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GENDER EQUALITY IN CANADA

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Gender Equality in Canada
(HillStudies)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender equality means that every person, regardless of their gender identity, has the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities. While in Canada, every individual is equal and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law, in practice, gender-based inequalities and discrimination persist and are more prevalent among certain groups.

Gains have been made in a number of areas relating to gender equality over the past few decades. For example, women represent the majority of recent post-secondary graduates, and as of January 2025, they represent more than half of senators and nearly one-third of members of Parliament.

However, inequalities remain in a number of areas. In education, women remain the minority among degree holders in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields. For example, in the 2021–2022 academic year, women represented 24% of post-secondary students in architecture, engineering and related technologies and 27% of students in mathematics, computer and information sciences.

The gender wage gap, or the difference in earnings between men and women, while smaller than in previous decades, persists and is particularly notable for Indigenous women, immigrant women and women with children.

Women, and particularly Indigenous women, face increased rates of certain types of violence. For example, in 2018, almost half of Indigenous women and girls over 15 years of age self-reported that they had experienced sexual assault in their lifetime. More than one-third of non-Indigenous women reported the same. Experiencing violence can affect an individual's sense of personal safety, which can lead to feelings of discomfort or fear. Many victims of unwanted sexual behaviour while in public – for example, sexual comments or attention – change their behaviour after the incident, such as avoiding certain places and changing routines.

The federal government has implemented a number of legislative measures to improve gender equality. The *Pay Equity Act* aims to support progress towards pay equity by requiring employers to provide equal pay for work of equal value. Amendments to the *Canada Labour Code* have increased benefits for maternity leave, parental leave and compassionate care leave, as well as provided leave of absence for victims of family violence.

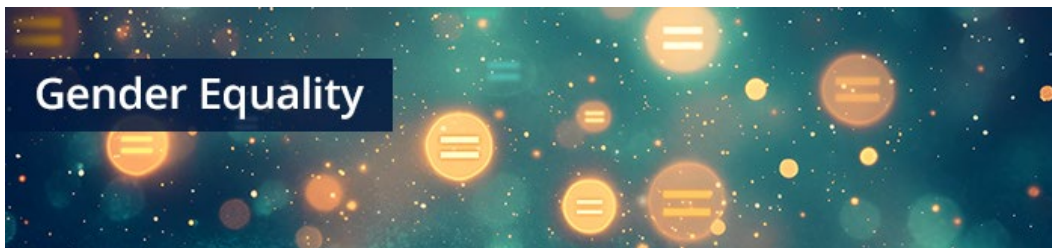
Further federal initiatives to support gender equality include developing the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, which aims to prevent gender-based violence and supports victims and survivors; allowing individuals who do not identify as female or male to mark “X” on their travel documents; and launching the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy, which supports women entrepreneurs by providing venture capital funding and networking and mentorship opportunities.

GENDER EQUALITY IN CANADA

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender equality is that every person, regardless of their gender identity, has the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities.¹ Substantive gender equality is created when laws, programs and policies consider different impacts on people of different genders and do not reinforce or perpetuate inequalities or further disadvantage people based on gender.²

In Canada, every individual is “equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination.”³ However, in practice, gender-based inequalities and discrimination persist and are more prevalent among certain groups.



2 GENDER EQUALITY FRAMEWORKS

2.1 INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The right not to be discriminated against on the basis of sex is a universal human right incorporated into international human rights instruments, including article 2 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*,⁴ *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* and its Optional Protocol, and other core human rights treaties.⁵

Several international, regional and national human rights instruments recognize gender equality as a human right; equality of rights for women is a basic principle of the United Nations (UN).⁶ One of the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality.⁷ To achieve the SDGs, Canada has adopted a national strategy with a Canada-specific indicator framework and makes its progress reports available on a data hub.⁸

2.2 CANADA'S FRAMEWORK

In Canada, the legal foundations for gender equality are enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (the Charter), which guarantees the right to equality before and under the law and equal protection and benefit of the law, and provides that all Charter rights are guaranteed equally to “male and female persons.”⁹ In addition, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, as well as marital and family status, are prohibited grounds for discrimination under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*,¹⁰ which applies to the federal government, other federal organizations, First Nations governments and federally regulated employers.

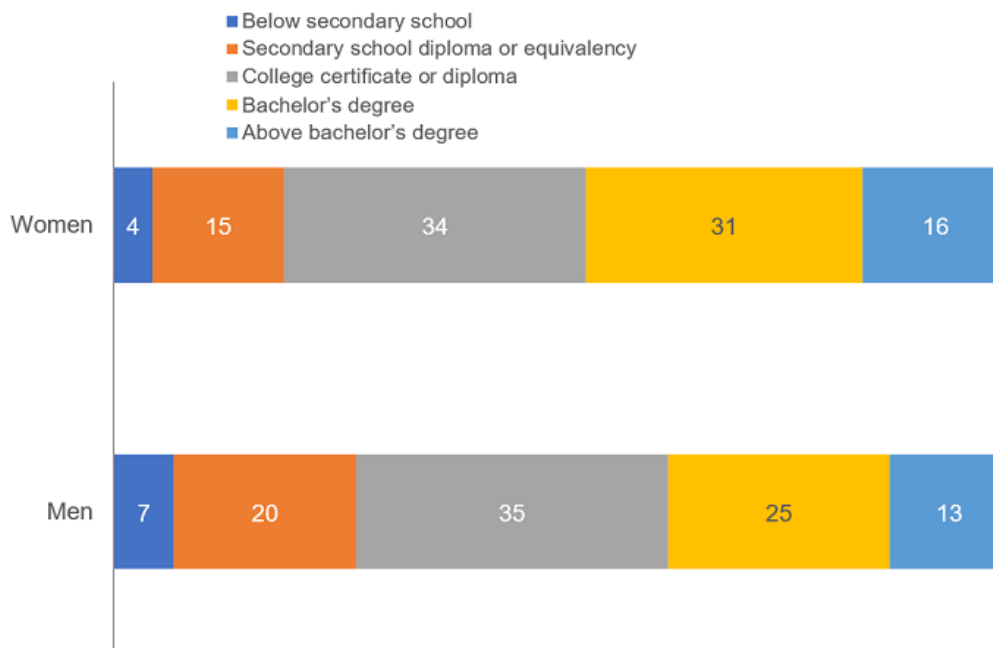
3 OVERVIEW OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN CANADA

Gender inequalities are apparent in a number of contexts in Canada. Some people may face additional or intersectional discrimination and inequality due to other identity factors, such as race, disability and sexual orientation or gender identity, which can amplify or compound the inequalities they face. Some refer to this interaction of multiple forms of discrimination as “intersecting systems of oppression.”¹¹ The following sections of this HillStudy give an overview of existing gender inequalities by issue.

3.1 EDUCATION

Certificate, degree and diploma completion rates vary by gender. Women in Canada represent the majority of recent post-secondary graduates in all provinces and territories and are the majority of university degree holders in most fields of study. Further, the proportion of women completing post-secondary education has increased at a rate faster than that of men in recent decades.¹² In 2024, 81% of women aged 25 to 54 years had completed post-secondary education compared to 73% of men in the same age group, as shown in Figure 1. Using data from Statistics Canada’s Canadian Community Health Survey, gay or lesbian people are more likely to hold a bachelor’s degree or higher when compared to their heterosexual counterparts.¹³

Figure 1 – Proportion of Women and Men Aged 25 to 54 Years by Educational Attainment, 2024 (%)



Source: Figure prepared by the Library of Parliament using data obtained from Statistics Canada, “[Table 14-10-0118-01: Labour force characteristics by educational degree, annual](#),” Database, accessed 22 January 2025.

Despite women receiving more post-secondary degrees, they remain the minority among degree holders in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, occupations that are often associated with high-quality, high-paying jobs.¹⁴ In the 2021–2022 academic year, women represented 23.7% of post-secondary students in architecture, engineering and related technologies and 27% of post-secondary students in mathematics, computer and information sciences.¹⁵ Gender stereotypes, microaggressions and a lack of women role models have been identified as significant contributing factors in the underrepresentation of women and girls in STEM education fields: “[g]irls’ disadvantage is not based on cognitive ability, but in the socialisation and learning processes within which girls are raised and which shape their identity, beliefs, behaviours and choices.”¹⁶

3.2 POVERTY AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

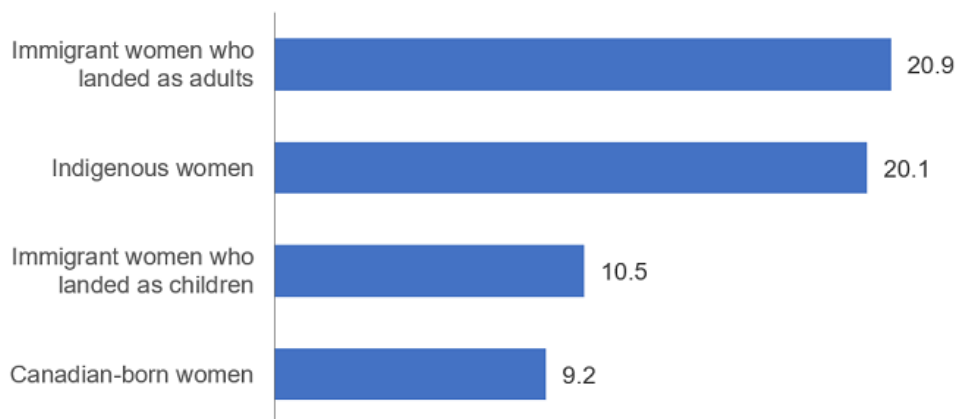
Gender-based differences and inequalities affect the economic well-being of Canadians.¹⁷ Overall, women in Canada have a lower average personal income than men (\$48,400 for women versus \$66,000 for men in 2022). Women, particularly senior women, lone mothers, Indigenous women and women with disabilities are also more likely to live with lower incomes than men.¹⁸ Further, Statistics Canada found that in 2020, a higher proportion of transgender men (12.9%) and transgender women

(12%) were likely to experience low income compared to cisgender men and women (8.2% and 7.9%, respectively), and non-binary people lived in poverty at more than twice the national rate (20.6%).¹⁹

Several factors may help explain the overall gender gap in economic well-being, particularly:

- The wage gap between men and women: while it has narrowed over time, there is still a gender wage gap.²⁰ In February 2024, women aged 25 to 54 years earned \$0.87 for every dollar earned by men of the same age group, which is little changed from 12 months earlier (\$0.86), and on par with the pre-pandemic average between 2017 and 2019 (\$0.87).²¹ Further, when Canadian-born women worked in the same occupation and industry as Canadian-born men, they earned 9.2% less than men in 2022.²² The gender wage gap faced by Indigenous women and immigrant women who landed in Canada as adults is more than twice as large as that for Canadian-born women in 2022, as shown in Figure 2.²³

Figure 2 – Gender Wage Gap Relative to Canadian-Born Men by Group of Women, 2021 to 2022 (%)



Source: Figure prepared by the Library of Parliament using data obtained from Statistics Canada, “[Intersectional Gender Wage Gap in Canada, 2007 to 2022 – Chart 1: Gap in average hourly wage relative to Canadian-born men, by group of women, 2007 to 2008 and 2021 to 2022.](#)” *The Daily*, 21 September 2023.

- Gendered work (horizontal segregation): Some sectors of the Canadian economy are gendered, meaning there is a higher concentration of women in occupations corresponding to gender stereotypes associated with women. For example, in July 2024, women aged 15 years and over were overrepresented in services related to health care and social assistance, where they made up 81% of the workforce. Conversely, women made up only 13% of the construction and 16% of the forestry and logging workforce.²⁴ Notably, the gender wage gap is more pronounced in occupations dominated by men: in 2024, women employed in manufacturing and utilities earned on average 22% less than men in

this sector; and 17% less in natural resources, agriculture and related production occupations.²⁵

- Unpaid work: Women continue to take on most household responsibilities, including preparing meals and cleaning. In 2022, women in Canada spent an average of 7.7 hours more on unpaid domestic and care work each week than men; moreover, mothers spent on average an additional 2.5 hours per day caring for their children compared to fathers.²⁶ More time spent on unpaid work may impact women's availability to participate in paid work and the duration of paid work. In 2022, two-thirds of not-retired "sandwich caregivers," or individuals caring for both their own child/children and parents/parents-in-law, said their caregiving responsibilities affected their employment or job-seeking activities.²⁷
- Fewer women in leadership (vertical segregation): Some demographic groups, including women, are underrepresented in economic leadership positions. In 2021, 30% of senior management positions in business were held by women. Racialized women and Indigenous women made up just 14% and 2%, respectively, of senior management positions.²⁸ Further, women executives earned about 56% less and are less likely to be in a relationship or have children than executives who are men.²⁹ In 2022, 19% of board members on publicly traded companies were women, and 57% of corporations had at least one woman on their board of directors.³⁰

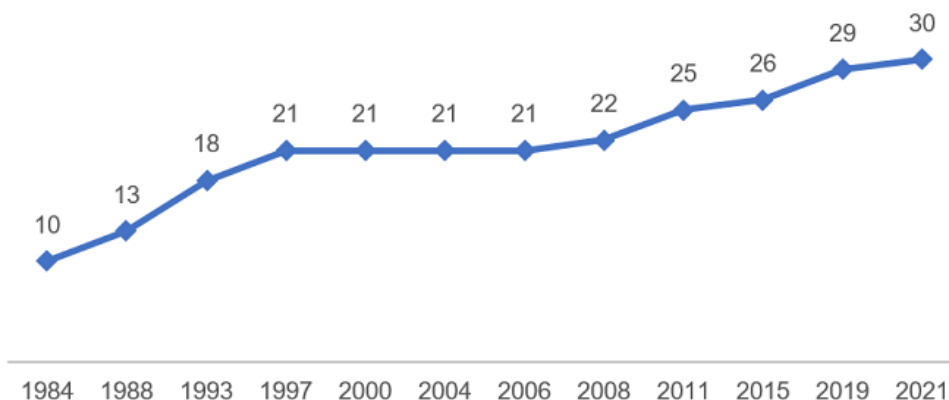
3.3 POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

In Canada, some demographic groups, including women, are underrepresented in electoral politics. According to Equal Voice, a Canada-based not-for-profit dedicated to equality in democratic representation, women and gender-diverse candidates represented 43% of all candidates who stood for office in the 2021 federal general election across the five parties represented in Parliament.³¹ According to Elections Canada data, individuals identifying as gender minorities accounted for less than 1% of candidates in the 2021 federal election.³² Further, racialized women accounted for 6% of candidates and Indigenous women accounted for 2% of candidates during the 2019 federal elections.³³

As of January 2025, women represented 31% of members of Parliament and 54% of senators.³⁴ As shown in Figure 3, women's representation in the House of Commons has increased over time, tripling between the 1984 and 2021 federal general elections. The first openly Two-Spirit candidate was elected to the House of Commons in 2021.³⁵ In 2015, gender parity was achieved among federal Cabinet ministers for the first time, a practice that was maintained following the 2019 and 2021 federal elections.³⁶

In terms of Indigenous women’s political representation at the band level, in 2019, Statistics Canada found that one in five First Nations leaders was a woman, and that more than a quarter of First Nations council members were women.³⁷

Figure 3 – Proportion of Women Among Elected Candidates to the House of Commons in Federal General Elections Between 1984 and 2021 (%)



Source: Figure prepared by the Library of Parliament using data obtained from Library of Parliament, “[Elections and Candidates](#),” Parlinfo, Database, accessed 14 January 2025.

Various barriers contribute to the underrepresentation of women in politics, including the following:

- gender socialization, meaning that leadership characteristics are perceived differently when demonstrated by men and women, and that women may be less likely to compete as these attributes may be perceived as “masculine”;
- biases about women’s work;
- women’s limited access to informal networks and mentors; and
- a lack of women role models.³⁸

Women are also much less likely to run in “party stronghold” ridings than men. In the 2019 federal elections, white women ran in stronghold ridings half as often when compared to white men. Further, racialized men and racialized women each ran only one-third as often as white men in such ridings.³⁹

To help address some of the barriers, the Parliament of Canada has adopted various measures to achieve a more gender-sensitive and family-friendly workplace for parliamentarians. These measures include:

- providing full-time and short-term child care services;
- adapting facilities to support parliamentarians with children, such as reserved parking spots and washrooms with changing tables;

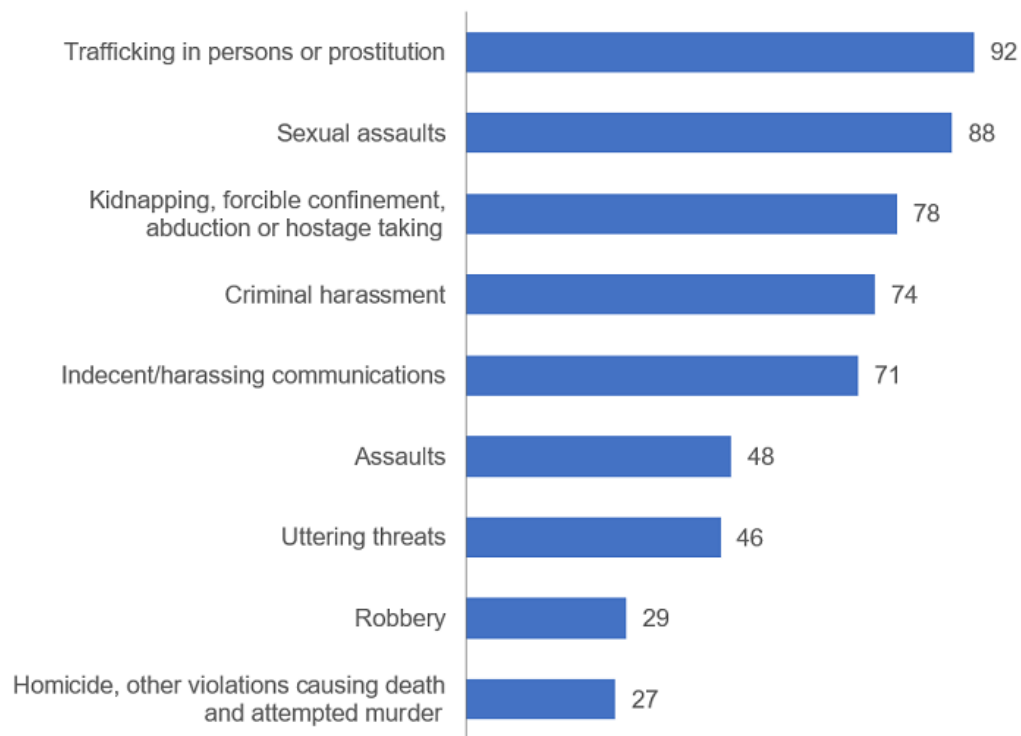
- adopting the *House of Commons Members' Sessional Allowance Regulations (maternity and parental arrangements)*; and
- developing and revising sexual harassment policies for the Senate and the House of Commons.⁴⁰

3.4 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Police-reported data show that women accounted for just over half (52%) of victims of violent crime in Canada in 2023.⁴¹ However, the most recent data from Statistics Canada's General Social Survey – Canadians' Safety show that in 2019, the self-reported rate of violent victimization among women was nearly double that of men.⁴² Part of the reason for this considerable difference between self-reported data and police-reported data is that nearly half of women's self-reported incidents in 2019 were of sexual assault: this type of violent crime is "vastly underreported to police."⁴³ In 2019, 94% of victims had not reported the incident to police, meaning that police-reported data reflect only a small proportion of these crimes. One reason victims may not be reporting sexual assaults to police is that they are less likely to result in a charge than physical assaults: in 2019, only one out of every 19 reported sexual assaults led to a custodial sentence.⁴⁴

In addition, women are more likely than men to be the victims of certain criminal offences (e.g., sexual assault and trafficking in persons and prostitution). Figure 4 illustrates the gender breakdown of certain police-reported violent offences.

Figure 4 – Proportion of Women Among Victims of Selected Police-Reported Violent Crime, 2023 (%)



Source: Figure prepared by the Library of Parliament using data obtained from Statistics Canada, “[Table 35-10-0050-01: Victims of police-reported violent crime and traffic violations causing bodily harm or death, by gender of victim and type of violation](#),” Database, accessed 14 January 2025.

Experiencing violence affects victims’ sense of personal safety. Many victims of unwanted sexual behaviour while in public – for example, sexual comments or attention – change their behaviour after the incident, such as avoiding certain places and changing routines to avoid certain people or situations.⁴⁵

Finally, cisgender people may feel safer than gender-diverse minorities. Data from the First Nations Information Governance Centre collected in 2015 and 2016 showed that First Nations cisgender men reported feeling safe in their community at a significantly higher rate (86%) than their cisgender women counterparts (81%) and Two-Spirit or transgender counterparts (54%).⁴⁶

3.4.1 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

Based on self-reported data, as of 2018, almost half of Indigenous women and girls over age 15 years had experienced sexual assault and 56% had experienced physical assault in their lifetime, compared to 33% and 34% of non-Indigenous women, respectively. Indigenous women with a disability or who had experienced homelessness were even more likely to have been the victim of a violent crime.⁴⁷

Established in 2016, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) was mandated to investigate “all forms of violence against Inuit, Métis and First Nations women and girls, including 2SLGBTQQIA [Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual] people.”⁴⁸ The MMIWG reports addressed historical aspects of discrimination and violence against Indigenous women, girls and members of 2SLGBTQQIA communities, and identified “four pathways that maintain colonial violence” that need to be addressed to achieve systemic change.

The findings and recommendations of the national inquiry’s final report included 231 Calls for Justice, directed at federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments, institutions, social service providers, industries and all Canadians.⁴⁹ In response, in 2021, the federal government, in collaboration with First Nations, Métis and Inuit partners, released a national action plan and the Federal Pathway, the Government of Canada’s plan to support systemic change to address the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people.⁵⁰ In 2023, the government released the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* Action Plan 2023–2028, which provides a roadmap to implement the rights and principles affirmed in the Declaration and to advance reconciliation.⁵¹ Finally, in 2024, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women issued findings on Canada’s implementation of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. In its concluding observations, it welcomed the MMIWG reports but expressed concern with the slow progress in implementing the Calls for Justice and the lack of concrete measures to address the root causes of violence against Indigenous women.⁵²

4 GENDER EQUALITY INITIATIVES AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

4.1 GENDER-BASED ANALYSIS PLUS

In 1995, the federal government committed to applying a gender lens, called Gender-based Analysis (GBA), to assess the different impacts of legislation, policies and programs on women and men. In 2013, it expanded this approach to include additional identity factors in its analyses. Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) allows for the examination of how federal programs, policies and initiatives are experienced differently by people with various intersecting identity factors, such as race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and disabilities.⁵³

In recent years, several Indigenous women’s organizations in Canada have developed culturally responsive GBA Plus frameworks. These take an intersectional approach, considering different characteristics, factors and representations.⁵⁴

4.2 GENDER RESULTS FRAMEWORK

The Gender Results Framework, introduced in the 2018 budget, tracks Canada's progress with regard to gender equality. It has six pillars representing the priorities established by the federal government (education and skills development; economic participation and prosperity; leadership and democratic participation; gender-based violence and access to justice; poverty reduction, health and well-being; and gender equality around the world). Goals, objectives and indicators have been developed for the pillars. According to the government, the framework will contribute directly to the advancement of the UN's SDGs.⁵⁵

4.3 MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT

The Office of the Co-ordinator, Status of Women was established in 1970 in the Privy Council Office (PCO) in response to a recommendation contained in the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. On 1 April 1976, the Office of the Co-ordinator, Status of Women became a departmental agency, which was replaced by the Department for Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) in December 2018. WAGE's mandate is to "advance equality with respect to sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression through the inclusion of people of all genders, including women, in Canada's economic, social, and political life."⁵⁶

The LGBTQ2 Secretariat was established inside PCO in 2017, with a mandate to engage with organizations, protect the rights of 2SLGBTQI+ Canadians and address discrimination. In 2021, it was renamed the 2SLGBTQI+ Secretariat and was relocated to WAGE.⁵⁷

4.4 DEPARTMENTAL GENDER EQUALITY INITIATIVES

In addition to the work of WAGE, all federal departments are directly or indirectly involved in implementing or promoting gender equality-related initiatives.

The following are some examples of such initiatives:

- The National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence (GBV), including bilateral agreements with each province and territory, aims to prevent GBV and provides supports for victims and survivors.⁵⁸

- Statistics Canada has made changes to the collection of gender- and sex-related data in recent years. For example, in 2018, Statistics Canada approved two new “recommended standard” variables: gender of person, which encompasses both gender identity and gender expression,⁵⁹ and sex at birth of person, which refers to the sex a person was assigned at birth.⁶⁰ In 2019, it began collecting and publishing diversity- and gender-related data across categories such as health, education, crime and justice, labour, science and technology, and language.⁶¹
- As of 2019, individuals who do not identify exclusively as female or male can request that an “X” gender designation be printed in their passports or travel documents.⁶² Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada was the first federal department to introduce such measures, but a government-wide policy direction to modernize the Government of Canada’s sex and gender information practices was introduced in 2018.⁶³
- The Women Entrepreneurship Strategy was launched by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada in 2018 to support women entrepreneurs through venture capital funding, loans, provides networking and mentorship opportunities, and a knowledge hub to share knowledge, data and best practices.⁶⁴
- The 50-30 Challenge was launched in 2020 as an initiative between the Government of Canada, Canadian businesses and diversity organizations to increase the representation and inclusion of diverse groups within their workplaces. Its goal is to reach gender parity on boards and in senior management (i.e., 50% women or non-binary people) and at least 30% representation of other equity-deserving groups, such as those who identify as racialized, Black, or people of colour, people with disabilities, people belonging to 2SLGBTQI+ communities and Indigenous people.⁶⁵

4.5 FEDERAL LEGISLATION AND PARLIAMENTARY INITIATIVES

Various federal Acts⁶⁶ contain provisions aimed at promoting gender equality or establishing protections against gender-based discrimination, including:

- the *Employment Equity Act*, which aims to achieve gender equality in the workplace with a focus on four specific groups: women, Indigenous people, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities;⁶⁷
- the *Pay Equity Act*, whose goal is to support progress towards pay equity.⁶⁸ According to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, pay equity is “a fundamental human right” in Canada, explaining that it means “equal pay for work of equal value”;⁶⁹
- the *Canadian Gender Budgeting Act*, which aims to promote the principle of gender equality as part of the federal budget.⁷⁰ The Act requires that every federal budget be accompanied by a Gender Impact Statement identifying the potential gender-based impacts of budget measures.

- the *Canada Labour Code* and the *Employment Insurance Act*, which include provisions such as maternity leave, parental leave, parental sharing benefits, compassionate care leave, maternity-related reassignment and leave, leave of absence for victims of family violence and others;⁷¹ and
- the *Criminal Code*, which prohibits conversion therapy or practices that aim to change an individual’s sexual orientation to heterosexual, gender identity to cisgender, or gender expression to match their sex assigned at birth; and which provides for mandatory minimum sentences for sexual offences against children.⁷²

In addition, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women was established in 2004 to examine women’s issues, including “the way that gender inequality impacts women’s lives.”⁷³ Other standing committees also undertake studies relating to issues of gender equality.

Finally, in 2015, the *Standing Orders of the House of Commons* were changed to include a code of conduct for members on sexual harassment, following a 2014 report by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.⁷⁴

5 CONCLUSION

While there have been significant gains with respect to gender equality in Canada over the past decades, inequalities remain, particularly for diverse groups of women, including Indigenous women, racialized women and women with disabilities, among others. Women face challenges in employment, in part relating to gender norms and discrimination. Fewer women are elected in federal politics than men. They also face higher rates of gender-based violence when compared to men. Federal legislation such as the *Pay Equity Act* and the *Gender Budgeting Act* and other initiatives aim to close such gaps.

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