

CANADIAN WOMEN IN THE 1920s

While Canadian women had earned new respect because of their contributions to the war effort in World War I, the world was still dominated by men in the twenties. Women had gained the right to vote in federal and provincial elections (except in Québec) but only a few women were elected to office.

Women were still viewed by many Canadians as being inferior to men. This was seen in their roles outside the home where they followed the directions of men and served as helpers; they were not allowed to make the decisions. They usually occupied low-paying, low-status jobs traditionally considered female such as nurses, secretaries, domestics, clerks, or factory workers. These "female" jobs accounted for 20 percent of the labour force by 1929. When unions bargained with employers they often made deals that discriminated against their female members. Female workers received less than males for doing the same work. When unions did demand equal pay for both sexes it was often done to ensure that male workers would not be replaced by the cheaper labour of women.

In 1929 only 25 percent of young women managed to attend high school. Few women became doctors, lawyers, or business executives. Middle-class women were expected to stop working when they got married; men were expected to support their wives and be the sole breadwinners. In 1921 a federal law required that female civil servants quit working when they married. It was assumed that married women no longer needed the income and that their jobs should be given to men with families to support.

Quality of Life

Many other changes were improving the quality of life for everyone, including women, during the 1920s. Machines, new methods of producing goods, and inventions were affecting the way people lived. Suddenly electrical appliances were available at reasonable prices to reduce the time it took to perform certain chores. Vacuum cleaners, stoves, refrigerators, washing machines, sewing machines, and irons were some of the new gadgets that became part of the daily lives of many Canadians. Before these appliances were available doing these chores had been time consuming hard work; they were usually done by women. Frozen and canned foods became common in homes and women no longer had to produce everything from scratch. This did not mean that women had more leisure time; it merely meant that they had more time to devote to other tasks like taking care of their children, husbands, and elderly relatives.

Fashion

Clothing styles for women changed in the 1920s. Hemlines rose to above the knee — unthinkable in earlier times. The "boyish" look in dress and hair was the modern look of the 1920s. It seemed to indicate that women were freer to do more than before and were more equal to the men around them. Beauty parlours grew in number, but concern for appearance was to attract someone suitable to marry. Both men and women saw females as wives and mothers. A few women lived non-conformist lives. These women were called flappers, but their lifestyles were considered too extreme for most Canadians; they did not fit the traditional ideas of how a woman should look and act.

Portrait of a Flapper

A minority of young women who lived in the cities during the 1920s were considered by many to be wild, immoral, and uncontrollable. The term "flapper" was a put down. It came from the word to describe a young, immature bird that had not yet grown enough feathers to fly but was uselessly flapping its wings to try to take to the air. Many Canadians were shocked by the flappers' appearance, behaviour, and lifestyle. They wore too much make-up and perfume, used bad language, smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, and wore short skirts and revealing clothing. They loved fast cars and parties and stayed out all night dancing.



In 1924 a new dance appeared called the Charleston. It was first performed in a theatre show called *Runnin' Wild* and at first was considered too difficult for ordinary people. But young people, especially flappers, soon adopted this new dance craze; its fast rhythm and steps were exactly what they wanted. They were ready to embrace anything that seemed new and exciting. Soon the Charleston became the rage and flying beads, crossing hands, and knocking knees became the newest fad.

1. List the number of examples given in this reading to support the fact that women were still viewed and treated by many Canadians as being inferior to men in the 1920s.

2. What social expectations were placed on women in terms of education and family life?

3. How did the technological changes that were happening in the 1920s improve the quality of life for women? (list examples)

4. Describe women's fashion in the 1920s.

5. Who were the "flappers"? Why were they considered by the previous generation of Canadians to be "shocking" or offensive?

6. What was the Charleston? Why do you think that it appealed most especially to young people and flappers?