



# NOVEMBER SPECIFIC REPORT: GENDER EQUALITY IN CANADA



1. 'International Women's Day: 10 Interesting Facts' (University of Toronto) <<https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/News/IWDFacts.html>> accessed 29 November 2021.

GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE  
NORTH AMERICA TEAM

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## Introduction

The concept of gender equality is regarded as a fundamental right in many nations today and is considered by many to be an absolute necessity in order to create a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, gender equality is defined as equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for all genders and contains a wide spectrum of constituents such as but not limited to the right to liberty and security, right to education and work, and the right to be not discriminated against<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, the concept of gender equality applies to all people, regardless of their gender. It aims to eliminate the barriers between different genders through rights and protections created by international and national legal systems as endorsed by national and international courts and tribunals. However, it is an acknowledged fact that women, transgender, and non-binary people have been more vulnerable to and at a higher risk of discrimination on the basis of their gender in every country since the beginning of history.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of gender equality finds its roots in the idea of equal treatment and non-discrimination. Nearly all human rights instruments prohibit discrimination in treatment (direct discrimination) as well as in outcome (indirect discrimination).<sup>5</sup> Further, it should be particularly emphasised that the classification of people may be inevitable in certain situations. The legitimacy of such classifications is often determined by questioning whether or not the differential treatment can be justified on any grounds. In order to answer this question, most judges will look at whether the differential treatment pursued a legitimate aim in a proportionate manner.<sup>6</sup> Certain groups, such as women, might have been treated unfairly over the years and, thus, might need a higher level of protection granted by law enforcement and judiciary in order to overcome historical patterns of disadvantage. For instance, gender quota limitations on companies and organisations that are imposed by the law might appear to many as being discriminatory towards men; however, they are justified through the reasoning that women often face more barriers when it comes to finding education or work as a result of having suffered from years of unjustified discrimination.<sup>7</sup>

2. Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' (United Nations) <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>> accessed 29 November 2021.

3. Concepts and Definitions' (UN Women) <<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/conceptsanddefinitions.htm>> accessed 29 November 2021.

4. See e.g. 'The struggle of trans and gender-diverse persons' (United Nations Human Rights) <<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/SexualOrientationGender/Pages/struggle-trans-gender-diverse.aspx>> accessed 30 November 2021; 'The Facts About Gender-Based Violence' (Canadian Women's Foundation, October 29 2021) <<https://canadianwomen.org/the-facts/gender-based-violence/>> accessed 30 November 2021.

5. Daniel Moeckli, 'Equality and Non-Discrimination' in Daniel Moeckli and others (eds), *International Human Rights Law* (3rd edn, OUP 2018) p 148.

6. *Ibid.*

7. See e.g. Angela Dorrough, Christa Nater, and Monika Leszczyńska, 'What are the positive and negative side effects of gender quotas?' (The Inquisitive Mind) <<https://www.in-mind.org/article/what-are-the-positive-and-negative-side-effects-of-gender-quotas>> accessed 30 November 2021.

Similar to international law, Canadian law prohibits discrimination and differential treatment on the basis of gender.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, Section 28 of the Canadian Human Rights Act of 1977 reads that all Canadians have the right to equal opportunity, fair and equal treatment, and an environment free of discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, marital status, and family status.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, in Canada, the month of October has been dedicated to women, girls, and gender equality since 1992, a month within which the outstanding achievements of Canadian women and girls are celebrated.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, there is much more to be done in order to achieve real equality as statistics show that the rates of gender-based violence, gender pay gap and sexual assault and harassment against women in Canada remain to be relatively and surprisingly high<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, some of the ongoing human rights problems regarding gender discrimination in Canada will be discussed in the present report. First, the history of women's rights will be briefly explained, followed by an extensive description and discussion of the legal framework for women's rights and gender equality in Canada. The focus will be on women's rights in general. However, special attention will be given to the rights of women coming from other minority backgrounds such as Indigenous, disabled, and transgender communities. Finally, issues discussed throughout the report will be summarised in the concluding remarks.

8. See e.g. UN General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 18 December 1979, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1249, <<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3970.html>> accessed 15 December 2021.

9. Rights of Women, (Government of Canada, 25 October 2017) <<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/rights-women.html>> accessed 30 November 2021.

10. '2021 Women's History Month Theme' (Government of Canada, October 1 2021). <<https://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/en/commemorations-celebrations/womens-history-month/2021-theme.html>> accessed 30 November 2021.

11. See e.g. 'About Gender-based Violence' (Government of Canada, 10 May 2021) <<https://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/en/gender-based-violence-knowledge-centre/about-gender-based-violence.html#statistics>> accessed 30 November 2021; 'Gender wage gap' (OECD, 2021) <<https://data.oecd.org/earnwage/gender-wage-gap.htm>> accessed 30 November 2021.

## The History of Women's Rights in Canada

Similar to how the change towards gender equality was initiated in almost every Western civilization, the earliest step towards achieving gender equality in Canada was taken by legalising married women's property rights over a hundred years ago.<sup>12</sup> A few years later, changes were seen in relation to the voting rights of women, followed by the labour inclusion of women at last. As of today, 50% of the Canadian Federal cabinet ministers are women.<sup>13</sup>

The earliest steps towards achieving gender equality were taken in Ontario in 1884 and Manitoba in 1900 through the passing of the Married Women's Property Act which gave married women the same legal rights as men.<sup>14</sup> This meant that women could now enter into legally binding agreements and buy property. Other provinces followed slowly, and as a result of Quebec signing the Married Women's Property Act in 1964, the Civil Code of Quebec was amended to give married women full legal and property rights.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, one aspect worth mentioning is the interpretation of the term 'persons' under the famous British North America Act of 1867 since it created ambiguity as to whether or not women were included by the term. Although the Supreme Court of Canada first ruled that the definition of 'persons' under the British North America Act did not include women, an appeal to the Privy Council made it clear that women were considered as 'persons' under the law and, thus, opened the way for further social change with regards gender equality.<sup>16</sup>

Canadian women were denied the right to vote in provincial and federal elections at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>17</sup> The situation changed in 1916 when women won the right to vote in provincial elections in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. British Columbia and Ontario followed shortly after in 1917.<sup>18</sup> In the same year, Canada passed the War-time Elections Act, which gave the right to vote to militant women and women who had male relatives fighting in World War I.<sup>19</sup> Although all Caucasian women had the right to vote in federal elections by 1918, minority groups and women from other backgrounds were nevertheless denied such a right until approximately the mid-1900s.<sup>20</sup> In 1937, the right to vote was extended to certain minority groups, and, by 1960, all Canadians were granted the right to vote, including Indigenous women and men.<sup>21</sup>

12. 'Rights of Women' (Government of Canada) <<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/rights-women.html#a2>> accessed 30 November 2021.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

In 1951, the Fair Employment Practises Act and the Female Employees Fair Remuneration Act were enacted in Ontario, amounting to one of the most important steps taken towards gender equality in the Canadian workforce.<sup>22</sup> Fines were implemented to provide women with equal pay for work of equal value, and a system for complaints was created through these acts that were designated to combat discrimination at the workplace. Canada's other provinces and territories followed Ontario and shortly adopted similar acts.

Today, Canada is known to be one of the most well-achieved states with regards to promoting and ensuring respect for gender equality and human rights. In fact, Canada was one of the first countries to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.<sup>23</sup> However, the mere fact that problems related to gender equality continue to exist on such a wide scale in Canada today, over a hundred years since the instigation of the earliest steps taken towards achieving gender equality, demonstrate that further social change is needed to promote respect for equality and eliminate barriers that Canadian women face every day.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid

## The Legal Framework for Women's Rights under the Canadian Legal System

The notion of equal rights play an extremely relevant role in protecting women and their basic human rights given the discriminatory treatment they have suffered throughout history. With that purpose, the legal framework available for protecting equal rights in Canada provides a number of instruments.

### a. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom (hereinafter, the Canadian Charter) sets basic constitutional protections to individual human rights, ones which apply to relationships between the individual and its government.<sup>24</sup> Private relationships, i.e. relations between individuals, are covered in certain areas by the Canadian Human Rights Act (hereinafter, the Humans Rights Act).<sup>25</sup> The issue of equality and non-discriminatory treatment is enshrined in the Canadian Charter mainly in two sections:

**Section 15** safeguards the equal protection and benefit of the law “without discrimination [...] based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability”.<sup>26</sup> The extension of this section has been expanded by Court decisions in order to prohibit discrimination on other grounds, such as citizenship, marital status and sexual orientation.

**Section 28** ensures that all the rights protected under the Charter ought to apply to men and women on an equal basis.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the Human Rights Act states that all Canadians have the right to equality, equal opportunity, fair treatment, and an environment free of discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, marital status and family status.

### International Human Rights Protection

In addition to supporting the principles outlined in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, Canada has subscribed to seven United Nations human rights treaties.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it must submit reports on the different measures taken for implementing each of these treaties.

24. Canada: Constitution Acts, 1867 to 1982

25. Canadian Human Rights Act, 1985

26. Canada: Constitution Acts, 1867 to 1982, s 15

27. Canada: Constitution Acts, 1867 to 1982, s 28

28. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (accession by Canada in 1970); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (accession by Canada in 1976); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ratified by Canada in 1976); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (ratified by Canada in 1981); Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (ratified by Canada in 1987); Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Canada in 1991); Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified by Canada in 2010).



Unlike other legal systems, Canada operates according to a dualist model. This means that a treaty that has been signed and ratified by the executive branch still requires incorporation into domestic law to be enforceable at the national level. Herein, it is important to note that international law is an entirely separate mechanism from domestic law, and sometimes the two can even be in conflict with one another.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, any ratification discussion in Canada is considered incomplete without a discussion of how to implement it at a domestic level, and thus make the international treaty enforceable under Canadian law.

### **Specific Rights: Rights of Indigenous Women**

Indigenous women (First Nations, Metis and Inuit women) have had to endure several socio-economic issues as consequences of colonisation, a history which has imposed a euro-centric male-controlled system of government on Indigenous society.<sup>30</sup>

A clear example of the discriminatory treatment Indigenous women have endured for over a century is the Indian Act of 1876. Until very recently, Indigenous women were deprived of their Indian status upon marriage to a non-Indian man, while Indian men were entitled to bestow status on their non-Indian wives.<sup>31</sup> Thus, marrying “out” has literally meant to be exiled from their communities, their rights and ties to their families, cultures, as well as their identities.

According to McIvor (2004), since 1869, colonialist and patriarchal federal laws, such as the Indian Act, have “fostered patriarchy in Aboriginal communities and subjected Aboriginal women to loss of Indian status and the benefits of band membership, eviction from reserve home, and denial of an equal share of matrimonial property”.<sup>32</sup>

In the early 1970s, several cases were set in legal motion to tackle the dominance of male leadership and participation in First Nations' organisations.<sup>33</sup> The *Canada v. Lavell* and *Isaac v. Bedard* cases in the Supreme Court of Canada (1974), and the *Lovelace v. Canada* case before the United Nations Human Rights Committee (1977), argued that the Indian Act was not compliant with the Canadian Bill of Rights and its prohibition against discrimination on the basis of sex.<sup>34</sup> In *Lovelace v. Canada* it was also argued that it violated Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is the right not to be denied the enjoyment of one's own culture and language.<sup>35</sup>

29. Library of Parliament, *Canada's Approach to the Treaty-Making Process* (HillStudies 2020)

30. Miriam McNab, 'Indigenous Women's Issues in Canada' (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 30 April 2020) <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/native-womens-issues>> accessed 30 November 2021

31. Native Women's Association of Canada, 'Aboriginal Women's Rights Are Human Rights' (NWAC, 1999) <<https://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2000-NWAC-Aboriginal-Womens-Rights-Are-Human-Rights-Research-Paper.pdf>> accessed 30 November 2021

32. Sharon McIvor, 'Aboriginal Women Unmasked: Using Equality Litigation to Advance Women's Rights' [2004] Can. J. Women & L. 16

33. Rauna Kuokkanen, 'Self-Determination and Indigenous Women's Rights at the Intersection of International Human Rights' [2012] Human Rights Quarterly 34

34. *Canada v. Lavell & Isaac v. Bedard* [1974] S.C.R. 1349 (Can.); *Sandra Lovelace v. Canada*, Communication No. R.6/24, adopted 29 Dec. 1977, U.N. GAOR, Hum. Rts. Comm., at 166, U.N. Doc. A/36/40 (1981); Bonita Lawrence, "Real" Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood 56-58 (2004); NWAC, supra note 37, at 8-9.

35. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR)

In 1985, Bill C-31 changed the Indian Act by bringing it in line with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This amendment allows women who “married out”—and those who lost their Indian Status by other means—to apply for the restoration of their status and rights.<sup>36</sup> This amendment also applies to the children of those who have lost their Indian Status. Since the 1985 amendments to the Indian Act, the number of registered Indigenous peoples in Canada has more than tripled, from approximately 360,000 in 1985 to more than 1,008,955 in 2019.<sup>37</sup>

### **Discriminatory treatment of (Im)migrant Women**

According to the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, all non-Indigenous Canadians are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. However, the term “immigrant” is often used to refer to racialised minorities who are considered as “others”.<sup>38</sup>

In 2020, more than half of the people who migrated to Canada were women,<sup>39</sup> mostly from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.<sup>40</sup> These migrant women face various forms of systematic discrimination when arriving in Canada and, due to the fact that they often migrate as dependents of men or by accompanying family members, they are considered to be a “trail” of their spouses, have few qualifications and being unable engage in paid work.<sup>41</sup> Given those factors, it is assumed that they are only suitable for “low-skill” jobs, creating a false narrative that is important to debunk.

The intersectional forms of discrimination that migrant women have to endure call for the need for a more present federal government that could support them and bring visibility to the many obstacles that lay in their path. Despite the many programs present in the Canadian system that attempt to tackle such issues, few seem to truly comprehend the complexity of migrant women's position.<sup>42</sup>

Migrant women frequently experience unfair treatment in the workplace, and, in many cases, sexism and racism forces those with professional qualifications to “deskill” themselves in order to find employment.<sup>43</sup> Not only that, women in temporary work programs often face low wages, poor conditions, and sexual and racial harassment, lack of overtime pay access to healthcare, as well as many difficulties regarding access to settlement services.<sup>44</sup>

36. Miriam McNab, 'Indigenous Women's Issues in Canada' (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 30 April 2020) <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/native-womens-issues>> accessed 30 November 2021

37. Lucy Jeudy, 'Number of registered Indians in Canada from 2000 to 2019' (Statista, 6 July 2021) <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/538050/registered-indian-population-in-canada/>> accessed 30 November 2021

38. Alexandra Dobrowolsky, Sedef Arat-Koç & Christina Gabriel, '(Im)migrant women in Canada' (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2018) <<https://www.criaw-icref.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Immigrant-Women-in-Canada.pdf>> accessed 30 November 2021

39. In 2020, Canada received 141,046 male migrants versus 143,341 female migrants (Statista, 2020)

40. Alexandra Dobrowolsky, Sedef Arat-Koç & Christina Gabriel, '(Im)migrant women in Canada' (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2018) <<https://www.criaw-icref.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Immigrant-Women-in-Canada.pdf>> accessed 30 November 2021

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

## Pay Gap

According to the 1995 **Employment Equity Act**,<sup>45</sup> Canadians have the right to be treated fairly in workplaces. Employment equity promotes equitable representation for the following designated groups in Canada: women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of visible minorities.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, this Act establishes that Canadians have the right to experience workplace compensation practices that are free from gender-based discrimination.

Additionally, the 2009 **Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act**<sup>47</sup> serves as a human rights legislation affirming that women in the federal public sector should receive equal pay for work of equal value. The Act is part of the Canadian government's compliance with the equality guarantee in the Canadian Charter.<sup>48</sup>

An important piece of data in this regard is found in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Gender Wage Gap indicator from 2020 in which **Canada is ranked as having the 8th highest gender pay gap** out of a list of 43 countries examined by the OECD.<sup>49</sup> Statistics Canada notes that some measurement tools do not account for the fact that full-time working women tend to work fewer hours than men, often because of “family responsibilities”. Therefore, comparing the hourly pay of full-time working women to those of men provides a more accurate scenario of the pay gap in Canada. Under these parameters, women earned an average of 87 cents for every dollar earned by men in 2015 (23% less).<sup>50</sup>

As a result, by only measuring the value of each hour worked by a Canadian woman, one may conclude that the Canadian economy puts more monetary value into one hour worked by a man than one hour worked by a woman. However, by clearing other elements from the equation, the parameter evades the question regarding the socio-cultural elements that also play an important role in the existence of a pay gap in Canada. Why do full-time working Canadian women “work” fewer hours? Why do “family responsibilities” affect mostly working women rather than men and women equally? Are “family responsibilities” a subsidy of Canadian female workers to the national economy?

45. Canada: Employment Equity Act, 1995

46. 'Equality and inclusion in federally regulated industries and workplaces' (Government of Canada) <<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/workplace/human-rights.html>> accessed 30 November 2021

47. Canada: Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act, 2009

48. 'The Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act and the Reform of Pay Equity' (Government of Canada) <<https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/topics/pay/equitable-compensation/public-sector-equitable-compensation-act-reform-pay-equity.html>> accessed 30 November 2021

49. 'Gender wage gap' (OECD) <<https://data.oecd.org/earnwage/gender-wage-gap.htm>> accessed 30 November 2021

50. 'Women and Paid Work' (Statistics Canada) <<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14694-eng.htm>> accessed 30 November 2021

## Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (hereinafter, GBV) is any violence directed towards someone due to their gender expression, gender identity or perceived gender.<sup>51</sup> In addition to the sexual/gender diversities present in European countries, Canada also includes in the groups at risk of GBV the “two-spirit” people. For that reason, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (hereinafter, RCMP) website defines “women, girls, Indigenous peoples and members of the LGBTQ2S+ community” as the groups who are more at risk of experiencing GBV.<sup>52</sup> GBV can occur in a physical and/or emotional form, such as sexual assault, rape, manipulation, and criminal harassment. Although everyone can be a subject of violence, statistics show that women, girls, and gender-diverse people are at a higher risk compared to the rest of the population. More specifically, in Canada, 67% of people know a woman who has experienced physical or sexual abuse; 30% of women that are aged 15 or older report experiencing sexual assault at least once in their lives; and more than 6,000 women and children sleep in shelters because of unsafe home situations.<sup>53</sup>

Although the occurrence of GBV in Canada is lower than in most countries,<sup>54</sup> additional factors and intersectionalities such as age, geographic location, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity contribute to the existence of different realities inside the same country, exacerbating the risk and unique challenges in certain populations.<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, the real extension of this issue is yet to be determined. What is certain is that the majority of the victimisation cases experienced by women remain unreported due to shame or fear of the repercussions; therefore, it is likely that the real numbers are much higher.

Violence against women can be considered to be the embodiment of the many vulnerabilities discussed in this report. There is no one solution to this issue. However, it seems evident that the more intersectional identities a woman embodies, the more likely she will be victimised. Thus, a multidisciplinary approach that tackles economic dependency, unequal pay for equal work, the racialisation of migrant and Indigenous women, lack of healthcare and childcare support, and other factors that could contribute to women's discrimination is a must.

51. 'Gender Based Violence' (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) <<https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/relationship-violence/gender-based-violence>> accessed 30 November 2021

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. 'Global Database on Violence against Women' (UN Women) <<https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en>> accessed 30 November 2021

55. 'Gender Based Violence' (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) <<https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/relationship-violence/gender-based-violence>> accessed 30 November 2021

## Conclusion

Despite all the legal instruments present in the Canadian governmental apparatus, women continue to be one of the most vulnerable groups in the country. This situation becomes even more critical when intersectional identities are part of the equation. In addition, the lack of access to support systems and healthcare services, such as child daycare, are other elements that could contribute to the expansion of the gap between men and women in Canada. Although the picture is not as dire as in other countries, there are still many more steps the need to be taken by the federal and First Nations' governments of Canada in order to combat discrimination against women.

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