

CANADA

A Model for Gender Equality?



EDITED BY

Gabriela Kwiatek

Anna Kasperska

Tomasz Soroka

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Contents

1. Gabriela Kwiatek, Tomasz Soroka	
The Quest for Gender Equality in Canada: Introduction	7
2. Aleksandra Kuroś	
Historical and Legal Perspectives on Contraceptive Accessibility in Canada: The Case for Comprehensive Pharmacare	21
3. Iga Machnik	
Abortion in Canada and the Importance of Legal Reasoning in <i>R. v. Morgentaler</i>	35
4. Olena Chuprynska	
Comparative Analysis of Abortion Service Accessibility and Reproductive Healthcare for Migrants in Poland and Canada	47
5. Gabriela Kwiatek	
Health Equity and Birth: The Accessibility of Indigenous Midwifery and Birth Workers in Canadian Healthcare	61
6. Julia Tymczyszyn	
Equality and Equity in the Canadian Prairies: Understanding the Needs, Challenges, and Experiences of LGBTQ2S+ People in Manitoba's Healthcare System	77
7. Kamil Sowa	
Gender Equality in Canada through the Prism of Political Party Documentation and Programs	89

CONTENTS

8. JR Wikkerink	
Canada's Feminist Foreign Policy: Analyzing the Effectiveness of the Trudeau Government's Gendered Approach	103
9. Marta Samburska-Kinal	
Gender Diversity and Inclusion Efforts within the Canadian Armed Forces	117
10. Anna Kasperska	
Examining Military Sexual Abuse: A Comparative Study of Canadian and Polish Contemporary Armed Forces	131
11. Alicja Murawa	
Highway of Tears: Exposing the Crisis of Violence and Discrimination Against Indigenous Women and Two-Spirit People in Canada	147
12. Katarzyna Sypień	
Gender Equality in Sports: The Struggle of Sportswomen for Equal Rights	161
13. Lucija Todorć	
Women in the Post-Apocalypse: Resistance and Survival in <i>The Marrow Thieves</i>	175
14. Nicole Koenigsknecht	
"Momma always said that woman was the epitome of resource": Contesting Canada's Colonial-Capitalist Food Systems in <i>Jonny Appleseed</i>	189
15. Aleksandra Rachwał	
Icelandic Women in Manitoba: Exploring the Role and Significance of Social and Cultural Capital in a Gender Context	201
About the Authors	213
Index	219

The Quest for Gender Equality in Canada: Introduction

The invisibility and underrepresentation of women, their narratives, and female bodies¹ in academia and research, particularly in the medical field, humanities, and social sciences, have been well-documented. Since the well-being of women is intrinsically interrelated to the welfare of society in its entirety, these gaps in knowledge and subsequent repercussions impact us all. Over the past decade, numerous female scholars have highlighted this matter in renowned academic and popular science publications (Bohannon 2023; Bigg 2023; Perez 2019), advocating for a female-focused perspective across various fields of study. Others have embraced the term “Herstories” in their research, employing feminist methodologies in archival research and highlighting narratives

¹ Historically, women were mostly excluded from clinical trials and pharmaceutical studies due to a variety of factors, such as the additional variable of the menstrual cycle, potential threats to fetuses, and a general conviction that research done on male bodies can apply to female bodies. There has been some improvement since the 1990s, with several nations having introduced regulations that require the participation of women in clinical trials. The first guidelines of this kind in Canada were not developed until 1997. However, since these were merely recommendations, they could not be legally enforced. Even though these guidelines were updated in 2013 and acknowledged the underrepresentation of women, their inclusion in medical trials has not become mandatory to this day (Yakerson 2019). These centuries of exclusion from all kinds of medical research have led to enormous gaps in knowledge about female bodies, which continues to contribute to inequalities in medical research and treatment.

previously disregarded by male historians (Janovicek, Carstairs 2013; Ware 2015; Smith 2019; Miles 2021). Recently, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality" has gained widespread acceptance in research, surpassing feminist theories by taking into account the diverse identity factors impacting each individual's experience. This approach expanded the scope of feminist theoretical frameworks to encompass various aspects, such as sexual and gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, bodily ability/disability, and other related factors. It is crucial to note that while the literature on female experiences is still lacking, non-heteronormative, trans, and non-binary narratives have been even more obscure.

Within the scope of this publication, it is essential to differentiate between "gender equality" and "gender equity" in order to comprehend the dynamics of social justice and policy implementation. Gender equality denotes the condition in which individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, obligations, and opportunities. This concept frequently receives criticism for its exclusive emphasis on formal equality, potentially disregarding the enduring structural inequalities that persist in society (Hankivsky 2009; Fraser 2013). Nancy Fraser contends that although second-wave feminists instigated a cultural revolution, this transformation has not been completely translated into structural change (2013). Nevertheless, this is gradually evolving in many places, including Canada. In contrast, gender equity involves recognizing and addressing these systemic inequalities by implementing measures that ensure fair treatment, access, and opportunities for all genders, based on their distinct needs and circumstances (Sen 1992). Thus, equity extends beyond the mere provision of equal resources and opportunities. It involves the redistribution of resources and the restructuring of systems to address historical and social disadvantages faced by certain groups (Rawls 1971). For instance, while gender equality might ensure equal pay for men and women in the same job, gender equity would involve implementing policies that tackle the obstacles women encounter in accessing these jobs. This includes measures like offering affordable childcare or combating workplace discrimination (Hankivsky 2005). Therefore, attaining genuine gender equity necessitates a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach than what is offered by a simplistic notion of gender equality.

Furthermore, addressing gender equity encompasses not only the principle of fairness, but also the tangible benefits it confers upon society at large. Studies have demonstrated that providing fair and equal support to women and gender-diverse individuals leads to notable advancements in multiple sectors,

including health, economic development, and community welfare. For example, equitable access to reproductive health services has the dual benefit of improving individual well-being and positively impacting public health outcomes by reducing maternal and infant mortality rates (World Health Organization, 2015). Similarly, workplace policies that promote gender equity, such as offering parental leave and flexible working arrangements, have been associated with higher levels of employee satisfaction and efficiency, which, in turn, benefit the economy and foster a more inclusive society.

Canada's history of gender relations and its progression towards gender equality is characterized by complexity, shaped by a confluence of historical, social, and economic factors that have intersected with broader global movements as well as the evolving nature of gender dynamics within the Canadian socio-political landscape. Whereas it is impossible to formulate broad and overgeneralizing assertions regarding pre-colonial times and Indigenous views of gender roles, as each Indigenous culture held its distinct perspective, typically, Indigenous communities' views of gender roles challenged European binary notions. While many societies recognized distinct roles for men and women, these were often seen as complementary rather than hierarchical. Leadership frequently involved both male and female figures, as exemplified by the Haudenosaunee clan mothers and chiefs (Noel 2022). Additionally, Indigenous cultures widely accepted and celebrated a broader range of gender expressions beyond the traditional male-female binary, including the notion of gender fluidity and Two-Spirit identities (Robinson and Bird 2022).

French and British colonization, however, established new foundations of gender roles. Due to the impact of European patriarchal systems, women were largely confined to the realm of household affairs, with restricted legal and property rights. Historically, especially in New France, but also among Puritans in the British North America, marriage and childbirth were seen as the principal responsibility of women, and "male authority within the marriage and the gendered division of labour were firmly entrenched among couples of all occupational groups" (Brun 2004: 36). Women's social standing was mostly contingent upon the occupational rank and socioeconomic position of their husbands.

A turning point for women's rights in Canada came no sooner than in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the emergence of women's suffrage movement in the U.S., Britain, Canada, and beyond, which challenged conventional gender roles and advocated for equal political rights for women. Prominent women activists like Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy were instrumental in

lobbying for women's suffrage, which was eventually granted federally in 1918 (Bacchi 1983). By 1922, women were also allowed to vote in all provincial elections, with the exception of Quebec, where the right was not granted in 1940. The landmark "Persons Case" of 1929, spearheaded by five notable Canadian women activists (known as the Famous Five), further solidified women's legal standing by securing their recognition as "persons" under Canadian law, and thus eligible to sit in the Senate (Sharpe, McMahon 2007). These early victories paved the way for further progress in women's rights and gender equality. While progress was slow, women gradually began joining the workforce, replacing men in factories, offices, and other industries. They subsequently became more prominent in fields like medicine, law, education, and eventually politics. The two World Wars only further accelerated women's rise in sectors previously dominated by men (Barker, Cooke, McCullough 2021). Despite the fact that many women resumed their traditional home responsibilities after the war, the groundwork for further advancements in gender equality and feminist movements had been established.

The suffrage movement, while a pivotal moment in the struggle for gender equality, was in its early iterations inherently limited in its scope. While figures like Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy achieved significant legal advancements for white, upper- and middle-class women, their advocacy was often underpinned by racist, classist, and eugenicist ideologies. Both activists were known for their support for policies that sought to control through sterilization the reproduction of those they deemed "unfit", often targeting Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (McClung 1928). In contrast, the feminist activism of women like Viola Desmond, who challenged racial segregation, and Indigenous activists like Mary Two-Axe Earley (Kanien'kehá:ka and Onyota'a:ka), who fought for the rights of Indigenous women under the *Indian Act* and opposed the exclusive nature of early feminism (Bromley 2012). By confronting systemic racism and colonialism, they expanded the movement's horizons to encompass the intersecting oppressions faced by marginalized groups. Their work was instrumental in creating a more inclusive and intersectional feminist framework.

The post-war period saw a notable rise of second-wave feminism. It specifically addressed concerns related to reproductive rights, equal pay, and workplace discrimination. The 1982 inclusion of gender equality rights in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Section 15), a component of Canada's Constitution, provided a crucial legal framework for combating sex-based discrimination and promoting gender equality in various domains. As

a result, substantial legislative changes followed, including the *Employment Equity Act* (1986), which sought to eliminate employment barriers and enhance job prospects for women and other underrepresented groups in federally regulated sectors, and the 1988 Supreme Court of Canada landmark decision (*R. v. Morgentaler* 1988) to strike down the criminalization of abortion as unconstitutional.

Nevertheless, the struggle for gender equality extended beyond legal recognition. The 1989 École Polytechnique massacre in Montreal, in which 14 women were killed by a shooter specifically targeting feminists, underscored the pervasive problem of violence against women and triggered a significant shift in public discourse regarding gender-based violence in Canada (Bradley 2006). The tragic event also led to increased advocacy and policy changes, prompting the creation of shelters, implementation of support services and educational programs, aimed at preventing and addressing violence. Additionally, the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women was established to solidify Canada's commitment to victims and raise awareness on this matter.

In the 21st century, the focus has broadened to encompass LGBTQ2S+ rights, including gender identity and gender expression. In 2005, Canada became the fourth country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. Consequently, exhaustive legal safeguards against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity have been enacted at both federal and provincial levels. Most recent years have also seen progress in recognizing the rights of transgender and non-binary individuals. Canada has made notable advancements in that regard, including allowing for self-identification of gender on legal documents and adopting gender-sensitive and inclusive language (Government of Canada 2024). In 2017, Bill C-16 was enacted, adding gender identity and gender expression as prohibited grounds of discrimination to the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code.

Beyond dispute, over the last few decades, Canada has made significant strides in promoting women's rights and emerged as a global leader in the advancement of gender equality, both domestically and internationally. Canadian diplomats and representatives abroad have consistently emphasized the significance of gender equality, integrating it into both formal and informal diplomatic discourse. This trend culminated with the election of Justin Trudeau in 2015, who explicitly positioned himself as a feminist and Canada as a global champion of feminism. He announced the promotion of women's rights and gender equality as the cornerstones and highest priorities

The collective publication, titled *Canada: A Model for Gender Equality?*, highlights the work of emerging scholars as the project is conducted by the Students' Association for American Studies. The Students' Association prioritizes the promotion of Canadian cultures in Poland among its primary objectives. This interdisciplinary publication comprises 15 chapters, addressing various issues with a primary focus on feminism and women's rights in Canada. It analyzes the notion of gender equality through an examination of governmental programs, literary works, and social initiatives. It also discusses the challenges faced by marginalized groups, including women of Indigenous descent, immigrant women, and 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals. The book highlights legislative progress and the necessity to continue striving for comprehensive gender equality in social, political, and economic spheres. The historical context of gender equality initiatives in Canada was examined, highlighting the contributions of Canada's feminist movements that facilitated women's advancement in male-dominated arenas. The book underscores the need for further reforms to tackle the pervasive systemic barriers and discrimination that persistently affect the lives of many women and individuals of diverse gender identities in Canada.

The Students' Association for American Studies at the Jagiellonian University (KNA UJ) was founded in 2004 and gathers students studying at the Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora at the Jagiellonian University. During its activity, KNA UJ has organized various cyclical events and conferences, including the Festival of Canadian Cultures, as well as occasional events – celebrations of the 1st and 4th of July, Quiz nights, Election Nights and meetings of the Fireside Chats cycle, where current events related to Canada and the United States are discussed. KNA UJ actively participates in charity events and the activities of the Jagiellonian University, such as supporting the refugees or food donations.



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