

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STATUS OF WOMEN
IN QUÉBEC AND ACROSS CANADA**
(Updated: 2005-04-21)

1. From a political representation viewpoint

In Québec

Since the election of April 14, 2003, the National Assembly has had 40 women members, or 32% of its total membership of 125. According to the standings compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Québec would rank 14th among countries in terms of most women elected. Québec is one of the few places in the world to elect such a high proportion of women without recourse to proportional representation or special measures favoring the election of women.

In Québec premier Jean Charest's government, 10 of the 27 ministers are women, which means women make up 37% of the cabinet. Also noteworthy, the number of women at the National Assembly and in cabinet has been rising constantly in Québec from one election to the next.

At the municipal level, however, only 10% of mayors and 25% of municipal councilors were women in 2004. To facilitate access to decision-making positions for women at the local and regional levels, the Government of Québec has renewed its program *À égalité pour décider* for 2004–2005 aimed at increasing the number of women in local and regional bodies.

Of further note is the proportion of women deputy or assistant deputy ministers in the Québec senior civil service, which rose from 11.8% in 1994 to 25% in 2003. Over the same period, the proportion of government agencies headed by women more than quadrupled, from 5.6% to 23.5%.¹

In Canada

The federal election of June 28, 2004, did not strengthen the presence of women in the House of Commons in Ottawa. In absolute terms, the number of women rose from 62 to 65, but their proportion held steady at 21% since seven new seats were added for a grand total of 308. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union figures, Canada ranks 33rd among countries (national parliaments) in terms of most women elected (as of June 30, 2004)². However, from a standpoint of the number of women candidates, there has been a slight improvement over previous elections, with the proportion rising from 20.7% to 23%. In the executive branch, Prime Minister Paul Martin's 39 member cabinet includes nine women, representing slightly less than a quarter (23%) of the available portfolios. This marks a drop compared to Martin's first cabinet, which had 11 women ministers.

¹ CONSEIL DU STATUT DE LA FEMME, *De l'égalité de droits à l'égalité de fait : repenser les stratégies et élargir la perspective*, Brief to the Minister for Relations with Citizens and Immigration, May 2004, p. 14.

² Complete IPU rankings are available at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn- f/classif.htm>

2. Recent Government Actions

In Québec

The Québec government is currently working on a new policy on the status of women. Conseil du statut de la femme, a government consulting agency that celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2003, presented a brief³ on new directions and priorities the government should be adopting to ensure equality between men and women. In the last few months, the social affairs parliamentary committee has held a general consultation on the brief to allow all those interested to comment on it. This consultation process will provide further input to the government as it draws up its new policy.

The Québec government is also developing a policy on work/family conciliation, an issue of vital importance to Québec women. A consultation document entitled *Vers une politique gouvernementale sur la conciliation travail-famille*⁴ was released by the Minister of Employment, Social Solidarity and Family Welfare in June 2004. Under its family policy, the Québec government also improved the current system of parental leave so that it better addresses the needs and realities of Québec families following an agreement with the federal government in this regard.

In Canada

Since January 2004, Canadian workers who must temporarily stop working to provide care and support to their gravely ill child, mother, father, or spouse have qualified for up to six weeks of compassion benefits. This measure is of particular interest to women since they are more likely than men to care for sick family members.

A working group created in 2001 to study possible improvements to pay equity measures at the federal level released its report in summer 2004. The federal government and most provinces and territories have adopted laws or policies on pay equity. In Québec, the 1996 *Pay Equity Act* applies to both the public and private sector (companies with 10 employees or more).

³ An electronic version of this brief is available online at <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/fra/37legislature1/commissions/cas/egalite/avis.pdf>

⁴ An electronic version of the consultation document is available online at http://www.mfe.gouv.qc.ca/famille/conciliation_travail_famille/consultation/document/index.asp