

Highlighting some historic gains for women in Canada

Although women in Canada did not become “persons” under the law until 1929, they have been leaders in advancing women’s rights and freedoms at home and around the globe.

Here is an overview of some historic Canadian milestones that transformed the landscape for women in our society, in politics, and in the workplace.

During World War I, thousands of women worked in Canadian factories, agriculture and the trades to keep the economy moving while the men fought overseas. Others worked as nurses and ambulance drivers on the frontlines of the war.

Women have long been at the forefront of the labour movement, organizing for unions, lobbying for workplace health and safety protections, and protesting against sweatshop working conditions.

Their activism intensified in 1911 after the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, where hundreds of garment workers were trapped inside a burning high-rise building in New York City.

Their employer had locked the stairwell doors, emergency exits were blocked, and the elevators broke from fire and heat damage and desperate workers overcrowding them in an attempt to escape the smoke and flames. There was no sprinkler system.

In the end, 146 workers (123 women and girls, and 23 men) lost their lives. It led to sweeping legislative changes to factory safety standards, and the growth of membership and visibility of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU).

EARLY TRAILBLAZERS

Mary Ann Shadd Cary. Jenny Trout. Clara Brett Martin. Emma Baker. Cairine Wilson. Charlotte Whitton. Elsie Knott. Nellie J. Cournoyea. Daurene Lewis. Jean Augustine.

Do you recognize any of those names?

Probably not. But these women are pioneers in creating opportunities for those who came after them. They represent monumental “firsts” that have helped break the glass ceiling for women to achieve greater equality – socially, economically, politically.

They opened doors for women to access post-secondary education, pursue careers of their choice, exercise their democratic right to vote in elections, and have agency over their own bodies.

The 10 names listed above barely scratch the surface of all the iconic women in this country, but they are some of Canada's earliest trailblazers.

So, what did these women accomplish?

- Activist **Mary Ann Shadd Cary** launched *The Provincial Freeman* in 1853, becoming the first Black woman in North America and first woman in Canada to publish a newspaper. She fought for equality, racial integration, and an end to slavery.
- **Jenny Trout** became the first woman doctor to be licensed in Canada in 1875. At the time, few women were allowed entry into medical schools so many practised as unlicensed doctors.
- **Clara Brett Martin** became Canada's first woman lawyer in 1897.
- **Emma Baker** became the first woman to receive a PhD from a Canadian university in 1903.
- **Cairine Wilson** became Canada's first woman Senator in 1930.
- As mayor of Ottawa in 1951, **Charlotte Whitton** became Canada's first woman mayor.
- **Elsie Knott** became chief of the Anishinaabe Curve Lake First Nation in 1954, making her the first woman in Canada to serve as chief of a First Nation.
- **Nellie J. Cournoyea** of the Northwest Territories became the first woman and Indigenous woman elected as leader of a Canadian territory in 1991. She was elected as an MLA in 1979.
- Elected as mayor of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia in 1984, **Daurene Lewis** became the first Black woman mayor in all of North America.
- In 1993, **Jean Augustine** became the first African-Canadian woman elected to the House of Commons, and appointed to a federal Cabinet position. This was the same year **Kim Campbell** became Canada's first woman Prime Minister.

Closer to home, Vancouver suffragist **Mary Ellen Smith** was the first woman elected to B.C.'s Legislative Assembly in 1918, and was later appointed to Cabinet.

In 1972, B.C. MLA **Rosemary Brown** became the first Black woman elected to provincial office, while B.C.'s **Rita Johnson** became Canada's first female provincial premier in 1991.

And in 2016, NDP MLA **Melanie Mark** became the first First Nations MLA and cabinet minister in British Columbia.

OTHER NATIONAL MILESTONES

- **Agnes Macphail** is the first woman elected to Canada's House of Commons in 1921.
- **Ellen Fairclough** becomes the first woman to serve in the federal cabinet in 1957.
- **Jeanne Sauvé** is the first woman to be appointed Governor General of Canada in 1984.
- NDP's **Audrey McLaughlin** makes history in 1989 as the first woman leader of a federal political party with representation in the House of Commons.
- **Dr. Roberta Bondar** takes flight on the Space Shuttle Discovery to become the first Canadian woman astronaut in 1992.
- **Beverley McLachlin** is appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada in 2000.
- **Michaëlle Jean** is the first Haitian-Canadian and Black person appointed Governor General of Canada in 2005.
- **Kathy Dunderdale** was elected the first woman premier of Newfoundland and Labrador in 2010.
- **Karen Jensen** is appointed as Canada's first Pay Equity Commissioner in 2019.
- **Mary Simon** becomes the first Indigenous Governor General of Canada in 2021.

Leading the women's suffrage movement in Canada, the "**Famous Five**" – **Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby** and **Henrietta Muir Edwards** – embarked on a Supreme Court of Canada challenge in 1927 after the *British North America Act* refused to include women as "persons".

They were successful in changing the law and paving the way for women's equality.

LEGISLATIVE AMENDMENTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

1929 – the British Privy Council declares women are “persons” under the law, and are now deemed eligible for Canadian Senator appointments. (Cairine Wilson is appointed the following year).

1946 – Fighting for racial equality, Civil Rights icon **Viola Desmond** was jailed and fined for sitting in a whites-only section of a Nova Scotia movie theatre. Her face is now on the Canadian \$10 bill, and she is often referred to as the “Rosa Parks of Canada”.

1967 – the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada is created.

1971 – *Canadian Labour Code* amendments introduce paid maternity leave, equal pay for equal work language, and prohibit discrimination based on sex and marital status.

1977 – the *Canadian Human Rights Act* becomes law, advancing pay equity and protecting women from gender discrimination.

1981 – the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* enshrines women’s equality.

1986 – the federal *Employment Equity Act* becomes law.

1988 – the Supreme Court of Canada legalizes abortion.

1996 – amendments to Canada’s *Human Rights Act* prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.

2005 – Canada legalizes same-sex marriage under the *Civil Marriage Act*.

2012 – Canada successfully lobbies allies in the United Nations to designate the annual *International Day of the Girl* (October 11).

2015 – Prime Minister Justin Trudeau unveils the first gender-balanced Cabinet in history, and launches the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

2017 – the *Canadian Human Rights Act* includes “gender identity or expression” as protected grounds from discrimination.

2022 – the Canadian government endorses a 10-year National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence.

THE RIGHT TO VOTE

Manitoba was the first province in Canada to extend voting rights to women in 1916, followed a few months later by Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia (1917), but it took decades for Indigenous women and women of colour to achieve voting equality across the country.

Voting rights for women varied from province to province and territory to territory, and also by race and status (including marital or property-ownership). Québec was the last province to grant women the franchise in 1940, followed by the Northwest Territories in 1951, and Nunavut in 1999.

On January 1, 1919, white women and black women in Canada were granted equal federal voting rights to men. Asian and Indigenous women were still excluded.

It wasn't until 1948 that all Asian Canadians could vote federally, regardless of provincial restrictions. Two years later, in 1950, Inuit were granted federal voting rights.

And in 1960, First Nations men and women could vote without giving up their status, regardless of where they lived.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

B.C. Labour Heritage

<https://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/18-historic-milestones-and-incredible-women-in-bc-labour/>

The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike: Organizing Women Workers <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25139909>

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, 1911 New York

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangle_Shirtwaist_Factory_fire

Winnipeg General Strike, 1919

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/winnipeg-general-strike>

Dressmakers' Strike, 1931 Toronto

<https://definingmomentscanada.ca/all-for-9/historical-articles/dressmakers-strike/>

The Fleck Strike, 1978 garment workers in London, Ontario

<https://riseupfeministarchive.ca/activism/issues-actions/the-fleck-strike-the-womens-strike-that-changed-labour-law-and-the-labour-movement/>

Status of Women: <https://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/en.html>

Migrante BC: <https://www.migrantworkersrights.net/en/actors/migrante-bc>

National Inquiry MMIWG final report: <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/>