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Canadian Women & the Struggle for Equality by Lorna Marsden

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Marsden, Lorna R. *Canadian Women & the Struggle for Equality*. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 290 pages. Hardcover, \$29.99.

Canadian Women & the Struggle for Equality is a historical-sociological account of the transformational process women went through in their quest for equality in Canada. Lorna R. Marsden, a sociologist, activist, former Canadian senator, and former university president, recounts the long road toward equality women have traveled. She discusses this struggle in the context of the evolution of the law, demographics, the labor force, health care, immigration, and the world wars. In effect, this book aims at a comprehensive explanation of how women and women's organizations contributed to social change and how the sociological circumstances within which major improvements in the status of women in Canada came to pass. The focus is on the means through which Canadian women and their male supporters succeeded in moving their agendas into law or common practice. What is remarkable was that social change in Canada was slow and accretive, and the struggle for women's equality occurred without social strife or acrimonious debate.

The author traces gender inequality in Canada to the British North America (BNA) Act of 1867, which became the basis of the Canadian constitution. The first major flaw of the BNA was "the complete omission of rights or recognition of women. Women neither participated directly in nor were mentioned as a group in the debates that led to the BNA Act" (p. 30). As a result, women were ignored in public life. Voting rights excluded women, and women's citizenship was tied until 1946 to their husbands or fathers. If a woman married a non-British subject, she automatically lost, along with other citizenship rights, the right of franchise. Married women were (or were expected to be) dependent on their husbands' income and could not seek paid employment outside the home. Single or widowed women were expected to live on modest means. Women were not likely to consider themselves equal to men and, even if contemplated, opportunities in the public domain to express such beliefs were limited. While women could vote in public elections in the 1960s, there were very few female representatives in the legislatures or the courts. Furthermore, only married women had access to birth control. In fact, the general perception was that women achieved a higher moral status through motherhood. Consequently, women were not only relegated to the maternal role, but were also denied any significant role in other aspects of society. Even marriage did not confer equality on women, as evidenced in the Irene Murdoch Case in Alberta in 1973, in which the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that Mrs. Murdoch, despite building and maintaining the family ranch together with her husband, was not entitled to an interest in the lands. Some historical events, notably the involvement of women in the First and Second World Wars, helped create economic opportunities and improve women's rights. Women's suffrage, for example, came as a consequence of war. While some provinces had granted women voting rights in municipal elections as property owners, the Canadian Parliament debated whether provincial suffrage automatically gave women the vote in federal elections. The law granting women the federal vote came into force January 1, 1919. Finally, the Dominion Elections Act of 1920 extended not only the right to vote but also the right of women to stand as candidates for public office. This law, however, excluded certain categories of ethnic minorities, and did not erase all provincial differences. For example, Manitoba and Alberta gave women voting rights in provincial elections in 1916, but Quebec did so only in 1940. Nevertheless, Marsden is right to argue that World War I brought significant permanent changes for women's political rights and military roles. Women served not only as commissioned officers in the military, but also could stand for elective office to the federal Parliament and hold public

office. In World War II women's work in food production and manufacturing contributed significantly to the war effort. These did not erase gender inequality; military women were usually paid less than men, and persuading the military brass on the equal treatment of female colleagues was a struggle. Yet on the political front, while only two women served in the House of Commons in 1939, more women actively participated in the main political parties and in electoral debates.

After World War II, the struggle continued in other areas of women's lives. For example, birth control debates were marked by a showdown between Catholic and Protestant communities. It was only in 1969 that abortion was legalized. Meanwhile, courageous individuals championed the struggle for higher education for women and for gender equality in the workplace. However, the 1982 Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms quickened the pace. Other crucial sources of social change in women's rights included women's organizations that pressured legislative changes and the entry of women into the study and practice of law.

Today, many more women have entered the labor force, but primary caregiving for children coupled with the double burden of labor market participation and domestic work (a.k.a. the "second shift") still fall largely on women. The book nevertheless ends on an optimistic note regarding the transformational progress that has been made in the women's struggle for equality. Some concerns and problems have not disappeared: equal pay for work of equal value, workplace discrimination, domestic violence, health care, and a host of other concerns that impinge on women's lives. But in light of the achievements already made, the watchword for the current generation is that persistence pays off. Besides a few printer's devils spotted here and there, Marsden's book provides in-depth and excellent sociological analyses of women's struggle for equality in Canada. Students of social inequality, history, and women's studies will find this resource invaluable.

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