

CHC2P Unit 5: Canada's Century

Activity 3: Women's Rights

Overview

In this activity, changes in the roles and status of women in Canada will be examined.

Lesson

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women, 1967



During the two world wars, women took on non-traditional jobs and made large contributions to Canada's wartime successes. In the 1920s, women worked to obtain the right to vote and to be recognized as "persons." In the 1950s, Ellen Fairclough who died at age 99 in 2004, became the country's first female Cabinet Minister.

At the urging of Cabinet Minister Judy LaMarsh, Prime Minister Lester Pearson in 1967 created the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. This special government study looked into what steps might be taken by the Federal Government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society.

The Commission listened to women's voices across the country. Among the more specific recommendations were that child care should be shared between mother, father, and society, that maternity required special treatment by society, and that for an interim period, women needed special treatment to overcome some discriminatory practices in employment.

Royal Commission Findings

At the time of the Commission's work, women lived in a different world from today. Some provinces had a minimum wage for women and another for men, in keeping with the view that a woman's income was only an "extra" to that of the main breadwinner. Many newspapers ran separate help wanted columns for men's and women's work.

In full-time work, a woman earned 58 cents for every dollar earned by a man. Women made up less than 5% of the Members of Parliament. Women in the work force did not receive unemployment benefits for maternity absences, and they had no guarantees of employment after the birth of a child.

Improvements in women's rights and conditions have taken place since the report in 1967, but much work remains to be completed. Violence against women continues to be a problem in Canada. Today, the average woman earns approximately 73 cents for every male dollar earned, and the majority of women over 65 are destined to die in poverty.

Parental Benefits and Child Care



If you work, your employer is required to deduct Employment Insurance premiums from your paycheque. These premiums or payments go into a government fund. If you meet certain qualifications, you can withdraw from this fund when you become unemployed.

In Canada, partial wage replacement is provided to new parents who take time away from a paid job to care for their infants through the maternity and parental benefits component of the Employment Insurance program.

Applicants for maternity/parental benefits require 20 weeks of paid employment. Following a two week waiting period, benefits are paid at a rate of 55 percent of previous earnings (to a set maximum amount).

As of January of 2001, the parental benefit period has been extended so that the full package of maternity plus parental benefits is now one year. The parental benefits may be divided between the mother and father of a new child.

Child Care in Canada

Canada has government-regulated child-care spaces for less than 20 percent of children under six with working parents. In comparison, 60 percent of young children in the U.K. are in regulated care, and 78 per cent in Denmark.

The Federal Government promised in 2005 to pump \$5 billion over five years into provinces and territories that create early-learning and child-care spaces that are regulated and universally accessible.

Assignment

1. What evidence exists that, in the past, women were considered second class citizens?
2. Explain why government-regulated and government-funded child care (for children under age 6) is considered an important reform by some Canadians.
3. On October 11, 1964, the CBC television program, This Hour Has Seven Days, broadcast a segment on the birth control pill. View the 2 minute segment at the CBC archives:
<http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/health/reproductive-issues/the-birth-control-pill/the-pill-meant-women-could.html>
4.
 - a) Does this primary source give an accurate picture of life in 1964? Why or why not?
 - b) Speculate about how the birth control pill changed society after its adoption by a large number of women in Canadian society.