

What role did women play in the decade of 1920? essay sample

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The decade of the 1920s was a period of change. In Canada many famous and important events occurred during that time, for example Canada joined the League of Nations; The Indian Act was amended to give Canadian aboriginal peoples the right to vote; The Ottawa Senators won the Stanley Cup, defeating the Seattle Metropolitans. The discussed in the present essay is the first wave of feminism that was also taking place in that time. It was then that women openly realized that their political and economic situation was absolutely unsatisfactory, and they started to demand for same rights as men had, including the rights to vote and to get qualified jobs. But To what extent did the feminists of the 1920s achieve their goals? Women's status in the 1920s changed, yet their role was expected to be the same as before. Meaning that women got the right to be (almost) equal to men, but men expected women to remain housewives rather than economical partners or economically independent persons.

Women were given the right to vote, to run for parliament, given an opportunity to work at many new types of industries. With their new opportunities women started to seek and explore more activeness in the society and many started exploring new areas of culture. By law women were allowed to run for Parliament but practically they were not welcome by their male comrades, which fact obviously demonstrated that many people were not in favour of the new enforcements. Men were prior to women when being chosen for a job by employers. In family life, they were expected to be doing the chores and taking care of the children, rather than economically maintain the family, which was no change from the good old times.

Women were given the right to vote, to run for Parliament, as well as given an opportunity to work at many new types of industries. On May 24, 1918 the Canada Elections Act gave all women over 21 the right to vote. It was by the Dominion Elections Act that the uniform franchise was established on July 1st, 1920 and the right for women to be elected to Parliament was made permanent [1]. The 1920s was full of biographies of famous women that stood out and became pioneers of new areas of society, which previously had been unexplored by women. One of such women was Agnes MacPhail, who became the first female Member of Parliament, originally a schoolteacher in Ontario. She was elected in 1921, at the first federal election in which women were allowed the vote, and she successfully fought for old-age pensions, prison reform, and farmers' co-operatives. She was also the first female delegate to the League of Nations. In addition to that, she was representing women's issues and created the Elizabeth Fry Society of Canada, an association that operates in the present and which goals have been to work with and for women and girls in the justice system, particularly those who are, or may be, criminalized [2].

Another big example of such women is Mary Ellen Smith, who was appointed to the provincial legislative Cabinet in British Columbia, and was the first female Cabinet minister. [3] Winnifred Blair, Miss Canada of the Montréal winter carnival, yet another suffragist pioneer was the first woman allowed to sit on the floor of a Canadian parliament when she attended the opening of the New Brunswick Legislature. The-Globe daily called it " the first distinctive recognition by any legislature of Canadian womanhood." [4] One

of the most famous group of women reformers, that involved law and politics matters were the Famous Five- the group that came to the Supreme Court of Canada with the question “ Does the word ‘ Persons’ in section 24 of the British “ North America Act, 1867, include female persons?”, beginning the famous “ Persons Case”. The section stated “ The Governor General shall from time to time, in the Queen’s Name, by Instrument under the Great Seal of Canada, summon qualified Persons to the Senate; and, subject to the Provisions of this Act, every Person so summoned shall become and be a Member of the Senate and a Senator”.

There was an interpretation that “ in the North America Act the word “ persons” involves the female persons in the sections that talk about responsibilities and duties, but it does not include female persons when talking about rights and freedoms”[5]. The case was very important for women, because it determined whether women could or could not share the same rights and freedoms as men. But The Supreme Court of Canada unanimously decided that “ women were not “ persons” who could hold public office as Canadian senators”. However that disappointment did not fold the famous five down, and the reformers turned to The British Privy Council with the same question, and the Council reversed the decision of the Supreme Court of Canada, and “ Canadian women become “ Persons” with all rights accorded to the definition of persons including the right to sit in the Senate of Canada”.[6] Women also got access to industries that had previously been governed exclusively by men, such as factory

workers, lawyers and judges, and many others. This showed that women were getting less and less dependent on men.

With their new opportunities women became more active in the society and many started exploring new areas of culture. With their own income, even if they gave most of their earnings to their family, women found a new place in society as workers and consumers. With money of their own they could then buy things that before had been mostly made at home, such as clothes. As workers, they became more influenced by the society around them, not just influenced by the people close to them, which were mostly men and women that had a loyal-to-man-housewives stereotype, and that led them to realize they could change the society. The decade of the 1920s saw a big feminist movement, like the flappers. Many women started participating in areas that were not previously explored by women, such as sport, architecture, arts, health and law. The 1920s gave history a lot of famous women, such as Margaret Anne Wilson Thompson, a leading researcher in the field of muscular dystrophy, Lela Brooks, a speed skater, Canada's first woman to be a world champion, or Mary Travers (La Bolduc) who began a successful singing career in 1925.[7]

Many women, mentioned in this essay, became involved in politics, and those female politician pioneers made big contribution to the women's world, as well as other issues that were looked down at before. Many women got high achievements in sports and academics such as Cecile Eustace Smith, the first Canadian woman to represent Canada in an Olympic Games, Lela Brooks, a speed skater, who won the world title Saint John New Brunswick.[8]

Many women sports clubs and leagues were created in the 1920s, such as the first ladies 5 pin bowling league was started in Toronto by Marion Dibble, or The Toronto Ladies Athletic Club, the first all-women's multi-sports club in Canada, that was established by Alexandrine Gibb, The Women's Amateur Athletic Federation (WAAF).[9] The Grads, a high-school women's basketball team from 1915 to 1940, won 49 out of 51 games.

Dr James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, called them " the finest basketball team that ever stepped out on a floor".[10] Women also began getting quality education, completing college and university courses and many excelled in academic subjects. Dr. Allie Vibert Douglas, for example, was the first woman in Canada to graduate with a PHD in astrophysics. In 1920s Women made 16% of the total number of undergraduate students in Canadian universities and 15% of professors in schools were women. Violet Guymer was the first woman to be a licensed Funeral Director in Canada. Eileen Vollick of Hamilton Ontario was the first Canadian woman to earn a private pilot's license. [11]

In the 1920 women were allowed in politics, but weren't welcome by their male comrades, the fact that showed that many people were not in favour of the new enforcements. Although women were beginning to play more active roles in society, the few who found decent and well paid jobs were harassed and discriminated by male colleagues and especially the ones who still believed that women were inferior. On Emily Murphy's first day at court as a judge, a lawyer confronted Murphy's authority and stated that women were not considered " persons" in the British North American (BNA) Act. Similar

cases happened in Alice Jamieson's, a magistrate, court and that's how began the "Persons Case", which was talked about above. [12] Women attending to work found themselves doing two jobs at once- at their salaried employment and at home, as a housewife. Women were also paid almost half the wages of men. Agnes MacPhail said "I think it is a disgrace to men that they are not willing that women should get the same pay for doing the same work.

Why should they not? It is because women, in their homes, do a lot of work – well, I would not like to say "without pay", but certainly not for a stated sum? It has become a habit of mind, that may be it; some explanation must be found to let the boys down, Mr. Speaker, so I will advance that it is simply that they are used to women doing a lot work for nothing, so they do not see why, in factories and other places of employment, they should not do the same".[13] Women were fighting to get a descent and well paid place in society, but men still discriminated women, and thought that if they're inferior to men, they could be treated less fairly than men. Agnes MacPhail remembers her first days in the parliament: "When I first came to the House of Commons and walked out into the lobby, men sprang to their feet. I asked them to sit down since I'd come to walk around. I didn't want them doing me favours. I figured I was going to have trouble enough. I was right. I found that I couldn't quietly do my job without being ballyhooed like the bearded lady ... I was a curiosity, a freak. And you know the way the world treats freaks". [14] Women in the 1920s just started to experience their new role, and men were still too used to "old-style" women.

Men were prior to women when being chosen for a job by employers, and in families. Women were still expected to be doing the chores and taking care of the children, rather than economically maintain the family. This explains the situation in those years: men were first, men could get a better place, and men ruled the world. There is a very good representation of the situation with jobs for both men and women. “ During the 1920s there was a rise in the average size of business units. Newer and larger enterprises began to invest in human resource departments that designed schemes, which aimed principally to reduce the turnover of skilled male workers. Even before the depression, a distinguishing characteristic of large firms was their two-tiered employment systems in which women’s positions were less secure.” [14]

Since men ruled the world, they wanted their profitable places secured, so most did not like the new upcoming changes, and they enforced rules that it was easier for men to get a job. Introduction of minimum wages was to insure that women were getting the minimum descent payment for their jobs, but that gave men a chance to get a stabilised earning, so instead of protecting women, this gave firms an opportunity to hire men in manufacturing. [15] Historically it happened that men dominated in the majority of industries including regulated and protected industries, like in legal and business sectors. A woman employed in office administration found herself in a much better and stable situation, than those in manufacturing: office administrative employees’ wages were higher, and they had better working conditions.

Immigration policies, like Pier 21 affected the women's labour market, as the new immigrants, in hope for better life, agreed to work for much lower wages than local labour force, so women workers were crowded out by those new immigrants. Industrial unions were in no hurry to accept women as their members, which also decreased women protection. Women started to get better quality education, and some even got educational degrees which allowed them to get better qualifications, and better jobs, but not every woman had such an opportunity, and there were seldom women who could afford quality education in a university or college, and therefore, there were seldom women that were high-demanded professionals. [16] Overall the situation for women in 1920s was very tense, and women, opening the door of rights, found themselves standing on the edge of an abyss of problems.

In summary, women's roles in 1920s, evolved into outside the home into active members of society, not just community. Despite many obstacles, such as men's disapproval of their ability to succeed in these roles, women achieved a lot of what they demanded for, and women's status improved. Yet the obstacles that women had to overcome, were very large such as both men's and women's discrimination, as both men and women were still too old-minded, and many still believed that women were inferior to men. Yet the role women changed a lot in the course of the struggle and aspirations of the 1920's, and the 1920s pioneers cleared the path for feminist for the subsequent suffragists of the 1960s.

CITATIONS FOR THE DIFFERENT SOURCES USED IN THE ESSAY

Timeline – Status of Canadian Women

Famous Women in Canada biographies- Agnes MacPhail

Famous Women in Canada biographies- Mary Ellen Smith

Famous Canadian Women Historical Timeline

Famous Women in Canada biographies- Emily Murphy

Persons Case

Famous Canadian Women Historical Timeline

Famous Canadian Women Historical Timeline

Famous Canadian Women Historical Timeline

Canadian Sports tribune

Famous Canadian Women Historical Timeline

Persons Case, Famous Women in Canada biographies

“ Agnes MacPhail and the politics of equality”

“ Agnes MacPhail and the politics of equality”

“ Occupational Gender Segregation and Women’s Wages in Canada: A Historical Perspective” by Nicole M. Fortin, Michael Huberman.

The Canadian Encyclopedia, The Rapid Changes in Women's Roles from 1900 to 1920