



Women and **POLITICS:** A Story of Commitment

Second edition



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From the First Steps until 1849: Limited Political Involvement

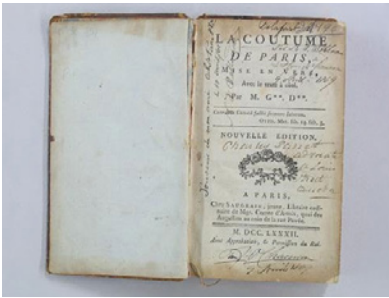
From the First Peoples to the *Constitutional Act, 1791*

Women's involvement in the world of politics in what is known today as Québec goes back a very long way indeed. Their participation stems from the First Nations, whose societies tended to be matrilineal and built around consensus. It is widely held that there was a certain equality of the sexes among the Indigenous nations in the Great Lakes region and the Laurentian Valley, at least before the Europeans arrived.¹ While no direct connection can be drawn between the participation of women today in civic life and those age-old Indigenous practices, the latter nevertheless constituted a unique manifestation of democracy, even in the era of monarchy-supported explorations in the Americas.

Holistic and animistic in nature,² Indigenous cultures practised a certain separation between the sexes, but did not allow one to dominate the other. Relationships were based on complementarity^{3,4} and the contribution of each individual, regardless of gender.⁵ Although the men represented their respective nations, fought in their name and signed treaties with the Europeans, the women held wide-ranging and varied powers. Depending on the nation and geographical region, the women had the power to authorize a war or bring it to an end, could appoint or remove a chief, and controlled the means of production and subsistence.⁶ Based on current understanding, women's influence over decision-making was similar, if not superior, to men's. They were therefore the cornerstone of political, economic and social organization.^{7,8} Unpacking the political influence and role played by Indigenous women remains a complex undertaking, however, as does pinpointing the degree of equality they enjoyed.⁹ Nevertheless, it is clear that they occupied a key position which could not have been further from the one held by the first women to arrive in New France.¹⁰

Initial contact, the fur trade and colonization slowly led to profound social changes among the First Peoples. For Indigenous women, the impact was as brutal as it was unexpected, coming up as they did against the Old World value system conveyed by missionaries and those representing royal authority.¹¹ Midway through the 17th century, men were very much in the majority in New France. In order to right the demographic imbalance, the Crown recruited young women to make new lives for themselves in the young colony, the famed “Filles du Roy”.¹² Starting in 1663, an estimated 770 such candidates were recruited by the French authorities, which strengthened the numbers of the colony and added to the number of women.

As European women settled, First Nations women were progressively relegated in colonizers’ minds to less respectable status.¹³ The place they occupied was gradually discredited by those who had the privilege of penmanship, although this did not put an end to mixed unions.¹⁴ Evangelizing, territorial expansion, the intensification of trade and constant wars disrupted traditional roles.¹⁵ Little by little, the norms, codes and customs of the settlers, who largely sought to address their fellow men, became dominant in political matters and excluded Indigenous women.



The Custom of Paris, 1782 edition. Pierre-Joseph-Olivier-Chauveau collection, Québec National Assembly Library, photo credit: Répertoire du patrimoine culturel du Québec, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications, photographer C. Tonatiuh Garcia Ramirez.

As of 1664, the colony was ruled by the Custom of Paris, which set out the legal incapacity of both minor girls and married women.¹⁶ These groups were living in a patriarchal society that was virtually identical to European societies. More often than not, they were married before reaching the age of majority—25 years old, by law—and were therefore considered to be minors under the tutelage of their husbands. Although not excluded from public life, women were nevertheless confined to the domestic sphere.

They could not vote or stand for office at the deliberative or representative

assemblies held in the public interest that were so popular throughout the French regime, such as the *communautés d'habitants*, procurator-syndics and parish assemblies.¹⁷

There were, however, situations where the legal framework granted laywomen greater autonomy, with heirs and widows enjoying the status of seigneuses, which allowed them to be usufructuaries of their fiefs.¹⁸ Women were also known to be granted power of attorney by way of proxy agreements.¹⁹ In the event of the death or prolonged absence of the head of a family, the wife and daughters would be brought into the business and entitled to make decisions.

But such cases of women acting autonomously and in management positions were the exception to the rule, the prerogative of a colonial elite. Proxy agreements or seigneurial concessions granted limited powers, since they tended to occur when a woman was waiting for a husband or son or for an heir apparent to be declared. In short, they were a last resort, when no man could be appointed instead.

Proxy agreements appear to have been more widespread in the world of business and trades. Women could even be found frequently in those spheres in positions of management and authority, even though the extent of their autonomy always depended on their husbands.²⁰ The colony's economic and political realms were rather porous, and the paths forged by businesswomen showed their ability to enter circles of power and make a place for themselves there.

The role and achievements of nuns in New France are generally better known than those of laywomen. Beginning in the 1630s, nuns began to play a part in the colony's social development and helped it put down roots. In 1639, the Ursulines, led by Marie Guyart, landed at Québec intending to educate young girls and convert Indigenous girls. On the same ship were the Augustinians Marie Forestier and Marie Guenet, who went on to found the Hôtel-Dieu, the first hospital in North America. These three key figures ushered in a sweeping missionary movement that led to the founding of a significant number of teaching institutions and hospitals along the St. Lawrence River.²¹ Marguerite Bourgeoys and the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, as well as Marguerite d'Youville and the Grey Nuns, are further examples of women whose influence, although not strictly political, played a decisive role in the colony.



Marie Guyart, known as Marie de l'Incarnation (1599–1672). BAnQ Québec. Public domain.



Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620–1700). BAnQ Québec. Public domain.

Throughout the French regime, a number of women distinguished themselves outside the religious orders. Although exceptional, their paths do suggest that it was possible for women to be involved in the colony's politics. Such was the case for Jeanne Mance and Madeleine de la Peltrie, two pioneers in the founding of Montréal. Women were also well represented in the judicial realm and were a common sight in courtrooms. As Dominique Deslandres notes in the Archives of the Royal Jurisdiction of Montreal, "women of every age, of every condition and of every ethnicity could be seen defending their rights."²²

However, the vast majority of women remained confined to the home, whatever their socio-economic situation. In keeping with the social norms of the time, their lives were always dominated by men.²³ And it should also be noted that Black and Indigenous women lived as slaves in the colony, most of them as servants. They made up around half of the 4,200 slaves recorded in Canada from the arrival of the Europeans until slavery was abolished in 1834.²⁴

ÀIn multiple ways, the latter half of the 18th century was an eventful one. New France falling to the British, the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and the American War of Independence were all turning points for the

colony, which went from being an absolute to a parliamentary monarchy, governed by a hybrid legal system that emerged from common law, French civil law and English criminal law. While the *Quebec Act* of 1774 maintained elements that favoured French-speaking subjects,²⁵ English-speakers were quick to call for rights similar to those already enjoyed elsewhere in the British Empire. They got their wish at the turn of the 19th century, at a time when the immigration of settlers from the British Isles and the arrival of large numbers of Loyalists after 1783 transformed the socio-political landscape of the Province of Quebec.



Jeanne Mance (1606–1673). BANQ Québec. Public domain.

1791–1849: Contested Suffrage

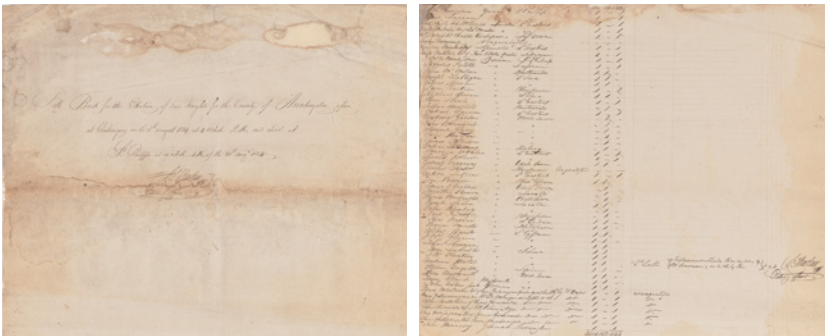
The *Constitutional Act* of 1791 split the Province of Quebec into two colonies, each governed by a different legal system. Upper Canada was governed by common law, while Lower Canada kept French civil law. The *Constitutional Act* reproduced the British model, adapting it to the realities of life in the colony. It established a Westminster-style parliamentary system in the provinces, with each having a separate legislative assembly and legislative council. The Act also gave landowners the right to elect representatives. In keeping with the spirit of the times, only individuals who owned (or rented) property were considered sufficiently enlightened to express themselves in a ballot. In other words, the right to vote was tied to landownership. But contrary to all expectations, the Custom of Paris and the property qualification for franchise combined to lead to an unintended consequence in Lower Canada: certain women were given the right to vote.

The Custom of Paris was less restrictive regarding women than common law²⁶ was in matters of property rights and succession. This meant that it was not uncommon to see widows and unmarried heiresses continue to own property in the former French colony. Moreover, the *Constitutional Act* made no mention whatsoever of gender, referring only to “persons”, and therefore did not expressly prohibit women’s right to vote.²⁷

Coming as it did during an exceptional period of political and legal transition, the ambiguity was probably an oversight by the British legislature.²⁸ But it was still an unprecedented lapse, making Lower Canada the second place in North America to give women the vote, after the state of New Jersey in 1776.^{29,30}

Poll books reveal that women took an interest in politics and voting, and research shows that they exercised their rights more than elsewhere on the continent.^{31,32,33} Louis-Joseph Papineau's grandmother reportedly voted in 1809 in Montreal East, for instance, while sources establish that Indigenous women also voted.³⁴

In the early 19th century, when violence marred many an election, women's right to vote was being called into question by male politicians. This growing hostility kept pace with the rise of political tensions within the colony. It made no difference whether the political actors of the day were reformers, liberals, constitutionalists or conservatives, all agreed that women had no place in public affairs.³⁵ Members of Parliament were also of the opinion that women's involvement might lead to election results being contested. When women were involved in voting irregularities, however, it was largely their qualification as voters that seemed to be questioned.³⁶



Voting register excerpt from the 1824 election in the riding of Huntingdon containing signatures of women, including Indigenous women. District of Montréal Court of King's/Queen's Bench fonds. BANQ Vieux-Montréal.

Rare voices were raised in defence of women's suffrage. Among them, a petition from 1828 stated, "That the Petitioners have not learned that there exist any imperfections in the minds of women which place them lower than men in intellectual power".³⁷ This is an important aspect of the debate. While women were considered entirely capable of voting, they were thought to be unworthy of doing so due to their natural qualities, as the popular moral and philosophical arguments of the day maintained.

The 1830s saw the opposing concepts of freedom and the affairs of the State go head to head. Fuelled by the ideas of the Enlightenment³⁸ and revolutionary rhetoric,³⁹ citizenship and masculinity became naturally associated in the minds of intellectuals and legislators. This was particularly the case with Republicanism, which the Patriotes were calling for.⁴⁰ This political ideology considered that social order was guaranteed by the division between the public sphere—reserved for men—and the private sphere, which was intended for women. Any deviation from those roles was considered to be suspect, or worse, a threat to the nation's stability.⁴¹ Other voices contended that sexual attraction and pregnancies jeopardized the work of parliamentarians and the sound working of institutions.⁴²

The growth of newspapers and a particular way of thinking among the elites helped these new doctrines to spread. Newspaper articles even showed a tendency to feminize opponents in order to discredit them. And no opportunity was missed to stress that women's support for a cause or idea was clear proof of its absurdity.

In spring 1832, a by-election spiralled out of control in Montréal and French Canadians were shot dead by British soldiers. The tragedy ratcheted political rivalries up a notch and heightened hostility to women's suffrage. The Patriotes lost the election, with the majority of women voters believed to have supported the opposing candidate. Realizing that English-speaking women voters might tip an election, Louis-Joseph Papineau was more vigorously opposed than ever to women taking part in civic life.⁴³

Coming under attack from parliamentarians, women's suffrage was almost abolished a first time in 1834 by the unanimous vote in favour of an Act that overhauled the criteria surrounding the property qualification for franchise. The text clearly stipulated that "no female shall vote at any Election. . . unless such persons hold such property as Co-heirs".⁴⁴ However, the Act was "reserved"⁴⁵ by the Governor and so did not officially come into force. It was successively disallowed by London in 1836 and by a proclamation by Governor Archibald Acheson the following year.

Laywomen flooded the education sector in the early 19th century, with many becoming rural schoolteachers. They were also very active in the charitable sector, establishing a number of charities and care agencies for the vulnerable.⁴⁶ As Denyse Baillargeon notes, starting in 1840, "a marked change of attitude towards women and the place allotted to them in society".⁴⁷

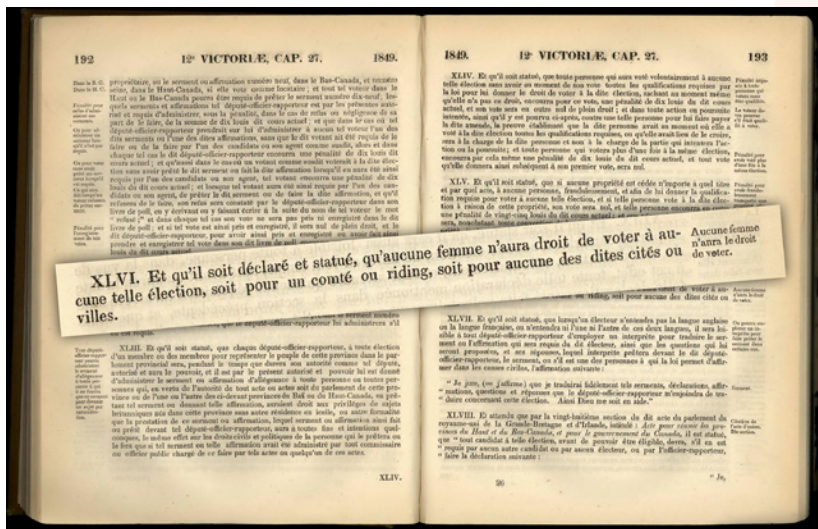
Diaries and correspondence became places where political convictions could be expressed. One might even imagine that some letters may have served as a vector for subtle feminine influence as ideas circulated. Such examples of personal writing certainly proved that the women who penned them considered themselves fully concerned by the political tensions they could only observe.^{48,49,50} Women's groups supporting Patriote causes attempted to get involved—the Club des femmes patriotes de Montréal in 1833, for example, or the Association des dames patriotiques du comté de Deux-Montagnes in 1837—but those initiatives did not play a major role in a movement that was soon to become an uprising.^{51,52}

During the rebellions that rocked Lower Canada in 1837–1838, the Patriotes did not invite more women to join their struggle outside of the domestic sphere. The rare women who distinguished themselves during this period, such as Hortense Globensky-Prévost and Rosalie Cherrier-Saint-Jacques, sided instead with the Loyalists^{53,54} Cherrier-Saint-Jacques was Papineau's cousin and fiercely opposed the Patriotes in the press.⁵⁵ And the involvement of women later became more visible as they pleaded the cause of their husbands, who had been exiled or imprisoned as a result of the authorities' bloody repression.

As summed up by historian Allan Greer, the rebellion's failure and the Patriotes' defeat clearly in no way led to the liberation of the women of Lower Canada.⁵⁶ The outcome of the conflict even led to a tightening of women's access to property in customary law, with the restriction of the right of dower.⁵⁷

1849–1940: The Long Road to Obtain the Right to Vote and Stand for Election

To general indifference, women's right to vote was revoked by reformers Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine in 1849 as part of a legislative reform aimed at "standardizing" the electoral laws of Lower and Upper Canada.^{58,59} The weight of a patriarchal value system, combined with the new Victorian doctrines, got the better of the timid participation of women in civic life, considered by Louis-Joseph Papineau as a "historical anomaly".⁶⁰ The adoption of the Civil Code of Lower Canada by Parliament in 1866 established the legal incapacity of married women.⁶¹



Provincial Statutes of Canada 1848–1849. Québec National Assembly Library collection.

As was the case for all women in Lower Canada, Indigenous women lost their right to vote in 1849. Subsequently, the 1857 *Act to Encourage the Gradual Civilization of Indian Tribes in this Province, and to Amend the Laws Relating to Indians (Gradual Civilization Act)* kept them out of the ballot box for good by restricting the right to vote to Indigenous men who voluntarily renounced their Indian status. A federal statute passed in 1869 under the government of John A. Macdonald stripped Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men of their Indian status. The same legislation took away the political role that these women could exercise in certain communities: henceforth, band councils were elected only by the males of the group having reached the age of majority and women no longer had any official voice.⁶²

In a period marked by ultramontanism and social and political conservatism, a real tutelage of women was unfolding, leading to their almost complete withdrawal into the domestic sphere.

1880–1910: The Early Years of the Women’s Movement in Québec

The 1880s marked the birth of the women’s movement in Québec and Canada. As historian Denyse Baillargeon points out, “the indifference—or, at least, the silence—that had greeted the 1849 abolishment of female suffrage would be replaced by a growing desire among some women to obtain the vote”.⁶³

The industrial revolution was in full swing and a growing number of women became interested in what was then called “the social question”. In urban areas, there was no shortage of public health problems. Infectious diseases killed thousands of children every year, especially in French-speaking and working-class communities. Other issues, such as unsanitary housing, alcoholism, prostitution and juvenile criminality, were sources of great concern.⁶⁴

Through a variety of charitable and philanthropic associations, women from the bourgeoisie became aware of these problems and proposed solutions. They supported the urban reform movement that was taking shape at the time, particularly in Montréal, but also in Sherbrooke and Québec City. To coordinate their actions, several of these associations set up the Montreal Local Council of Women (MLCW). Founded in 1893, the MLCW was affiliated with the National Council of Women of Canada, itself a member of the International Council of Women. The MLCW’s work enabled women’s associations to gain greater visibility in the public arena. Increasingly, it was as citizens that these women were making their voices heard, whether through petitions, briefs or meetings with political leaders.

It would be wrong to think that this action was limited to a fringe of the “progressive”⁶⁵ bourgeoisie. In the fall of 1899, working-class women set up the Association pour les droits de la femme (Association), with Alphonsine Rodier (Mrs. Pierre Drolet) as its Chair. The members of the Association had close ties to, and their spouses joined, the labour movement as well as the first socialist groups active in Montréal.

From its very first meeting, the Association declared itself in favour of women’s right to vote.⁶⁶ It also supported various reform projects proposed by the labour movement, such as the municipalization of public utilities. Most of their demands were well received by the unions affiliated with the Conseil central des métiers et du travail de Montréal, except the right to vote. Admittedly, at the end of the 19th century, the presence of women delegates in union assemblies was still a matter of debate. Unlike the MLCW, which was lobbying at the time for taxpaying women to be allowed to vote in municipal and school elections, the Association demanded this fundamental right for all women, ten years before other suffragist groups in Québec adopted the same principle.

The Association was certainly the first predominantly French-speaking feminist group in Québec. During the same period, the MLCW was mostly composed of Protestant organizations led by women from the English-speaking community. While French-Canadian activists, such as Joséphine Marchand-Dandurand, held important positions in the organization, Francophones were still by far in the minority. Few Catholic associations were members of the Council. This was largely due to the hostility of the Catholic clergy to the religious “neutrality” of the MLCW. To get around this problem, French-speaking activists decided to set up their own organization, the Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste, whose objective was to bring together Catholic women’s groups within a single structure. Founded in 1907, the Fédération immediately obtained the support of the clergy and became the spearhead of Catholic feminist action in Québec.

Like the MLCW, the Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste sought to extend women’s right to vote to municipal and school elections but did not demand universal suffrage.⁶⁷ This seemingly contradictory position was due not only to the controversial nature of the issue within Catholic circles but also to the role given to women in the private sphere.



Photos of the members of the Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste. *La Presse*, April 2, 1921. Québec National Assembly Library collection.

Prior to the Great Depression of the 1930s, provincial and federal governments seldom intervened with respect to health, education and support for the “indigent”. In Québec, these areas were primarily the responsibility of religious communities or local governments. Municipal and school governments perceived as being closer to “women’s interests” arising from their role as mothers. In 1892, widows as well as single women who owned property were granted the right to vote in municipal and school elections though they were not allowed to run for office. In 1899, tax-paying women tenants in Montréal were also granted the right to vote. However, this right was frequently challenged, forcing the women’s movement to organize in order to defend it.

1910–1940: The Struggle for the Right to Vote in Federal and Provincial Elections

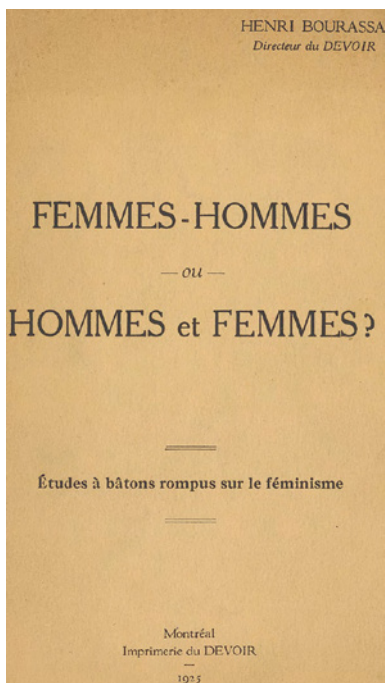
After fighting several battles to secure the right to vote for women property owners and tenants in Montréal, the women’s movement doubled down on its efforts to extend that right to provincial and federal elections. Beginning in the 1910s, new groups emerged that focused exclusively on this issue: the Montreal Suffrage Association (MSA) (1913), the Equal Franchise League (1913), and the Comité provincial pour le suffrage féminin (1922).

Chaired by Carrie Matilda Derrick, the first woman to hold the position of full professor in a Canadian university, the MSA was formed on the initiative of the MLCW. In 1915, the MSA’s Chair met with Premier Lomer Gouin to present the organization’s demands, which the Premier rejected, claiming that no woman in the British Empire had yet been granted the right to vote in a general election.

Like the MLCW, the MSA obtained the support of some of the city's English-speaking political and economic elite, from which many of its most active activists came. This was not the case for the Equal Franchise League, which was established during the same period. Seeking to mobilize working-class women on the issue of voting rights, the Equal Franchise League included socialist activists such as Rachel Ray Press (Mrs. Ray Mendelsohn) and Rose Henderson. As a sign of changing attitudes within the Montréal labour movement, banners calling for women's right to vote appeared in the May 1st demonstrations to mark International Workers' Day.⁶⁸

Although they seemed to be united around the same cause, the suffragist groups took different paths during the First World War. As the conflict in Europe became entrenched, the federal government introduced a bill in 1917 to give the right to vote to the mothers of soldiers on the frontline. The government's objective was to obtain the majority needed to win a referendum on compulsory conscription. The women's movement was divided on this issue. The majority of MSA members favoured conscription and supported the government's proposal as an important, if insufficient, step forward for Canadian women. The Equal Franchise League, on the other hand, was opposed to war and conscription and saw the government's move as opportunistic. The National Federation of St. John the Baptist, which was close to nationalist circles, supported the war effort while being opposed to conscription. In the name of "maternalistic" arguments, it campaigned for all women to finally exercise the right to vote.⁶⁹ Its Chair, Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie, sent a telegram to Prime Minister Robert Laird Borden in which she urged him to grant women the right to vote on the same basis as men...in order to recognize the immense services they rendered during the war in assisting the wounded, including as part of the Red Cross, and in engaging in humanitarian works which honour the country.⁷⁰

In 1918, women won the right to vote in federal elections. Beyond the democratic arguments, services rendered by women during the war played a key role in securing this decision. That same year, the Equal Franchise League joined the newly formed Québec branch of the Canadian Labour Party. Women held several important positions in this new political party. This was the case for suffragist and socialist activist Mathilde Prévost (Mrs. Conrad Lacombe), who was elected Vice-Chair. The following year, she was replaced in this position by Rose Henderson, who ran as a labour candidate in the 1921 federal election in the riding of Saint-Laurent-Saint-Georges. Henderson received 510 votes, that is, 3.7% of the votes cast. For the first time in the history of Québec, a woman's name appeared on a ballot.⁷¹



Henri Bourassa. *Femmes-hommes ou hommes et femmes? Études à bâtons rompus sur le féminisme*. 1925. Canadian Pamphlet Collection, Québec National Assembly Library.



Caricature "Quand maman votera". *Almanach de la langue française*, 1929. Québec National Assembly Library collection.

The Road to Obtaining the Right to Vote in Provincial Elections

The gains at the federal level marked an important step in the women's movement's struggle for political empowerment. However, suffragist activists in Québec would have to work even harder in order to extend this right to the provincial level.

The void created by the dissolution of the MSA in 1919 was filled by the Provincial Committee for Women's Suffrage, established in 1922. A bilingual organization co-chaired by Marie Lacoste Gérin-Lajoie and Anna Lyman, the

Committee immediately put pressure on the Liberal government led by Louis-Alexandre Taschereau. The latter expressed deep reservations about their demands, citing Québec's Catholic bishops' resolute opposition to women's suffrage.

Far from giving up, the suffragists took their demands to the Parliament Building in Québec City: on February 9, 1922, between four and five hundred women—English-speakers, French-speakers, but also some representatives of the Jewish community—invaded the Parliament.⁷² They submitted a petition for women's suffrage signed by 3,200 people. The Taschereau government stuck to its position, claiming that most Québec women did not want the right to vote. The suffragists' mobilization was thwarted by that of Catholic and conservative circles, which succeeded in blocking the momentum of the Provincial Committee for Women's Suffrage. Their intransigence resulted in Québec falling behind other North American societies: one by one, the other Canadian provinces passed laws between 1916 and 1922 guaranteeing women's suffrage.⁷³



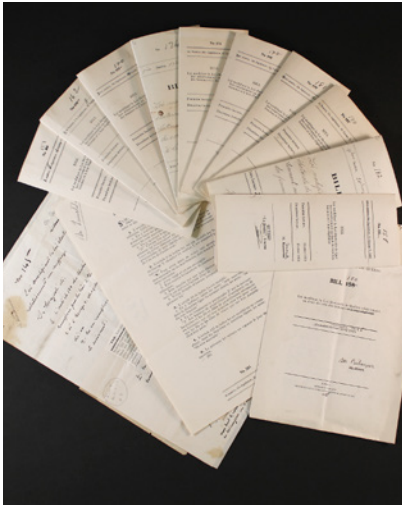
"Délégation qui s'en va demander le suffrage féminin à la Législature". *La Presse*, February 9, 1922. Québec National Assembly Library collection.

The struggle for the right to vote was revived in the late 1920s with the founding of two new organizations, the Canadian Alliance for the Vote of Women of Quebec (1927), headed by Idola Saint-Jean, and the Women's Rights League (1929), whose president was Thérèse Casgrain. Through their interventions, the debate on the issue of women's suffrage gained momentum. The gains made by other women elsewhere in Canada encouraged them to continue the struggle. In 1929, the Privy Council invalidated a Supreme Court of Canada ruling from the previous year, which held that women were not "persons" under section 24 of the British North America Act. This decision granted women the right to become members of the Senate. Far from being limited to the right to vote, women's political rights were, more than ever, closely linked to other demands for their economic and social rights, from their legal status to their working conditions.⁷⁴

Between 1927 and 1940, the two organizations were active in lobbying the provincial government through petitions, meetings with politicians and public awareness campaigns. They also sought to reach women living in rural areas, an arduous task that had been neglected until then by Montréal-based suffragist groups.

Throughout this period, women's place in the public sphere continued to grow. At the height of the economic crisis of the 1930s, women were involved in the struggles of the unemployed for direct relief from various levels of government. The right to vote was increasingly seen as an indispensable tool for women to secure their basic rights.

The demands of suffragist groups began to find an echo in the Legislative Assembly. Between 1927 and 1939, no fewer than thirteen bills were sponsored by members of different political parties to grant women the right to vote. However, most parliamentarians remained firmly opposed to any broadening of that right. For politicians and Catholic clergy alike, the separation of the private and public spheres remained more necessary than ever. They urged women to continue to play their role as guardians of the faith and of the French language in the family unit. In their eyes, the broadening of women's suffrage would lead inexorably to the "masculinization" of women, a prelude to the dissolution of French-Canadian national specificity.



Thirteen bills were defeated before women obtained the right to vote. Québec National Assembly fonds.

Despite the jeers and invective, suffragist activists stayed the course. They were aware of the changes that were gradually taking place in Québec society and were determined to see their struggle through to the end. In 1939, thanks to the intervention of Thérèse Casgrain and some forty delegates at the Liberal Party's annual convention, the party committed to granting women the right to vote once it came to power. This was a major shift for the party led by Adélard Godbout, given that it had previously been opposed to the measure.⁷⁵ The Liberal victory in the October 1939 election paved the way for the introduction

of legislation by the new government. On April 25, 1940, the Legislative Assembly passed the *Act granting women the right to vote and to be elected* by a large majority. The Legislative Council did the same.

1940–2020: Women in Parliament

Although Québec women obtained the right to sit as a Member of Parliament in 1940, it was not until 1947 that the first woman ran in an election, and it was not until 1961 that the first woman was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Québec.

As Diane Lamoureux states, the right to vote and to be elected gave women a right to have rights.⁷⁶ This power paved the way for political demands to combat juridical gender inequalities. Women's entry into Parliament should be understood as a *de jure* means of achieving *de facto* equality.

1940–1961: A Timid Start in the Political and Electoral Realms



Rival Candidates at Huntingdon

**Huntingdon Election Vote Today
To Determine By-election Choice**

John Gillies Rennie (left) and Mae O'Connor (right), candidates in the 1947 by-election in the riding of Huntingdon. *The Gazette*, July 23, 1947. Québec National Assembly Library collection.



Mme PIERRE-F. CASGRAIN

**Mme Pierre Casgrain
élue chef du parti
C.C.F. dans Québec**

"Mme Pierre Casgrain élue chef du parti C.C.F. dans Québec". *Le Droit*, June 25, 1951. Québec National Assembly Library collection.

Not all Québec women obtained the right to vote and stand for election in 1940: Indigenous women did not acquire this right until 1969;⁷⁷ and the first Indigenous women member of the National Assembly, Kateri Champagne Jourdain, was elected only in October 2022.

Non-indigenous women voted for the first time in the by-elections of November 19, 1940 (Mégantic and Terrebonne ridings), October 6, 1941 (Huntingdon and Saint-Jean-Napierville ridings) and March 23, 1942 (Montréal-Sainte-Anne, Montréal-Saint-Jacques, Richelieu-Verchères and Westmount-Saint-Georges ridings), before voting in the August 8, 1944 general election.⁷⁸ However, it was not until the July 1947 by-election that the first female candidate was nominated, when Mae O'Connor ran for the Quebec Liberal Party in the riding of Huntingdon. She lost to her rival John Gillies Rennie by 727 votes.

There continued to be few women candidates during that period. Three women ran in the 1952 general election, seven in the 1956 general election, and none in the 1960 general election.⁷⁹ Among the women candidates, Thérèse Casgrain stood out for her perseverance: from 1952 to 1979, she ran 13 times in provincial and federal elections without ever being elected.⁸⁰ In 1951, she became the first female leader of a provincial political party following her election as leader of the Québec branch of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation political party.⁸¹

In 1961, Marie-Claire Kirkland made history by becoming the first woman elected to the Legislative Assembly of Québec after the December 14 by-election. She represented the Quebec Liberal Party in the riding of Jacques-Cartier following the death of her father, Charles-Aimé Kirkland, who was the MNA for that riding.⁸²

Women's Political Actions

Gaining the right to vote and stand for election—considered an accomplishment in itself—signalled the end of many women's political movements in the 1940s.⁸³ However, women did not stop mobilizing in the middle of the 20th century. For instance, in 1945, they undertook an important initiative in relation to family allowances. Under the leadership of Thérèse Casgrain, women's groups and unions convinced the Government to give those allowances to mothers instead of fathers.⁸⁴

The increased presence of married women in the labour market during the Second World War and in the post-war era also drew the attention of women's groups to gender-based wage discrimination. Associations such as the Ligue des femmes du Québec, founded in 1957, emerged to demand improved working conditions. This group, which had links to the Communist Party, defended the unionization of women and the passage of legislative measures aimed at protecting "women and children".⁸⁵

1962–1975: First Women MNAs and First Legislative Advances

In addition to being the first woman elected to the Legislative Assembly, Marie-Claire Kirkland became, in 1962, the first woman to introduce a bill in the Assembly and the first woman to hold a position as minister in Quebec.⁸⁶ Initially appointed as a minister without portfolio, she was Minister of Transport and Communications from November 25, 1964 to June 16, 1966. She was also the first woman to serve as interim premier when she replaced Robert Bourassa for four days in 1972. Marie-Claire Kirkland left politics after being appointed as a provincial court judge and Chair of the Commission du salaire minimum on February 14, 1973.⁸⁷



Marie-Claire Kirkland. Official photograph of the 28th Parliament (December 1, 1966 to March 12, 1970). Québec National Assembly Library collection, photo credit: Cécile Weedon.



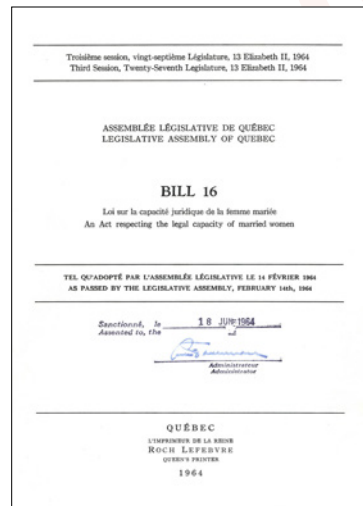
Lise Bacon. Official photograph of the 30th Parliament (November 22, 1973 to October 18, 1976). Ministère des Communications du Québec fonds, BAnQ-Québec. Unknown photographer.

It was not until the October 29, 1973 general election that a second woman was elected to the National Assembly. Lise Bacon won in the riding of Bourassa, under the banner of the Quebec Liberal Party. She served as Minister of State for Social Affairs from November 13, 1973 to July 30, 1975.⁸⁸

The presence of women in the Assembly remained extremely low, with only one female Member between 1961 and 1976.⁸⁹ Their proportional presence decreased even more during this period, as the total number of MNAs increased from 95 in 1962 to 110 in 1973, thus decreasing the proportion of women from 1% to 0.9%.⁹⁰ This meant that, from 1940 to 1976, women represented less than 1% of the parliamentary body, even though they represented half the population of Québec. Nevertheless, the proportion of women candidates in elections rose from 1.9% in 1971 to 8.5% in 1976,⁹¹ a significant increase in only five years.

Outside the parliamentary arena, women were active and organized. As a result of the political action of the feminist movements, several legislative measures were passed by the Parliament.⁹² For example, the *Act respecting the legal capacity of married women*, introduced by Marie-Claire Kirkland in 1964, surely stemmed from her personal experience in having to obtain her husband's signature on the lease for her new Québec City accommodations. However, as Denyse Baillargeon has established, the Act was also inspired by repeated demands by various women's groups such as the Association des femmes de carrière du Québec métropolitain, the Fédération nationale des femmes libérales de la province de Québec and the Association

des femmes diplômées des universités de Montréal.⁹³ This legislation, which empowered women to manage their own property, take legal action, and sign agreements and contracts,⁹⁴ among other things, had also been part of the Quebec Liberal Party platform since 1958.⁹⁵



Bill 16 – An Act respecting the legal capacity of married women. Québec National Assembly fonds.



Kathleen Jamieson. *Indian Women and the Law: Citizens Minus*. 1978. Québec National Assembly Library collection.

Amendments to the *Quebec Election Act* in 1969 empowered Indigenous people to vote. This change must be linked to the actions of Equal Rights for Indian Women, founded in 1967 by Mary Two-Axe Early, a Mohawk from Kahnawake. This association lobbied mainly for changes to the federal *Indian Act* so that Indigenous women would retain their status even if they married a white man.⁹⁶ Although obtaining the right to vote at the provincial level was not their main demand, their actions contributed to asserting the political rights of Indigenous women.

At the same time, more radical groups, such as the Front de libération des femmes du Québec, founded in 1969,⁹⁷ were influencing the legislative sphere. On March 1, 1971, seven members of the Front organized a

demonstration at the courthouse to obtain the right for women to serve as jurors.⁹⁸ On June 18, 1971, the *Act to amend the Jurors Act* received royal assent and corrected the injustice.



"Le Front de libération des femmes prépare l'escalade". *La Patrie*, March 7, 1971. Québec National Assembly Library collection.

The creation of the Conseil du statut de la femme by the Québec government in 1973 also arose from the demands of the feminist movements.⁹⁹ At the federal level, in 1970, in response to a proposal by several women's groups, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (the Bird Commission) recommended the creation of an organization dedicated to the status of women in each Canadian province. In 1971, the Fédération des femmes du Québec, founded in 1966, submitted a brief to Premier Robert Bourassa entitled *Office de la femme* (women's office), which explained the form that such an organization should take in Québec.¹⁰⁰

A year later, Marie-Claire Kirkland introduced Bill 63, *An Act respecting the Conseil du statut de la femme*,¹⁰¹ in the Assembly.

Finally, in a move that signalled that the status of women was progressing and that times were changing, the Québec government adopted the *Charter of human rights and freedoms* in 1975; this charter affirmed, among other things, that spouses had the same rights, obligations and responsibilities.¹⁰²

1976–1989: The Institutionalization of Gender Equality

The November 15, 1976 general election represented clear progress for women's presence in Parliament, as the number of female MNAs increased, with five women elected: Thérèse Lavoix-Roux, Louise Cuerrier, Denise Leblanc, Jocelyne Ouellette and Lise Payette.¹⁰³ Eight women were elected to the National Assembly in the 1981 election, and the second half of the 1980s saw encouraging progress with the election of 18 female MNAs in 1985 and 23 in 1989.¹⁰⁴ Women's representation in the Assembly increased from 4.5% in 1976 to 18.3% in 1989. In cabinets, the percentages of women increased similarly; women comprised 4% of the Cabinet in 1976 and 21% in 1989.¹⁰⁵ In addition, the proportion of women candidates continued to increase during the same period, from 9% in 1976 to 22% in 1989.¹⁰⁶

During this period, a number of women held various parliamentary offices for the first time. Louise Cuerrier was the first female Vice-President of the National Assembly of Québec, an office she held from December 14, 1976 to May 19, 1981.¹⁰⁷ On March 15, 1984, Thérèse Lavoix-Roux became the first female Chair of a parliamentary committee (jointly with Louise Harel) and Lise Bacon became the first female Vice-Chair of a parliamentary committee. Huguette Lachapelle became the first woman to hold the office of Whip on December 4, 1984. Lise Bacon marked a significant milestone on December 12, 1985, when she was appointed Deputy Premier of Québec, an office she held until January 11, 1994.



Louise Cuerrier. [1977]. Johann-Natale Kreiber fonds. BANQ Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean.



Thérèse Lavoie-Roux. [1981]. Québec National Assembly fonds, photo credit: Kedl.



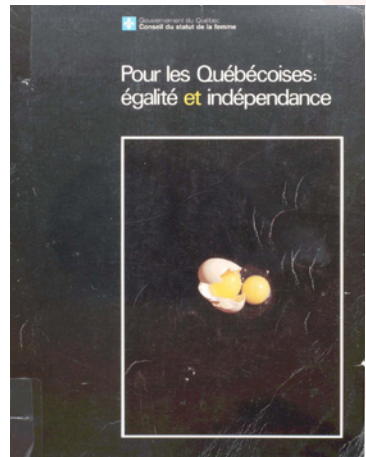
Huguette Lachapelle. 1981. Québec National Assembly fonds, photo credit: Kedl.

Women MNAs led the way in examining new legislation, especially with regard to families and women's working conditions. As women increasingly participated in the labour market in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist movements demanded better protections, such as maternity leave, equal pay and support for women's financial independence.¹⁰⁸ Several changes were accordingly made to the *Civil Code of Québec*. In 1977, the concept of "paternal power" was replaced by "parental authority" in order to affirm the equality of parents.¹⁰⁹ In 1979, the National Assembly passed the *Act respecting labour standards* and the *Act respecting occupational health and safety*, both of which contained provisions to protect pregnant women from employment discrimination. In the same year, the *Act respecting child day care* established school-based childcare services to facilitate work-family balance. In 1980, a major family law reform amended the *Civil Code*, officially enshrining equality between spouses and allowing married women to keep their birth name and give it to their children. In 1989, the Minister for the Status of Women, Monique Gagnon-Tremblay, implemented a new reform of the *Civil Code* that established rules for dividing family patrimony.¹¹⁰ The development of these various laws required ongoing involvement on the part of women's groups and feminist movements to write the many briefs and studies presented during public consultations.¹¹¹

While these legislative advances were occurring, the principle of gender equality became more institutionalized with the emergence of the first government policies on the status of women. In 1978, after consulting 116 women's groups, the Conseil du statut de la femme published its first comprehensive policy on the status of women, entitled *Pour les Québécoises: égalité et indépendance*.¹¹² In a context where the State was increasingly taking action to address gender inequality, the Secrétariat à la condition féminine was created in 1979 with the objective, among others, of ensuring consistency in government initiatives for the status of women.¹¹³ Lise Payette became the first Minister for the Status of Women. The same year, the Office québécois de la langue française published a groundbreaking opinion in favour of using the feminine forms of job and office titles.¹¹⁴ Lise Payette was the first MNA to use the feminine form and to sign her documents *Madame la ministre*.¹¹⁵ In 1982, the *Act to amend the Charter of human rights and freedoms* made it possible to implement equal access programs in government departments and agencies.¹¹⁶ Lastly, in 1986, the Government unveiled its first domestic violence intervention policy.¹¹⁷



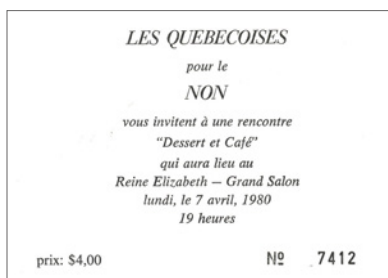
Campaign button for Lise Payette. 1981. Charles Breton-Demeule collection, National Assembly of Québec.



Conseil du statut de la femme. *Pour les Québécoises: égalité et indépendance*. 1979. Québec National Assembly Library collection.

This institutionalization was in part a result of demands from feminist movements, which asserted that “the personal is political” and that the State therefore had an obligation to take action to protect women in spheres that, on the surface, seemed limited to private and domestic matters. To this end, feminist movements actively campaigned for abortion rights in the 1970s and 1980s, notably with the creation of the Coordination nationale pour l’avortement libre et gratuit (CNALG) in 1978 and in the context of the Chantale Daigle affair in 1989.¹¹⁸ The Regroupement des femmes québécoises, created in 1978, also mobilized to fight rape and violence against women.¹¹⁹ The Association féminine d’éducation et d’action sociale (AFEAS), founded in 1966, focused on the situation of housewives, whose rights still needed to be defended despite women’s increased presence in the labour market; AFEAS published a report on their situation in 1984.¹²⁰

Other feminist groups became more diverse and complex during this period. In the 1980 referendum, women were divided between the Yes and the No committees. They took a position on the 1982 repatriation of the Constitution.¹²¹ New groups were created to defend the rights of racialized and sexual minorities. The Centre des femmes immigrantes was founded in Montréal in 1985, and the Maison pour femmes immigrantes in Québec City in 1986.¹²²



Invitation card of the group Les Québécoises pour le NON during the 1980 referendum campaign. Michel Lévesque collection, Québec National Assembly.



Promotional card for the group Les Québécoises during the 1995 referendum campaign. Alain Lavigne collection, Québec National Assembly.

Although this prolific legislative period was full of promise for the status of women, it was overshadowed by the Polytechnique Montréal tragedy on December 6, 1989, when 14 women were killed by a misogynist gunman. In the National Assembly, parliamentary proceedings were cut short on the evening

of December 6. The party leaders spoke the next day, but no political leader made any reference to the gender of the victims or the anti-feminist nature of the attack.¹²³ This event was a culmination of the masculinist backlash against feminists in the 1980s and 1990s.

1990–2007: Breaking through the Glass Ceiling

In the 1990s and 2000s, legislative advances for the status of women continued with regard to family issues, improvement of working conditions and women's economic independence. In 1991, a major reform of the *Civil Code* introduced a framework for the issue of assisted reproduction, reflecting women's desire to have control over their own bodies. In 1997, early childhood centres were created with the passage of the *Act respecting the Ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance and amending the Act respecting child day care*, an important measure to encourage women to enter the workforce. And in 2001, the parental insurance plan was established.¹²⁴ These new provisions were aimed at promoting women's economic independence and increasing their participation in the labour market.¹²⁵

In a context of economic difficulty, feminist movements demanded more measures to protect women from poverty.¹²⁶ The Bread and Roses March was thus organized in 1995 under the leadership of the Fédération des femmes du Québec's new president, Françoise David. This 10-day march to Québec City brought together numerous women's groups who submitted their demands to the Government on reaching their destination. Their demands were partially met in the following years with, among other things, the passage of the *Pay Equity Act* in 1996 and the *Act to combat poverty and social exclusion* in 2002.¹²⁷

In Parliament, although women had already been able to run for office for half a century, new inroads continued to be made. On January 20, 1994, Monique Gagnon-Tremblay became the first female Chair of the Conseil du trésor, and on May 13, 1998, the first female Leader of the Official Opposition. In 2003, Louise Harel became the first female President of the National Assembly.¹²⁸ The following year, Diane Lemieux became the first woman to hold the office of House Leader. Despite these advances, women's presence in the National Assembly plateaued and would not exceed 30% until 2012.¹²⁹ In the 1989 and 1994 elections, 23 women were elected, for a female representation of 18.3%.¹³⁰

This percentage increased to 23.2% in 1998 with 29 women elected, and to a new ceiling of 30.4% with 38 women elected in 2003, before falling back to 25.6% with 32 women elected in 2007. The proportion of women candidates in those elections achieved similar percentages, from 23% in 1989 to 31% in 2007.



Louise Harel. [2003]. Québec National Assembly collection, photo credit: Daniel Lessard



Diane Lemieux. [2003]. Québec National Assembly collection, photo credit: Daniel Lessard.

To break through this glass ceiling, various groups mobilized for greater representation of women in politics. While some groups focused their actions on women's participation in politics, others identified measures to change the political system itself. Created in 1992, the group *Promotion des Estriennes pour initier une nouvelle équité sociale* (PEPINES) sought to facilitate women's access to positions of power by working to remove the institutional barriers in their way.¹³¹ *Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie* (GFPD), founded in 1999, took an education- and support-based approach for women who wished to enter politics.¹³²

In response to this mobilization, the Québec government established the program *Equal Access to Decision Making* to encourage women to run for office by funding initiatives with the same objective.¹³³ In contrast to this program in support of women's individual ambitions, the *Collectif Femmes*

et Démocratie (CFD) was created in 2002 to advocate for electoral reform that would take into account gender equality. In 2003, as part of the Estates General on the Reform of Democratic Institutions, the CFD created a forum for 150 women and produced a text entitled *Penser enfin une démocratie avec les femmes*.¹³⁴ On the parliamentary front, the Minister for the Reform of Democratic Institutions, Benoît Pelletier, tabled a draft bill in 2004 to add provisions to the *Election Act* to encourage political parties to nominate more women and people from cultural communities as candidates.¹³⁵

Although this draft bill was never passed, the mobilization for equality did have an impact on the composition of cabinets, where the presence of women increased over time. In 1998, a one-third female cabinet was achieved for the first time in Lucien Bouchard's administration. In 2007, although fewer women were voted in compared to the previous election, Jean Charest formed the first gender-balanced cabinet.

2008–2020: Towards Gender-Balanced Representation

After the gender-balanced cabinets of 2007 and 2008, premiers sought to form cabinets that included more women, without necessarily achieving gender parity.¹³⁶ As researcher Magali Paquin found, women had a slight advantage over men when they were elected under the banner of the party that formed the Government. There was usually a higher proportion of women in the Cabinet than of women MNAs and women candidates.¹³⁷ In other words, once elected, women MNAs belonging to the government party had a greater chance of being appointed to the Cabinet than their male colleagues, due to the Government's desire to form a more gender-balanced cabinet.

However, women had to first be elected as part of the governing party, which was no easy task. From 2008 to 2014, their representation in Parliament still fluctuated between 29% and 32%.¹³⁸ It was not until 2018 that near-parity (40% to 60%) was achieved for the first time in Québec history, with 53 elected women MNAs making up 42.4% of the House.¹³⁹ The same year, 40% of the general election candidates were women, a percentage that was also near-parity.¹⁴⁰ Despite this slow progress for women's representation in the Assembly, a breakthrough was made in 2012 when Pauline Marois became Premier of Québec.¹⁴¹ In addition, with the election of Françoise David, co-spokesperson for Québec solidaire, the National Assembly had two female political party leaders for the first time.¹⁴²



Pauline Marois. 2012. Québec National Assembly collection, photo credit: Marc-André Grenier.



Françoise David. 2012. Québec National Assembly collection, photo credit: Marc-André Grenier.

At the same time, solidarity initiatives were developed between women parliamentarians from different parties, such as the 2010 creation of the Cercle des femmes parlementaires du Québec. In 2012, a monument honouring women in politics was inaugurated on Parliament Hill. It was the first major tribute to women in the Parliament's gardens.¹⁴³ In 2019, a women's committee was officially created in the Cercle des ex-parlementaires du Québec. A moving expression of this female solidarity between parties occurred in 2014 during the adoption of a motion to mark the 25th anniversary of the Polytechnique tragedy.¹⁴⁴ À cette occasion, chaque femme parlementaire avait pris la parole pour commémorer les quatorze victimes de l'attentat. L'adoption d'un mandat d'initiative portant sur la place des femmes en politique par la Commission des relations avec les citoyens en 2016 constitue également un exemple de collaboration entre les femmes parlementaires.¹⁴⁵

Both inside and outside Parliament, actions and stances to promote gender-balanced representation continued. In 2016, the Suffragettes 2.0, a group of former parliamentarians, called for the passage of a law to ensure at least 40% female representation in the National Assembly by providing financial

incentives for parties to nominate women candidates.¹⁴⁶ In 2018, the Québec solidaire party tabled a bill in the House entitled *An Act to establish gender-balanced representation among Cabinet Ministers*. The same year, the Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie (GFPD) presented a manifesto and a draft bill establishing quotas for women candidates in the *Election Act*.¹⁴⁷

Along with these actions to increase women's political representation, feminist movements continued their struggles, which, in the 21st century, were more focused on issues related to intersectionality, diversity, and violence against women. More than ever, feminist movements were varied. Indigenous women's rights were promoted through the Idle No More movement and events to raise awareness regarding missing and murdered Indigenous women.¹⁴⁸ The rights of sexual minorities and the LGBTQ+ community also became more important in feminist movements. In addition, in 2016 the National Assembly unanimously passed the *Act to strengthen the fight against transphobia and improve the situation of transgender minors in particular*.¹⁴⁹



Monument to honour women in politics. 2012. Québec National Assembly collection, photo credit: Renaud Philippe.

The struggles against sexual and domestic violence, already underway for several decades, gained momentum in 2015 with the *#MoiAussi* (*#MeToo*) and *#AgressionNonDénoncée* (*#BeenRapedNeverReported*) movements on social media, a new forum for feminist activism.¹⁵⁰ In response to these campaigns, in 2017 the Government passed the *Act to prevent and fight sexual violence in higher education institutions*, introduced by MNA and Minister Hélène David. And in recent years, more and more female politicians have spoken out to denounce the violence experienced by women in politics, in particular on social media.

Although the National Assembly achieved near-parity in the 2018 general election, overall progress in increasing women's presence in the Parliament of Québec has been slow and fraught with obstacles. Despite this, women parliamentarians have helped achieve many legislative advances that have had – and continue to have – a major impact on improving the status of women. These advances have come as a result of concerted action by elected women and feminist movements that, through their demands and mobilization, have worked tirelessly to bring about real change in the legislative and political spheres.

Conclusion

Although the presence of women in Parliament is relatively recent in Québec history, women's participation in the political realm has ancient roots. From involvement that was limited and then restricted because of their gender, women have obtained the right to vote and run for office and sit in Parliament through many initiatives and remarkable perseverance. Through their involvement in feminist movements and associations, voter turnout, parliamentary work and legislative initiatives, women have left their mark on Québec's political landscape both inside and outside the National Assembly. Although women's presence in Parliament has increased, there are still obstacles and inequalities with regard to the status of women. In this respect, the history of women's involvement in Québec politics reveals how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

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