economic Security of Québec Women) was held.

1986

The reform of the Divorce Act came into effect on June 1. Marriage breakdown became the sole cause for divorce, thus eliminating the notion of fault, and spouses could jointly file for divorce. The legislation also introduced new rules governing support payments and child custody.

1987

The Conseil du statut de la femme organized the International Forum on New Reproductive Technologies. For the CSF, reproductive technologies were a new sector where women's rights were at risk and required protecting.

The Canadian government adopted Bill C-31, which restored rights to native women that had been lost in 1869. Native women who married whites could now keep their native status and pass it on to their children.

Claire L'Heureux-Dubé became the first woman from Québec to be appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada.

1988

The Supreme Court declared that article 251 of the Criminal Code—which made abortion illegal—was unconstitutional on the grounds that it ran counter to the dispositions of the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.

Statistics revealed that family violence affected one household in ten. The Québec government reacted by launching a vast information and awareness campaign under the theme *La violence conjugale, c'est inacceptable* (Family Violence Is Unacceptable).

1989

With its ruling in the Daigle-Tremblay affair, the Supreme Court confirmed that a third party, even a presumed father, could not oppose a woman's decision to have an abortion.

Negotiations in the public sector were marked by significant progress toward pay equity. Approximately 19,000 civil servants, mostly women, had their salaries adjusted in keeping with the principle of "equal pay for equal work." But for most women, pay equity was still just a pipe dream. Women working full time earned less than 65% of the average man's salary. This discrepancy had remained unchanged since 1980.

The National Assembly adopted a bill to promote economic equality between spouses. The legislation officially confirmed marriage as an economic partnership, and provided for the equal sharing of family assets between spouses in the event of marriage breakdown.

On December 6, 1989, a man screaming, "You're all feminists. I hate feminists!", killed fourteen young female engineering students at the École Polytechnique de Montréal. The tragedy reopened the debate on violence against women.

1990

Québec authorized the practice of midwifery in pilot projects in hospitals and healthcare facilities.

The federal government amended the Unemployment Insurance Act. Ten weeks of parental benefits, which could be paid to either the mother or father or shared between the two parents, were added to the fifteen weeks of maternity benefits available to working women.

In April, thousands of Québec women took part in discussions and celebrations surrounding the 50th anniversary of their winning the right to vote.

1991

In keeping with its family policy, the Government of Québec improved the sections of the Act respecting labour standards dealing with maternity and parenthood. To supplement the eighteen-week unpaid maternal leave of absence, the amended legislation added a period of unpaid parental leave up to a maximum of thirty-four weeks that either the father or mother could take advantage of following a birth or adoption. The same legislation introduced provisions to improve the working conditions of part-time employees.

As a result of the Polytechnique massacre, December 6 was proclaimed National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.

1992

A bill amending the Criminal Code introduced new rules governing proof of the prior sexual history of women plaintiffs, and defined the notion of consensual sex to ensure fairer treatment of sexually assaulted women.

The federal government abolished universal family allowances. As of January 1993, only low income families were eligible for assistance.

With no public announcement, Québec withdrew maternity benefits from middle class working women (gross family income of \$55,000 and over). These benefits had been used to compensate for the two-week delay before working women began receiving maternity benefits from the unemployment insurance scheme.

In late May, over 1,000 women from around Québec assembled in Montréal to draft the main outlines of a feminist plan for society. The meeting, entitled *Un Québec féminin pluriel* (A Feminine Pluralist Québec), was an initiative of the Fédération des femmes du Québec and was organized with the cooperation of representatives from various community groups and associations.

1993

For the first time in the history of Canada, a woman led the country. After serving as Minister of Justice and Minister of National Defence, Kim Campbell was elected Conservative Party leader and appointed Prime Minister. In Québec, Monique Gagnon-Tremblay became the first woman Minister of Finance.

The Immigration and Refugee Board issued new directives on the enforcement of the Immigration Act to enable women to apply for refugee status if they feared persecution because of their sex. Significantly, Canada was the only country to have adopted such a provision.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women issued the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, while the United Nations Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution incorporating the rights of women into human rights mechanisms. The resolution included the possibility of appointing a Special Rapporteur with responsibility for gathering information on violence against women around the world.

As the Conseil du statut de la femme celebrated its 20th anniversary, the Government of Québec adopted its new policy on the status of women including a proposed new law on pay equity.

1994

The first birthing houses where midwives could practice their profession on an experimental basis opened their doors. The Federal Court of Appeal ruled in favor of Susan Thibaudeau, who had been fighting the support payment provisions of the Income Tax Act, saying they were discriminatory.

The Church of England, in a progressive move, ordained 32 women priests, while the Roman Catholic Church closed the door on any further discussion of the subject. In Vienna at the International Conference on Human Rights, the final text officially—and for the first time ever—accorded distinct recognition to women's rights. In Cairo, the International Conference on Population and Development organized by the UN spotlighted more than ever the need for improved education for women—especially in the area of contraception—in order to slow burgeoning population growth in developing countries.

1995

The “Bread and Roses” March from May 26 to June 4 was a major event that attracted great interest and support. Hundreds of women marchers, met by thousands of women and men at destination, carried nine demands for improving the economic status of women to the very doors of Québec's National Assembly. The Government of Québec agreed to act on their demands.

The National Assembly unanimously adopted the Act to facilitate the payment of support, which set up a universal, automatic support collection scheme. The legislation progressively came into force beginning on December 1, 1995, for orders issued as of that date, and in Spring 1996 for all remaining orders in default of payment.

The 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing succeeded in hammering out a broad-based action platform for governments to implement on a voluntary basis. The platform—the result of long negotiations and compromises made necessary by the differing cultural and religious convictions of the various delegations—contained a number of major gains, including recognition of the sexual and reproductive rights of women, the need to eliminate all forms of violence against women, and the equal right of daughters to family inheritances.

After twenty-two years of existence, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women was disbanded by the federal government. Some of its activities and part of the Women's Program were taken over by Status of Women Canada (SWC).

The Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the state had the right to tax child support payments received by ex-spouses, bringing an end to Susan Thibaudeau's long legal saga. However, the federal and Québec governments promised to amend the laws she had challenged.

On December 6, 1995, the Government of Québec released its policy on family violence. Some fifty measures were proposed, including informing victims when their aggressors are released from prison, setting up victim/witness waiting rooms in courthouses, providing continuing education for police officers and, lastly, seizing firearms belonging to violent spouses at the time of their arrest.

1996

The Pay Equity Act was adopted by the National Assembly. This law requires companies with ten or more employees to correct pay inequities that women employees suffer because of their sex.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban take over and decide to ban women from working or going to school, force them to wear the burka, and impose a strict separation between men and women.

1997

The Supreme Court of Canada refused to recognize the fetus as a person with legal rights. This was the third time that the highest court in the land had ruled that the fetus had no legal status under current legislation.

The Canadian and Québec governments decided to make support payments for children nontaxable. They also adopted a model for setting the level of support payments for children. The Government of Québec's new family policy introduced full-time kindergarten. It also set daycare fees at \$5 a day for children 4 years of age, and included provisions to make \$5-a-day places progressively available to younger children.

A family mediation bill was adopted. The legislation obliged couples with children who could not agree on one or more aspects of the dissolution of their marriages to take part in family mediation information sessions.

The Conseil du statut de la femme organized a series of activities to mark its 25th anniversary. The theme was Le Conseil du statut de la femme : un allié vers l'égalité (The Council on the Status of Women: An Ally in the Fight for Equality).

1998

The profession of midwifery is finally recognized in Québec. The Canadian Firearms Act, long awaited by organizations concerned with violence against women, comes into effect.

For the first time, women make up one third of the Quebec government's cabinet. Linda Goupil becomes the first female Minister of Justice.

1999

Juanita Westmoreland-Traoré becomes the first black woman judge of the Court of Québec, and Beverly McLachlin, the first woman Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada. Julie Payette becomes the first Québec woman in space on a space shuttle flight immediately preceding the first one commanded by a woman. The Federal Court upholds a decision of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, siding with some 200,000 government employees demanding pay equity.

2000

The World March of Women is a historic event that stretches far beyond Québec's borders. Some 30,000 demonstrators from associations, community groups, and labor organizations join the Fédération des femmes du Québec and take part in the World March of Women 2000 in Montréal to denounce violence and poverty. This mass rally of solidarity concludes in New York, where millions of women from some 150 countries deliver a petition to the UN to ensure that their demands result in concrete measures for women all over the world.

2001

Bill 143, an Act respecting access to equal employment in public bodies, comes into effect. This bill requires programs to be set up to eliminate barriers to the hiring and promotion of women and seek equitable participation by women in the various job categories and professions.

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan comes to an end. Afghan women are freed from the daily oppression of fundamentalists and regain their dignity and a measure of freedom. The new interim government has 30 members, including one female deputy and one female minister.

2002

Francine Ruest-Jutras is elected as the first woman president of Union des municipalités du Québec.

Louise Harel becomes the first female president of the National Assembly in 210 years of Québec parliamentary history.

2003

Shirin Ebadi becomes the first Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

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