

Women's History Month Celebrates the Activism of Women Educators

Poster Concept

October is Women's History Month in Canada. Labour history often excludes women and the role they played in winning rights, dignities, and protections for all. This year's poster celebrates women educators as union activists who were instrumental in advocating for better working conditions and advancing women's issues.

The Federation of Women Teachers of Ontario was at the forefront of these struggles. Their campaigns laid the foundation for the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario's work in social justice and equity. We continue to build on this history in our ongoing efforts to foster a diverse women's movement in which all women belong.

Artist's Concept

Toronto artist Suharu Ogawa uses a timeline, diverse characters, and colour to illustrate emerging issues within the women's movement.

Poster Timeline

1918: The Federation of Women Teachers of Ontario (FWTAO) is formed

The Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario (FWTAO) was formed in 1918 at a time of great upheaval. The First World War was over; the Spanish Influenza epidemic was affecting populations around the globe; and anti-union sentiment was spreading, with some labour groups being banned through the *War Measures Act*.

These times also reflected the triumphs of first wave feminism, including some Canadian women* winning the right to vote in 1918. Canadian women were also organizing for better wages and working conditions through organizations like the Women's Labour League. FWTAO addressed discrimination in women's salaries, and accomplished improvements to wages during the 1920s and job security amid economic uncertainty in the 1930s.

**The right to vote was not granted to all women in 1918. First Nations women, for example, did not have the right to the vote federally until 1960.*



1918: The Federation of Women Teachers of Ontario (FWTAO) is formed



1944: Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) is established

The passage of the *Teaching Profession Act* in 1944 led to significant changes for educators in Ontario, such as mandatory membership in a federation and recognition of teaching as a profession. The Act also led to the establishment of the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF), an umbrella body for the various teachers' federations.

In 1945, FWTAO brought the issue of pay equity to the forefront. This would become a focus for major union drives in other sectors as well. As a result, during the first half of the 1940s, many thousands of unionized women won their demand to receive pay equal to their male counterparts.



1944: Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) is established

1960s: Equality rights beyond voting rights

The women's movement from the 1960s to 1980s is often referred to as second wave feminism. During this time, the understanding of women's equality went beyond the right to vote and started to address social, economic, legal, and reproductive rights.

In 1966, a coalition of 30 women's labour federations demanded that then-Prime Minister Lester Pearson establish a royal commission on issues affecting Canadian women. The culmination of this came in 1971 with the establishment of the National Action Committee for the Status of Women (NAC), a national coalition of feminist and community-based organizations and unions, including FWTAO. In addition to serving on the committee, FWTAO's support for members addressed topics such as affirmative action, daycare, women's dual roles at work and home, women's leadership, and trade unionism.



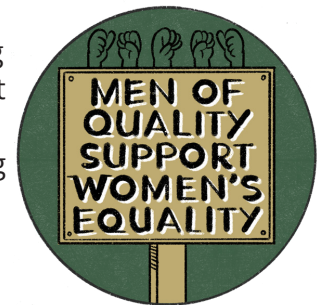
1960s: Equality rights beyond voting rights

1970s: Raising awareness of women's issues

Women's participation in the labour market was increasing throughout the 1970s. FWTAO bargained for maternity leave and lobbied the provincial government to address maternity leaveⁱⁱ; advocacy that would inform provisions relating to parental leave. In 1976, the Canadian Labour Congress opened its Women's Bureau.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, violence against women gained more public attention. Canada's first women's shelter opened in 1973 and raised awareness of domestic violence, which was an unknown concept at the time. Canada's first Take Back the Night march was held in Vancouver in 1978 to address violence and community safety.

The FWTAO appointed an inquiry into violence against women and published a summary of findings entitled *Women in Crisis* in 1981. The document concludes that, "as long as society is prepared to equivocate about the physical and mental abuse of a woman, equality is merely a word with no meaning."ⁱⁱⁱ



1970s: Raising awareness of women's issues

1980s: Rights, freedoms, and the law

The struggle to improve women's working conditions continued into the 1980s. In 1981, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers were on strike for 42 days and won 17 weeks of paid maternity leave.ⁱⁱⁱ

Enacted in 1982, Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* enshrined equality rights and provided protection against discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability. The Charter did not explicitly list sexual orientation until 1995.

FWATO was instrumental in establishing the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF)^{iv}, which won landmark cases about violence against women, discrimination in the workplace, and pay equity. The Ontario Federation of Labour created designated seats for women on its executive in 1986,^v a first within the labour movement.

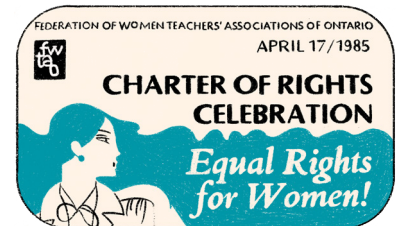
1987: Pay equity legislation

In 1987, the Ontario government passed the *Pay Equity Act*. This legislation was intended to eliminate gender discrimination by ensuring equal pay for work of equal value between female-dominated and male-dominated professions. At the time the legislation came into effect, women elementary teachers were earning on average about 80 per cent of what their male colleagues did.^{vi} This pay gap was attributed to fewer women in administrative roles, collective agreements that lacked maternity leaves, and the prevalence of women in non-degree categories.

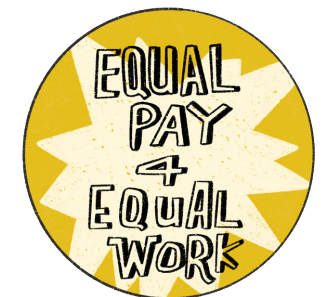
1990s: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) Women's Programs

The women's movement of the 1990s built on the victories of second wave feminism but recognized the need to be more inclusive of diverse lived experiences. Third wave feminism employed an anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and anti-colonial lens while also adopting more grassroots methods of organizing. This reflected the concept of intersectionality introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe how race, class, gender, and other social identities compound oppression for women.

Upon its creation with the merger of the FWTAO and the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation (OPSTF) in 1998, ETFO allocated six per cent of its annual budget to dedicated programming for women members.^{vii}



1980s: Rights, freedoms, and the law



1987: Pay equity legislation



1990s: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) Women's Programs

2000 and beyond: A movement for all women



2000 and beyond: A movement for all women

Throughout the 2000s, the women's movement continued to address social issues. The #MeToo movement, closing the persistent gender pay gap, increasing awareness of gender-based violence, and rallying for more protection of women's bodily autonomy continue to shape the women's movement. The centring of Black, Indigenous, and racialized women; members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community; and women with disabilities broadened the movement to make it more inclusive.

ETFO's Women's Programs such as Leaders for Tomorrow, Women's Collective Bargaining Issues, Health and Safety Training, Women in Politics Conference, and Women's Legal and Health Conference (to name a few of many) strive to remove barriers for women members while incorporating a union lens. Building solidarity through an intersectional and anti-oppressive lens continues to inform the union's work.

Classroom Activity

1. After reviewing the poster, facilitate a discussion using the following reflection questions:
 - **What** do you notice about the colours in the poster?
 - **How** do the characters change as the timeline progresses?
 - **Which** social issue is important to you?
 - **What** message about this issue would you share with the world?
2. This poster companion includes sketches of political buttons of different campaigns that benefited workers. Invite learners to design a campaign button with a message about making the world better.

ⁱ Morison, M. (Summer, 2016). Looking back: Women's history in Ontario teacher federations. ETFO Voice. <https://etfovoice.ca/feature/looking-back-womens-history-ontario-teacher-federations>

ⁱⁱ Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario. (1981, March). Women in Crisis: Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Problems of Women in Crisis. <https://riseuparchive.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/fwtao-womenincrisis-pamphlet-march1981-OCR.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Maternity & Parental Benefits. Canadian Labour Congress. (2019, June 26). <https://canadianlabour.ca/who-we-are/history/maternity-parental-benefits/>

^{iv} Federation of Women Teachers of Ontario (FWTAO). Rise Up Feminist Digital Archive. (n.d.). <https://riseupfeministarchive.ca/activism/organizations/federation-of-women-teachers-of-ontario-fwtao/?highlight=FWTAO>

^v Parl-L: A Canadian Electronic Feminist Network. (n.d.). Milestones in Canadian Women's History: the 1980's. <https://parl.ext.unb.ca/milestones3.htm>.

^{vi} Richter, B. (2007, Summer). Part IV of it's Elementary: A brief history of ontario's public elementary teachers and their federations. ETFO Voice. <https://etfovoice.ca/feature/part-iv-its-elementary-brief-history-ontarios-public-elementary-teachers-and-their#:~:text=An%20examination%20of%20the%20salary,what%20their%20male%20colleagues%20did.>

^{vii} Constitution. Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. (n.d.-a). <https://www.etfo.ca/about-us/governance/constitution>