

Focus Canada – Fall 2021
Women’s equality and the women’s movement: an update
FINAL REPORT (PUBLISHED JANUARY 4, 2022)

About this study

The study provides an analysis of Canadian public opinion on issues facing women in Canada today and on the impact of the women’s movement. It compares the latest results to those from previous surveys conducted in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. The study was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with Senator Donna Dasko.

This study is part of the Environics Institute’s Fall 2021 Focus Canada survey.¹ Focus Canada is the longest running and most comprehensive public opinion research program on public policy issues in Canada.

In the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, several Focus Canada surveys addressed issues relating to women in Canadian society, including attitudes towards gender equality, perceptions of challenges facing women, and opinions on feminism and the women’s movement. Building on this unique collection of historical information, the Fall 2021 Focus Canada revisited many of these issues, to determine whether and how attitudes have evolved.

The survey is based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cellphones) with 2,000 Canadians between October 4 and 17, 2021.² A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples. The survey data are weighted by region, age and gender to ensure they are representative of the overall Canadian population.

¹ The earlier reports from this survey covered attitudes on immigrant and refugees, and on Indigenous Peoples and reconciliation. Reports are available online at <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects>.

² The funding to cover the direct costs of these survey question was provided by Senator Donna Dasko; funding for research and analysis was contributed by the Environics Institute.

Executive summary

Just over 50 years ago, the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was tabled in Parliament, making dozens of recommendations intended to advance women's equality in Canadian society. In the ensuing decades, the legal, economic and political status of women has changed dramatically, as have social attitudes about gender roles. But the sense that there is a need to continue to promote the equality of women has not faded – rather, it is more pronounced today than in previous decades. At the same time, both women and men in Canada are more likely today than they were 20 years ago to say they consider themselves to be a feminist – with the increase over time being the most dramatic in the case of young women.

Key findings

- Canadians in general, and Canadian women in particular, recognize the importance of a wide range of issues facing women in Canadian society, including those related to economic equality and access to child care. However, violence against women stands out as the top concern: just over eight in ten Canadians say that violence against women in the home is a very important problem facing women in Canada today, and almost as many say the same of violence against women in society at large.
- At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the particular challenges facing Indigenous, racialized and immigrant women in Canada. The proportion saying the poor conditions of Indigenous women are very important has almost doubled since 1998, as has the proportion saying the same of the poor conditions of immigrant and visible minority women.
- In the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, large majorities of Canadians agreed that more should be done to promote the equality of women. But agreement is even stronger today – in fact, at nine in ten, it is almost universal. Agreement among women is only slightly higher than agreement among men.
- Similarly, there is widespread agreement in Canada that, since the women's movement got started in the 1960s, it has made things better for women: 80 percent of Canadians hold this view, while very few say it has made things worse for women. Once again, there is little difference in opinion between women and men on this question.
- While in the 1990s, large majorities of women in Canada felt that more needed to be done to promote the equality of women, only a minority at that time said they considered themselves to be a feminist. But since then, the term “feminist” has significantly increased its appeal to Canadian women – and to men as well. Today, more than one in two women in Canada say they consider themselves to be a feminist.
- The increase in the proportion of women that consider themselves to be a feminist has occurred across all age groups, but most dramatically in the case of younger women. The proportion of women age 18 to 24 who consider themselves to be a feminist has doubled since 1992.

Importance of problems facing women in Canada today

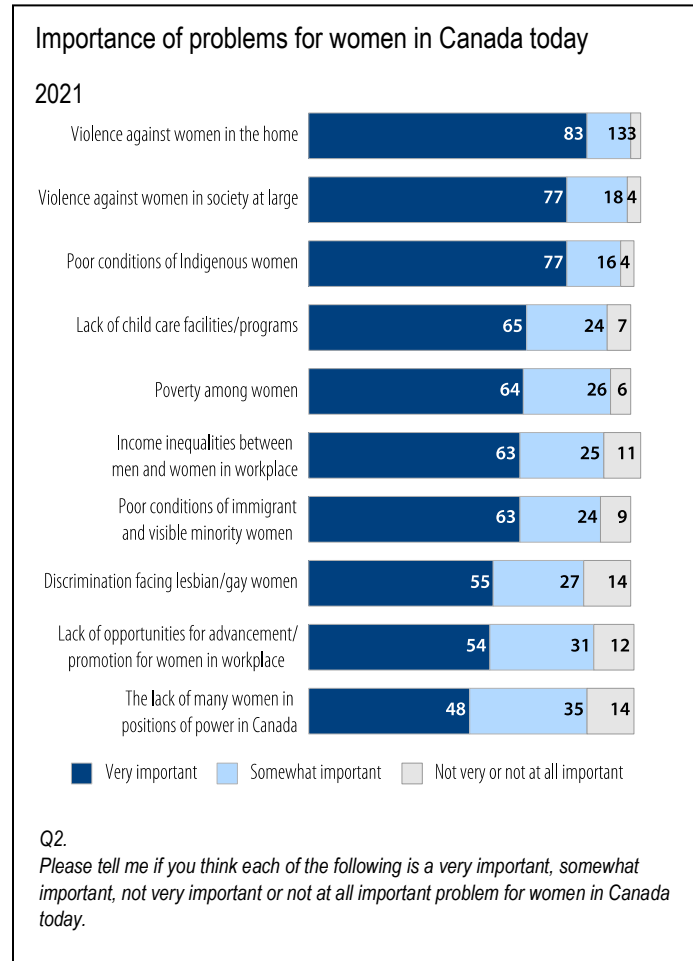
When thinking about a number of different problems facing women in Canada, violence against women stands out as the top concern. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the particular challenges facing Indigenous, racialized and immigrant women in Canada.

Advocates for women's equality in Canadian have no shortage of issues to address. Women continue to be under-represented in decision-making institutions, including federal and provincial legislatures, and corporate boards of directors. On average, women continue to earn less than men, while taking on a disproportionate share of responsibilities for child care and other forms of domestic labour. Women in general – and specific groups of women in particular, such as Indigenous women – are targets of gender-based violence in society at large and in their own homes. Many women, particularly those with public-facing roles such as politicians, journalists and academics, have been subjected to misogynistic threats and abuse on social media platforms.

Canadians were presented with 10 issues facing women in Canada today and asked to rate their importance. The results show that, while Canadians in general – and Canadian women in particular – recognize the importance of each of these issues, violence against women stands out as the top concern. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the particular challenges facing Indigenous, racialized and immigrant women in Canada.

- **Violence against women in the home** is the issue most likely to be seen as a very important problem: 83 percent of Canadians hold this view. Almost as many (77%) also say that **violence against women in society at large** is a very important problem.
- Just over three in four Canadians (77%) also say that **the poor conditions of Indigenous women** is a very important problem for women in Canada today.

- Four issues are seen as a very important problem for women by around almost two-thirds of Canadians: **the lack of child care facilities and programs (65%); poverty among women (64%); income inequalities between men and women in the workplace (63%); and the poor conditions of immigrant and visible minority women (63%)**.
- According to just over one in two Canadians, **discrimination against lesbian and gay women (55%), and lack of opportunities for advancement and promotion for women in the workplace (54%)** are very important problems for women in Canada today.
- **The lack of many women in positions of power in Canada** is the least likely of the 10 items to be seen as a very important problem, with about one in two Canadians (48%) holding this view.



Large majorities of Canadians say that each of these 10 issues is either a very important or somewhat important problem for women in Canada today; the proportions saying the issues are not very or not at all important are under 15 percent in each case.

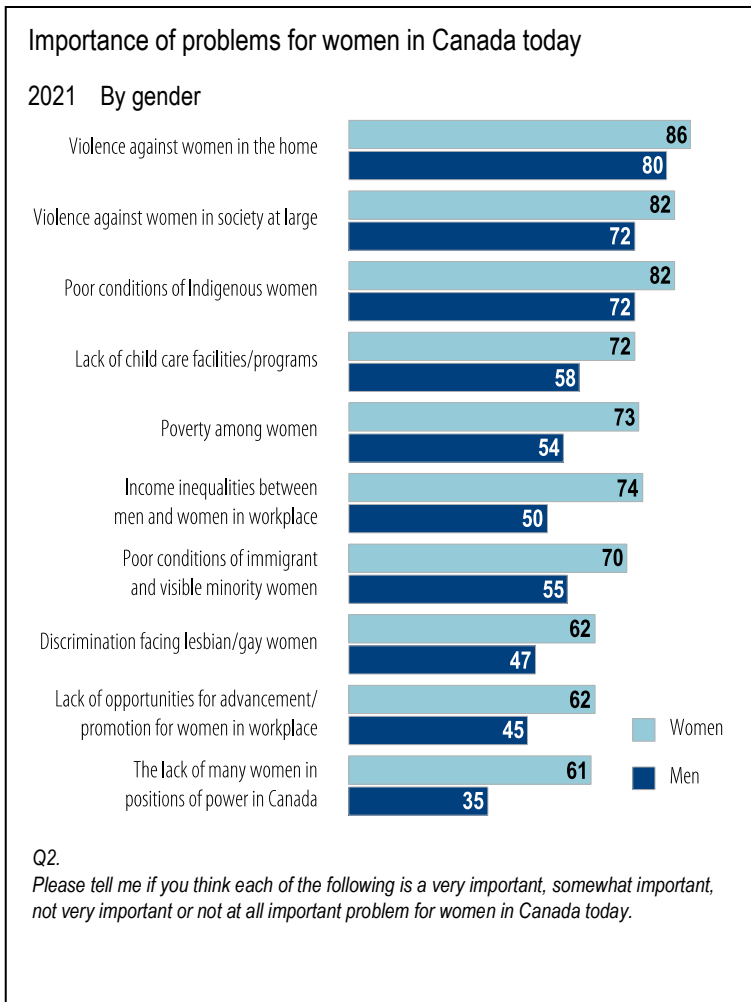
Differences between men and women

Both women and men are most likely to say that violence against women (whether in the home or in society at large) is a very important problem for women in Canada today; and both are least likely to say the same about lack of opportunities for advancement and promotion for women in the workplace, or

the lack of women in positions in power. Women, however, are more likely than men to say that each of the 10 issues is very important.

The gap between the views of women and men is larger in the case of economic issues such as the lack of women in positions of power (a gap of 26 points), or income inequalities between men and women (a gap of 24 points), than in the case of issues such as violence against women in the home (a gap of 6 points).

Both women and men almost universally recognize that violence against women is either a very or a somewhat important problem for women in Canada today. In the case of violence against women in the home; for instance, only two percent of women, and only four percent of men, say that it is not very or not at all important.



However, larger proportions of men (about one in five) say that some economic issues are not very or not at all important problems for women in Canada today. In the case of the lack of many women in positions of power in Canada, 21 percent of men (compared to 7% of women) say this is a not very or not at all important problem for women; 19 percent of men (compared to 5% of women) hold this view in the case of lack of opportunities for advancement and promotion for women in the workplace; and 18 percent of men (compared to 4% of women) say the same in the case of income inequalities between men and women in the workplace.

Differences in views among women

Large majorities of women of all backgrounds see violence against women in the home and violence against women in society at large as very important problems for women in Canada today. In these cases, there is little noticeable variation in opinions across regions, among age groups, among those with more or less education, or higher or lower incomes, or between white and racialized women.

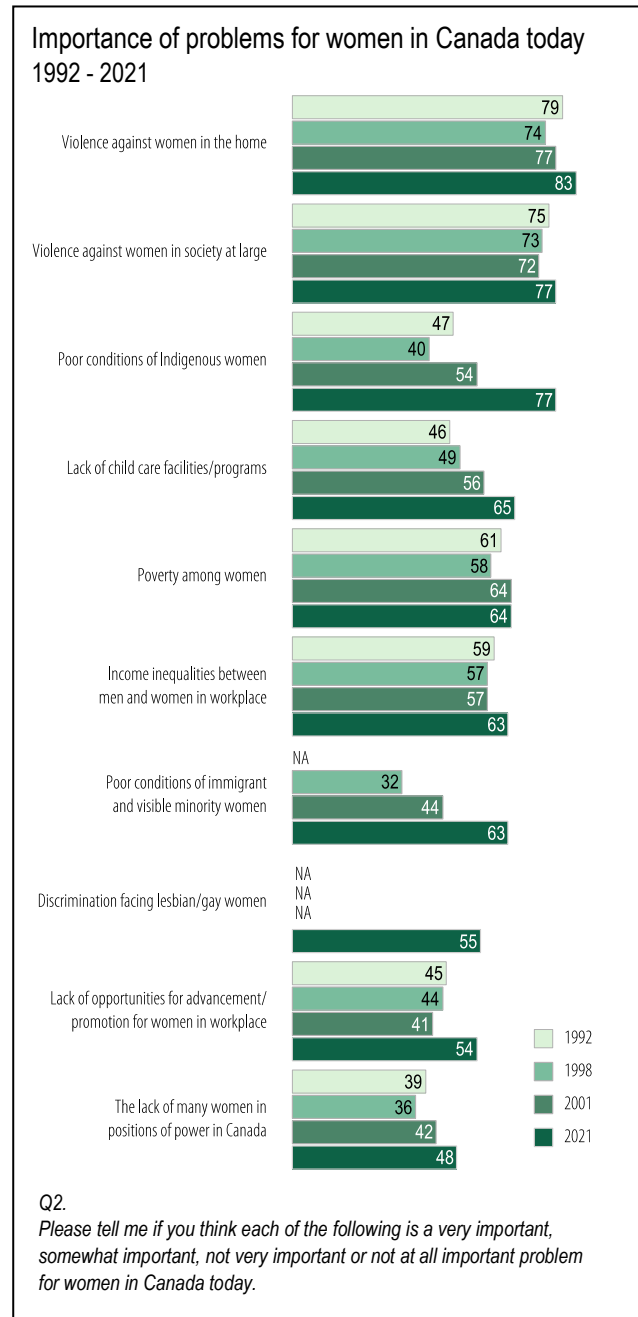
There are some modest variations in views among women on the other issues mentioned in the survey.

Women in Quebec are somewhat less likely to say that both income inequalities between men and women in the workplace, and the lack of many women in positions of power in Canada, are very important problems for women in Canada today. Women in Ontario are the most concerned both with the poor conditions of both Indigenous women, and immigrant and visible minority women. The proportion of women saying that the lack of child care facilities and programs is a very important problem ranges from a high of 82 percent in Atlantic Canada to a low of 66 percent in the West.

Differences in views between older and younger women appear on only a few issues. Older women (age 55 and older) are more likely than younger women (age 18 to 34) to say that poverty among women is a very important problem for women in Canada today. But the opposite is the case when it comes to discrimination against lesbian and gay women, and the poor conditions of immigrant and visible minority women.

Lower-income women are only somewhat more likely that their higher income counterparts to say that poverty among women, and the lack of child care facilities and programs, are both very important problems for women in Canada today: large majorities of women in all income groups agree that both of these are very important. There is a more noticeable difference in the case of the lack of opportunities for advancement and promotion for women in the workplace: 72 percent of lower income women say this is a very important problem, compared to 56 percent of higher income women.

Significant differences between racialized women and those who identify as white are also the exception rather than the rule. Racialized women (80%) are more likely to say that the poor conditions of immigrant and visible minority women are a very important problem, though this view is nonetheless shared by about seven in ten (68%) white women. Racialized women are also somewhat more likely than white women to say that the lack of opportunities for advancement and promotion for women in the workplace is a very important problem for women in Canada today; and the same is true regarding the lack of child care facilities and programs.



Changes over time

In general, Canadians (both women and men) are more likely today than they were 20 or 30 years ago to say these issues are very important problems for women. But the changes over time are more pronounced in some cases than others.

In particular, Canadians are much more likely today to say that the poor conditions of both Indigenous women, and of immigrant and visible minority women, are very important. The proportion saying the poor conditions of Indigenous women are very important has almost doubled since 1998 (from 40% to 77%), as has the proportion saying the same of the poor conditions of immigrant and visible minority women (increasing from 32% to 63%).

The proportion saying that the lack of child care facilities and programs is a very important problem has also increased significantly, from 46 percent in 1992 to 65 percent in 2021. The increase has been about as large for men (up 17 points) as for women (up 20 points).

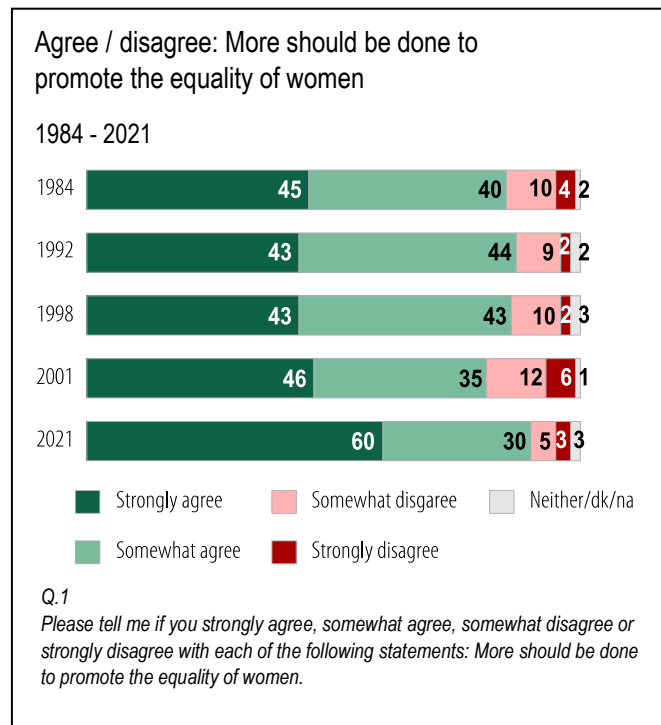
There have been smaller increases in the proportions saying that both the lack of opportunities for advancement and promotion for women in the workplace, and the lack of many women in positions of power in Canada, are very important (up 9 points since 1992 in each case). In the case of the other issues, the increases over time are even smaller.

The need for action on women's equality

There is almost universal agreement in Canada that more should be done to promote the equality of women. Moreover, this agreement is higher and stronger than in was in previous decades.

Just over 50 years ago, the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was tabled in Parliament, containing dozens of recommendations intended to advance women's equality in Canadian society. In the ensuing decades, the legal, economic and political status of women has changed dramatically, as have social attitudes about gender roles. But the sense that there is a need to continue to promote the equality of women has not faded – rather, it is more pronounced today than in previous decades.

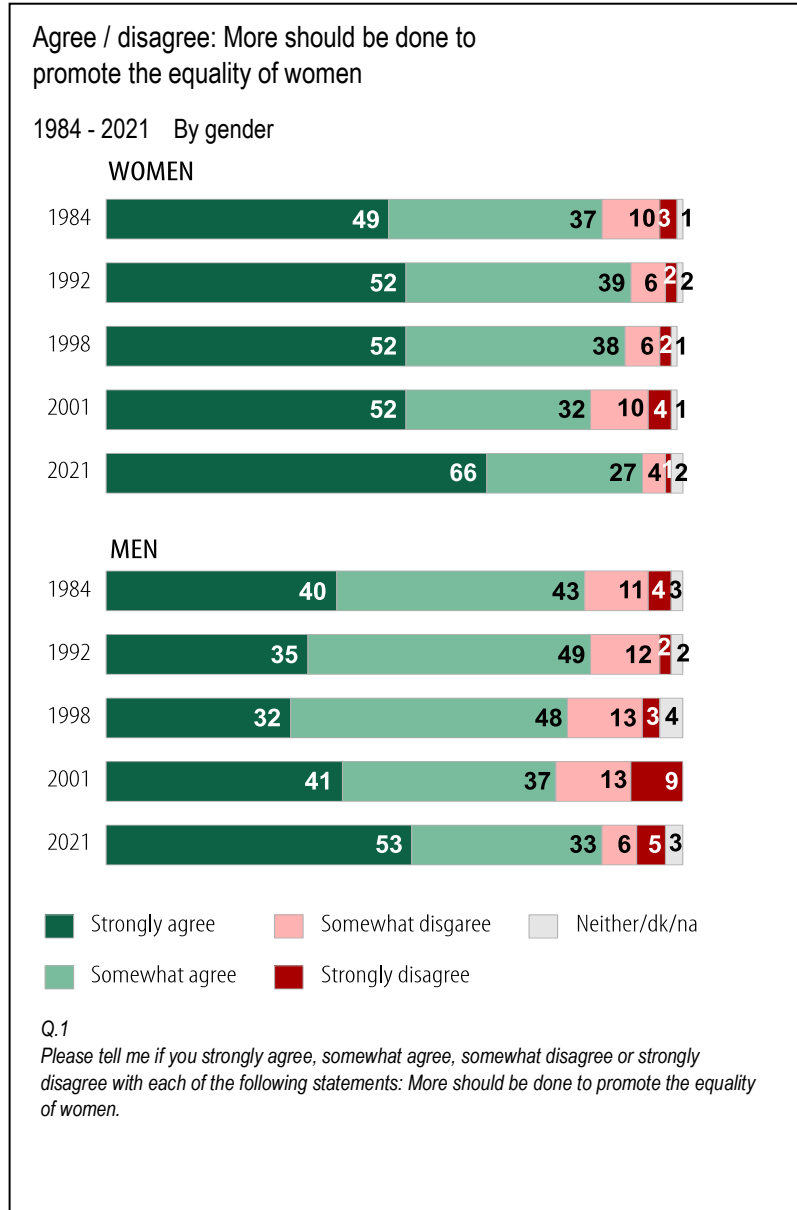
Currently, 89 percent of Canadians agree that more should be done to promote the equality of



women, including 60 percent who strongly agree, and 30 percent who somewhat agree. Seven percent disagree, and three percent do not offer an opinion either way. Agreement among women (at 93%, including 66% who strongly agree) is only slightly higher than that among men (at 86%, including 53% who strongly agree).

In the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, large majorities of Canadians also agreed with this proposition. Since the question was last asked in a Focus Canada survey in 2001, agreement has nonetheless risen from 81 percent to 89 percent today; and strong agreement is up 14 points, from 46 percent to 60 percent.

Majorities of women from all backgrounds strongly agree that more should be done to promote the equality of women. Strong agreement among women is currently highest in Atlantic Canada (76%) and lowest in the West (61%). It is also somewhat higher among those who have completed university (69%) compared to those who did not continue their formal education past high school (60%); and slightly higher among non-racialized women (68%) compared to those who are racialized (63%). Strong agreement does not vary notably among women in different age groups or with different levels of household income.



Impact of the women’s movement

Eight in ten Canadians believe the women’s movement has had a positive impact by making things better for women. Women and men hold similar views on this question.

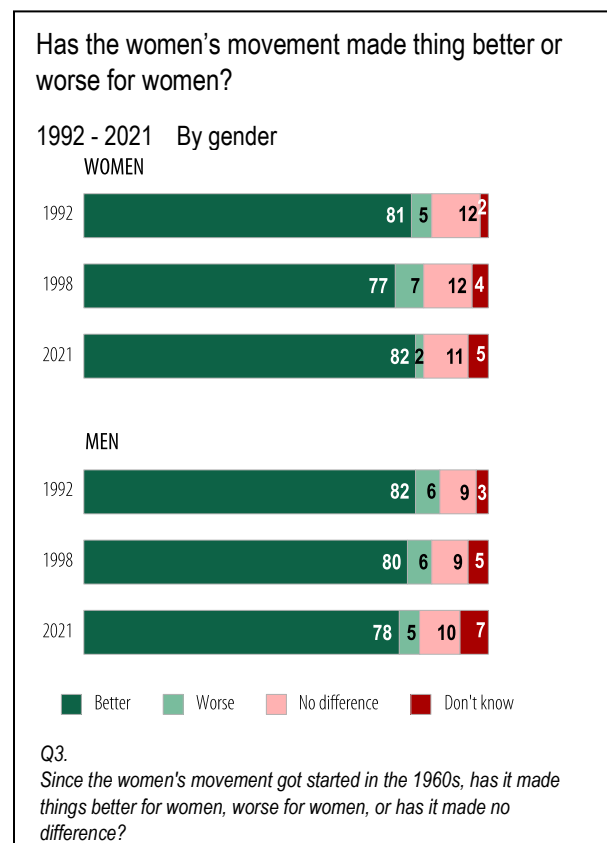
The contemporary women’s movement is one of a number of movements promoting social change that emerged in the 1960s – other examples included the civil rights, environmental and peace movements. In practice, the women’s movement and other social movements are loosely defined terms referring to the efforts of individuals, and countless advocacy and service organizations, to advance shared objectives, such as greater equality. While the popularity of any one organization or policy objective at any given moment in time may vary, there is more general agreement among Canadians that the overall impact of the women’s movement over the past several decades has been positive.

Specifically, 80 percent of Canadians say that, since the women's movement got started in the 1960s, it has made things better for women, compared to only four percent who say it has made things worse for women, and 11 percent who say it has made no difference (an additional 6% do not offer an opinion either way). And there is little difference in opinion on this question between women and men:

- 82 percent of women and 78 percent of men say the women’s movement has made things *better* for women; and
- two percent of women and five percent of men say the women’s movement has made things *worse* for women.

This high level of agreement as to the positive impact of the women’s movement was equally visible in the 1990s: in both 1992 and 1998, roughly eight in ten Canadians said the movement had made things better for women.

While majorities of women from all backgrounds say that, since the women's movement got started, it has made things better for women, there is some variation in the extent of agreement, particularly by age and socio-economic status. Among women, 75 percent of those age 55 and older (including 70 percent of those age 70 and older) say the women's movement has made things better for women, compared to 88 percent of those under age 55. The proportion holding this view is also higher among those with an annual household income of \$80,000 or more (90%), compared those with an annual household income below \$40,000 (72%); and among those who have completed university (90%)



compared to those who did continue their formal education past high school (72%). However, very few older women, or women with lower incomes or less education, say the women’s movement has made things worse for women; rather, about 15 to 20 percent of women in these groups are say the movement has made no difference. (These same patterns were also evident in 1992 and 1998.)

Identifying as a feminist

The term “feminist” has significantly increased its appeal to Canadian women – and men. Most notably, younger women are twice as likely today compared to 20 years ago to say that they consider themselves to be a feminist.

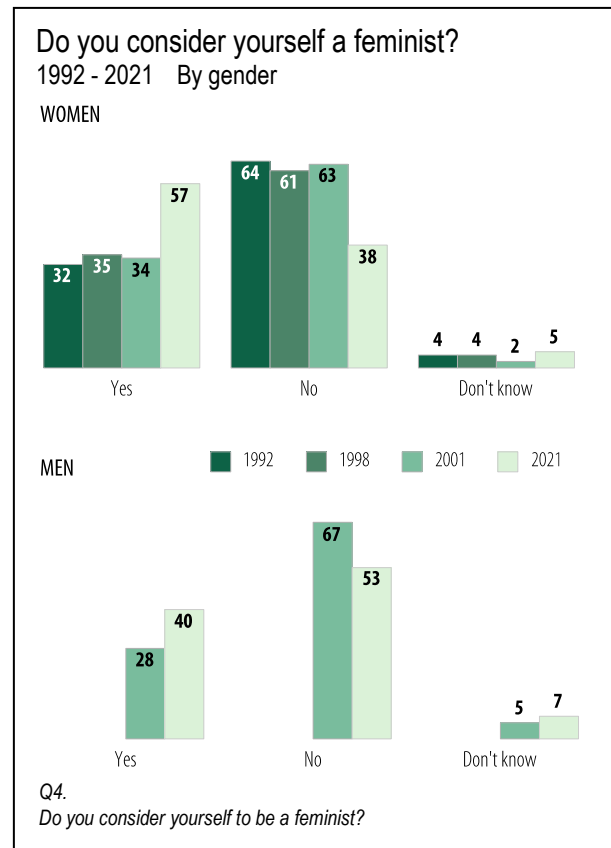
As noted, in the 1990s, large majorities of women in Canada felt that more needed to be done to promote the equality of women, and had a favourable view of the impact of the women’s movement. Yet, at the time, only about one-third of Canadian women said they considered themselves to be a feminist. Twenty years ago, the 2001 Focus Canada survey report observed that “it appears that Canadians want equality, not feminism.”

But since then, the term “feminist” has significantly increased its appeal to Canadian women – and men.

Currently, 57 percent of women in Canada say they consider themselves to be a feminist – up from 34 percent since the question was last asked in a Focus Canada survey in 2001. The proportion of men that consider themselves to be a feminist has also risen over the past 20 years, from 28 percent to 40 percent. Overall, for both women and men combined, the proportion considering themselves to be a feminist has risen from 31 percent in 2001 to 49 percent in 2021.

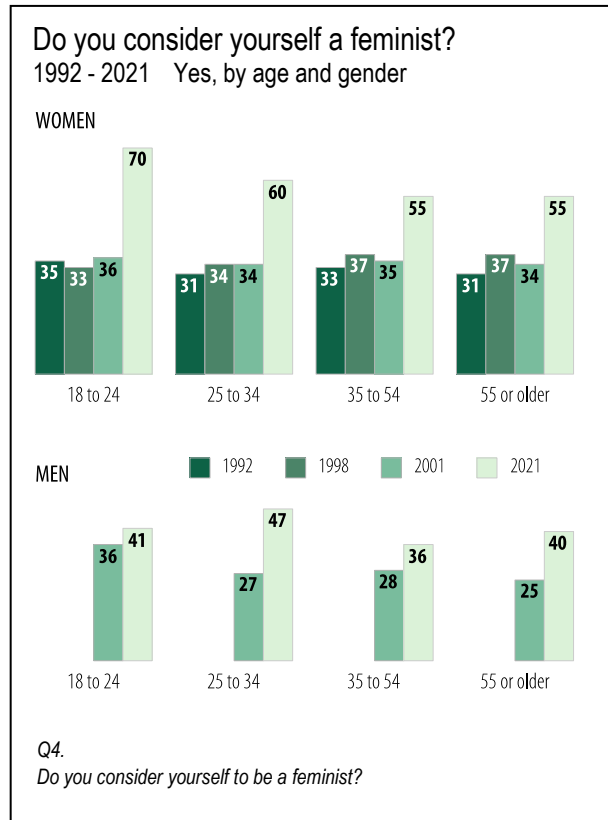
In 2021, only a minority of women (38%, down from 63% in 2001) do *not* consider themselves to be a feminist. Just over one in two (53%) men do *not* consider themselves to be a feminist today, down from 67 percent in 2001.

The proportion of women in all age groups that consider themselves to be a feminist is higher today than it was 20 or 30 years ago, but the extent of that increase is the most dramatic in the case of younger women. The proportion of women age 18 to 24 that consider themselves to be a feminist has doubled since 1992, from 35percent to 70 percent.



This question was asked of men for the first time in 2001. Since then, the portion of men in all age groups that consider themselves to be a feminist has increased. However, a gap has opened up between women and men in the youngest age group, due to the much greater change in opinion among younger women. In 2001, younger women and men were equally likely to consider themselves to be a feminist. In 2021, younger women are 29 points more likely than younger men to see themselves this way.

Currently, women with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to say they consider themselves to be a feminist; and the same is true of women with higher household incomes. For instance, women with a university degree are more than twice as likely to consider themselves to be a feminist than to not accept this label (66% say they do and 30% say they do not). Among women who did not continue their formal education past high school, opinions are more divided (45% say they do and 49% say do not).



Women who are racialized (60%) are about as likely as those who identify as white (57%) to say they consider themselves to be a feminist.

Whether or not one considers oneself a feminist has some bearing on how one perceives the women's movement, but only to some extent. Compared to Canadians who do *not* consider themselves to be feminists, those who do are much more likely to *strongly* agree that more needs to be done to promote the equality of women. Yet, a large majority (83%) of those who do *not* consider themselves to be feminists at least somewhat agree that more needs to be done to promote the equality of women; only 12 percent disagree. Nine in ten women (88%) and eight in ten men (80%) who do *not* consider themselves to be feminists at least somewhat agree that more needs to be done to promote the equality of women.

Similarly, a large majority (75%) of Canadians who do *not* consider themselves to be feminists nonetheless say that the women's movement has made things better for women, and only six percent say it has made things worse.