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International Bar Association

Raising the Bar: Women in Law Project



CANADA RESULTS REPORT

International Bar Association Legal Policy & Research Unit, the Canadian Bar Association and the Federation of Law Societies of Canada

The International Bar Association (IBA), established in 1947, is the world's leading international organisation of legal practitioners, bar associations, law societies, law firms and in-house legal teams. The IBA influences the development of international law reform and shapes the future of the legal profession throughout the world. It has a membership of more than 80,000 lawyers, 190 bar associations and law societies and 200 group member law firms, spanning over 170 countries. The IBA is headquartered in London, with offices in São Paulo, Seoul, The Hague and Washington, DC.

The IBA Legal Policy & Research Unit (LPRU) undertakes research and develops initiatives that are relevant to the rule of law, the legal profession and the broader global community. The LPRU engages with legal professionals, law firms, law societies and bar associations, governments, non-governmental organisations and international institutions to ensure innovative, collaborative and effective outcomes.

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Foreword

It is an honour to present the International Bar Association's *Raising the Bar: Women in Law Project* report on Canada.

This wide-reaching initiative to examine the status of gender parity and women's experiences across all levels of the legal profession represents an essential step toward identifying and dismantling the systemic barriers that continue to limit women's ability to reach their full potential.

While significant efforts have been made over the years to improve inequities in the profession, recent scepticism toward equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives make these gains vulnerable and risk stalling further progress. The IBA's study, and its continued support for the advancement of women legal professionals, could not be timelier.

We have both experienced some of the obstacles that many women face when trying to build careers in the legal profession. As this report highlights, gender equality has not yet been achieved in the Canadian legal profession, despite significant progress in the last several decades. Women continue to experience gender-based and sexual harassment in the workplace, and many women consulted for this report said that they do not feel seen as equals to their male colleagues. These challenges may be even more pronounced for women of colour, members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, and others from diverse backgrounds.

Retention of women lawyers remains a persistent challenge, with women continuing to shoulder a disproportionate share of the responsibility for balancing their professional obligations with family responsibilities. Insufficient supports in legal work environments, combined with concerns about potential career setbacks for women who start families, can serve as significant disincentives to remaining in the profession. Women lawyers also report higher rates of psychological stress than their male counterparts.

The wage gap between men and women in the legal profession likewise persists, particularly at the senior and partner levels; while representation of women in leadership roles has improved substantially, it remains a work in progress.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the notable gains that women have made in the legal profession in Canada. This includes the presence of women at the highest levels of the judiciary; as of late 2023, the Supreme Court of Canada achieved a historic milestone with a female majority for the first time, with five of its nine justices being women. While we take pride in Canada's strong comparative performance when it comes to women's representation, we do so without complacency, recognising that continued effort is required to sustain and build upon these advances.

There are ongoing efforts across Canada to increase diversity within justice system institutions, including the judiciary, with the shared objective of fostering both a legal profession and a system of justice that more accurately reflects Canada's population. These efforts are supported by the work of governments, courts, law societies, bar associations, universities, law schools and other justice sector organisations committed to improving equity and representation. In particular, we commend the federal government for enhancing the transparency of the judicial appointments process, and for taking steps to attract a broader and more diverse pool of candidates, including women and members of other underrepresented groups.

Both the Canadian Bar Association and the Federation of Law Societies of Canada are committed to promoting the resilience of Canada's legal profession: an objective inseparable from ensuring that it reflects the diversity of those it serves. When women are able to contribute fully and meaningfully to the practice of law, the justice system is strengthened through a broader range of perspectives, more inclusive decision-making, and increased public confidence in legal institutions. A profession that draws on the full talents and experiences of its members is better equipped to deliver fair, responsive and effective justice, and in doing so, better serves Canadian society as a whole.

Bianca Kratt KC

President

Canadian Bar Association

Teresa Donnelly

Past President

Federation of Law Societies of Canada

Main findings: Canada



Women make up **53 per cent** of legal professionals in Canada, with **51 per cent** of those working in senior positions.



93 per cent of law firms, corporations and the public sector monitor gender representation in their workplaces generally and at a senior level within their organisation.

Women make up **48 per cent** of the judiciary in Canada, and **49 per cent** of those working in leadership positions.



Women make up **60 per cent** of all lawyers in the public sector, as well as **60 per cent** of those in senior positions.



Unconscious bias training and coaching and mentoring were the most popular initiatives overall.



Quota setting and target setting are the least popular but most highly rated at **100 per cent** effective. Leadership training was rated **91 per cent** effective.

In law firms, women constitute

43 per cent of all lawyers and

35 per cent of those in senior positions



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www.ibanet.org/gender-equality-in-the-legal-profession

Introduction

The project

In March 2021, the International Bar Association (IBA) launched an ambitious, multi-year global study, the **Raising the Bar: Women in Law Project (Women in Law Project)**, examining women's representation across all levels of the legal profession, including the most senior levels (across law firms, in-house legal teams, public sector institutions and the judiciary). The Women in Law Project builds on the IBA's previous work in this field, including the 2017 *Women in Commercial Legal Practice* report¹ and the *Us Too? Bullying and Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession* report published in 2019.²

Methodology

The Women in Law Project began with a study of England and Wales in March 2021. Since then, studies have been completed in 13 jurisdictions: Uganda, Spain, Nigeria, the Netherlands, Chile, the Republic of South Korea, Brazil, Mexico, Ukraine, Türkiye, Taiwan and Australia.³ The IBA published an interim report compiling the data from 11 jurisdictions in 2024.⁴ Additional studies are currently underway in Singapore and India.⁵ More information about the broader methodology and the aims of the Women in Law project can be found in the England and Wales Report.⁶

The Canadian study began in May 2025 and concluded in November of that year. During this time, Canada's 30 largest law firms (determined by number of lawyers) along with the 50 largest corporations listed on Canada's leading stock exchange (the Toronto Stock Exchange), were approached. The public legal sector, as represented by federal, provincial and territorial departments of justice, was also approached. In addition, the chief justices of the Supreme Court of Canada, the federal, superior and appellate courts, and the chief judges of all provincial and territorial courts were contacted. The overall response rate is shown in Figure 1.

Organisation	Number approached	Number responded	Response rate (%)
Law firms	30	6	20
Corporations	50	3	6
Public sector	14	4	28
Judiciary	38	15	39

Figure 1: Overall response rate

- 1 *Women in Commercial Legal Practice*, (IBA LPRU Women Business Lawyers Initiative, December 2017) see www.ibanet.org/lpru/women-business-lawyers-initiative-front-page, accessed 30 March 2026.
- 2 *Bullying and Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession* (IBA LPRU, May 2019), see www.ibanet.org/bullying-and-sexual-harassment, accessed 30 March 2026.
- 3 *Raising the Bar: Women in Law Project* (IBA), see www.ibanet.org/gender-equality-in-the-legal-profession, accessed 30 March 2026.
- 4 *50:50 by 2030: A longitudinal study into gender disparity in law* (IBA, 2024) see www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-Gender-Progress-Report-2024, accessed 30 March 2026.
- 5 See n 3 above.
- 6 *50:50 by 2030: A longitudinal study into gender disparity in law – England and Wales Results Report* (IBA, 2022), see www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-Gender-Disparity-Report-England-and-Wales-2022, accessed 28 May 2026.

The survey responses represent approximately eight per cent of lawyers practising in Canada (8,762 out of 110,619, excluding the judiciary). These results are supplemented and supported by the findings of the desk-based research summarised below, and the substantial response by Canadian lawyers to the Phase 2 survey.

Concurrently with the Canada survey, the IBA implemented the second phase of this project. Phase 2 was designed to highlight women's subjective experiences of working in the profession, and to enhance understanding of the factors that support or hinder the career progression of women pursuing legal careers. The survey was open to women working across all legal sectors, including academia and non-governmental organisations. It was also open to those who had left the legal profession within the last five years. The survey was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data and to complement and expand upon the research gathered as part of Phase 1 of the Project. Over 1,500 responses were received from women lawyers in Canada. Highlights from the Phase 2 survey are integrated throughout the discussion of the Phase 1 results below.

Country context

Canada is the second largest country in the world by area, with a relatively small population of 41.5 million.⁷ It has a federal parliament in the capital city of Ottawa, responsible for creating laws that apply across the entire country. Separate legislatures in each of the ten provinces and three territories address laws specific to their regions. The Canadian Constitution⁸ determines the respective powers of both the provincial legislatures and the federal government. Laws passed at either level are referred to as statutes, legislation or acts.⁹ Canada's legal system is a combination of both common and civil law.¹⁰ Quebec is the only province in Canada governed by a civil code, based on the French Napoleonic Code.¹¹ The rest of the country operates under the common law system. Additionally, the Criminal Code,¹² applicable nationwide, is also considered a code.¹³

Canada's Constitution includes the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (the Charter), providing foundational constitutional protections for individual human rights, including gender equality.¹⁴ Canada has two official languages, English and French; the rights of official language minority communities are

7 'Canada's population estimates, first quarter 2025' (Statistics Canada, 1 April 2025), see www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250618/dq250618a-eng.htm, accessed 30 March 2026.

8 'The Canadian Constitution' (Justice Canada), see www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/just/05.html, accessed 30 March 2026; s 91, The Constitution Act, 1867; s 92, The Constitution Act, 1867 (The Constitution Act, 1867 established Canada as a self-governing part of the British Empire; the Constitution Act, 1982 later patriated the Constitution, granting Canada authority over its amendments and adding the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms).

9 *Ibid.*

10 'The Canadian Legal System' (Justice Canada, 2015), see www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/just/img/courten.pdf, accessed 30 March 2026.

11 'Where our legal system comes from' (Justice Canada), see www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/just/03.html, accessed 30 March 2026.

12 Criminal Code (RSC, 1985, c C-46), see <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

13 *Ibid.*

14 The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, enacted as Schedule B to the Canada Act 1982, which came into force on 17 April 1982. See www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/index.html, accessed 30 March 2026.

also protected by the Charter, other constitutional provisions and the Official Languages Act. Canada's commitment to respect and promote multiculturalism is also recognised in the Charter.¹⁵

Canadian governments and many Canadians are actively engaged in a process of reconciliation with the Indigenous Peoples, First Nations, Inuit and Métis as the original occupants of the land. Aboriginal rights are also protected by the Canadian Constitution.¹⁶ Much work remains to be done to address Canada's colonial past, which continues to have negative intergenerational effects on many Indigenous persons.

Canada's strong commitment to gender equality is reflected in provincial, national and international legal commitments. Section 15 of the Charter prohibits discrimination based on various grounds such as race, sex and disability; over time, courts have extended this protection to other 'analogous' grounds, including sexual orientation¹⁷ and marital status.¹⁸ Section 28 of the Charter further strengthens gender equality by ensuring that all Charter rights apply equally to men and women. Together, these provisions emphasise the importance of equal protection and benefit under the law.¹⁹ Complementing the Charter, the Canadian Human Rights Act (CHRA)²⁰ addresses discrimination within federal jurisdictions, explicitly protecting against biases related to sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status and family status. The Canadian Human Rights Commission was established by Parliament through the CHRA to handle complaints and refer cases to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. Additional legislative measures, such as the Employment Equity Act,²¹ Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act,²² and Pay Equity Act²³ further promote fairness and equality, particularly in the workplace, with a focus on advancing gender equity. Provincial and territorial human rights statutes also establish entities to promote equality rights and handle complaints in their respective jurisdictions.²⁴ They protect people from discrimination in areas such as restaurants, stores, schools, housing, healthcare, and other non-federal workplaces (including many legal workplaces).

Legal profession in Canada

In Canada, every lawyer (and notary, in Quebec) is required by law to be a member of a law society and be governed by its rules. Each province and territory has its own law society.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Please see s 35 of the Canadian Constitution, <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-12.html>. For an overview and updates about this process see 'Reconciliation' (Government of Canada) www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1400782178444/1529183710887, accessed 30 March 2026.

17 *Friend v Alberta* [1998] 1 SCR 493.

18 *Miron v Trudel* [1995] 2 SCR 418.

19 See n 14 above.

20 Canadian Human Rights Act (RSC, 1985, c H-6), see <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/h-6/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

21 Employment Equity Act (SC 1995, c 44), see <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/E-5.401/index.html>, accessed 30 March 2026.

22 Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act (SC 2009, c 2, s 394), see <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/P-31.65/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

23 Pay Equity Act (SC 2018, c 27, s 416) <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/p-4.2/page-1.html>, accessed 30 March 2026.

24 *Overview of Human Rights Codes by Province and Territory in Canada*, (Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, January 2018), see <https://new-api.ccdi.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20171102-publications-overview-of-hr-codes-by-province-final-en.pdf>, accessed 30 March 2026.

Historically, the legal profession in Canada has been entirely self-regulated.²⁵ Operating independently of government, these law societies uphold the independence of the bar by setting professional standards and enforcing ethical conduct. This includes providing oversight over the conduct of individual lawyers through audits and complaints-based disciplinary processes.²⁶ In May 2024, British Columbia shifted away from this tradition and created a single regulator, Legal Professions BC, to oversee lawyers, notaries and licensed paralegals.²⁷

The Federation of Law Societies of Canada (FLSC) is the national association of the 14 law societies mandated by the provinces and territories to regulate Canada's legal profession in the public interest. It is the body through which Canada's law societies collaborate at the national level, share information on trends and issues affecting the legal profession, and engage in collective action and decision-making. FLSC is also the law societies' national and international voice on important issues related to the regulation and core values of the legal profession.

National mobility of legal professionals across Canada is governed through several agreements developed by the FLSC, in consultation with member law societies.²⁸ Law societies delegated to FLSC the authority to assess the legal education credentials of individuals educated outside of Canada or in a civil law degree programme, who intend to seek licensure for practice in a common law jurisdiction. This assessment is conducted through the National Committee on Accreditation.²⁹

The Canadian Bar Association (CBA) is the largest professional association for lawyers in the country, representing over 40,000 lawyers, judges, notaries, academics and students. Considered the 'voice of the legal profession', the CBA has championed the interests and priorities of Canada's legal profession and the rule of law in Canada since 1896.³⁰ The CBA's national office is based in Ottawa, with branches in each province and territory. Membership in the CBA is voluntary except in the province of New Brunswick, where membership is mandatory because of an agreement with the law society. Promoting equity, diversity and lawyer wellbeing are longstanding priorities of the CBA, supported through its programmes, publications and initiatives. While the legal regulation rests within the domain of the law societies, the CBA champions and supports the interests of legal professionals across the country.

In 2024, law societies across Canada reported they had 114,574 members with active practices: 55,667 (49 per cent) women and 57,747 (51 per cent) men.³¹ Their total membership is slightly higher than these

25 *Canada (Attorney General) v Law Society of British Columbia* [1982] 2 SCR 307.

26 'Law Societies' (Canadian Bar Association) www.cba.org/For-The-Public/Legal-Resources/Legal-Links/Law-Societies, accessed 30 March 2026.

27 Legal Professions Act, SBC 2024, c 26. The Act aims to improve access to justice and modernise regulation. Full implementation is phased in over a two-year period. (For more information see <https://lpatransition.ca/about/>.) This statute is currently being challenged in the courts on constitutional grounds including lawyer independence by the Law Society of BC and the Trial Lawyers Association of BC (see www.lawsociety.bc.ca/news-and-engagement/news/law-society-of-bc-announces-legal-action-to-challenge-legal-professions-act/).

28 'Facilitating National Mobility of the Legal Profession' (FLSC), see <https://flsc.ca/what-we-do/national-mobility-of-the-legal-profession/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

29 'Certifying Internationally Educated Lawyers and Law Graduates' (FLSC), see <https://flsc.ca/what-we-do/nca/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

30 'The voice of Canada's legal profession' (CBA), <https://cba.org/about-us/who-we-are/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

31 'Federation Statistics Report 2024' (Federation of Law Societies of Canada, last modified 25 August 2025) 3. See <https://flsc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/FederationStatisticsReport2024.pdf>, accessed 30 March 2026.

numbers reflect, as it includes non-practising members. There is substantial variation between provinces and territories with respect to gender representation, as seen in Figure 2:

	British Columbia	Alberta	Saskatchewan	Manitoba	Ontario	Barreau du Québec	Chambre des notaires du Québec	New Brunswick	Nova Scotia	Prince Edward Island	Newfoundland & Labrador	Yukon	Northwest Territories	Nunavut	Total
Female	7,043	5,570	927	1,013	20,698	17,928	2,551	686	1,074	138	378	212	N/A	N/A	55,667
Male	7,623	7,166	1,147	1,349	24,383	13,179	1,011	818	1,214	153	458	257	N/A	N/A	57,747
Total	14,831	12,757	2,204	2,369	45,109	31,110	3,562	1,504	2,288	291	837	469	526	279	114,574

Figure 2: Total active/practising membership³²

The gender ratio is comparable to the last reported statistics in 2019, when there were 49,175 practising female lawyers and 56,678 practising male lawyers.³³

On a provincial/territorial level, the Law Society of Ontario’s 2020 *Annual Report* on membership statistics revealed that, while the gender distribution of practising lawyers in Ontario was almost equal (males comprising 56 per cent and females 44 per cent), there was a higher retention rate for men over the years.³⁴ In Quebec, since 2014, there have been more women than men in the combined profession of lawyers and notaries.³⁵ In September 2024, women accounted for 57 per cent of professionals in this field.³⁶ This represents a demographic shift; while older legal professionals tend to be predominantly men, the overwhelming majority of younger lawyers and students are women. As of 2020 in British Columbia, the gender ratio for practising lawyers with up to 15 years of experience was nearly balanced, with approximately 49 per cent men and 51 per cent women.³⁷ The same report notes, however, that the ‘percentage of women lawyers begins to decrease for 15 to 19-year calls (approximately 57 per cent men to 43 per cent women), and the gender disparity becomes more pronounced at higher years of call’.³⁸ By 2023, the Law Society of BC’s *Annual Report* notes that, of the practising lawyers in the youngest cohort (20–39 years of age) in that province, 2,430 are men compared to 2,709 women (with 262 not selecting a gender).³⁹

32 *Ibid.* Note that, below the Table of Contents for these statistics, the FLSC comments: ‘The data in this report has been aggregated from data provided by each law society. Not all law societies collect the same information, so please note that the addition of results in each section may not provide the same total number of active legal professionals. Inquiries regarding statistics in a particular jurisdiction should be addressed to that law society.’

33 Sylvia Guirguis, ‘Women in Law: How the Legal Sector Still Fails Female Lawyers and Why True Equality Remains Elusive’ (Lexpert, 7 September 2022), see www.lexpert.ca/news/legal-insights/women-in-law-how-the-legal-sector-still-fails-female-lawyers-and-why-true-equality-remains-elusive/368855, accessed 30 March 2026.

34 *2020 Annual Report - Licensing Statistics* (Law Society of Ontario) see <https://lawsocietyontario-dwd0dscmayfwh7bj.a01.azurefd.net/media/lso/media/annualreport/documents/statistics-membership-2020.pdf>, accessed 30 March 2026.

35 ‘Pour l’égalité et l’avancement des avocates dans la profession: Projet Justicia’ (Barreau du Québec) www.barreau.qc.ca/fr/ordre/equite-diversite-engagement-barreau/projet-justicia/, accessed 30 March 2026.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Background report to facilitate discussion for the roundtable ‘On the Path to Equity for Women in the Law’ (Law Society of BC, International Commission of Judges, and CBA BC Branch, 2023), see www.lawsociety.bc.ca/getContentAsset/3f1bc52e-309c-40c8-a8af-9e10cf12239b/dfc3d011-8f63-43f6-9ed8-4b444333a1d0/Women-Roundtable-2022?language=en-CA, accessed 29 May 2026.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Annual Report 2023* (Law Society of BC, 2023), 24. See www.lawsociety.bc.ca/getContentAsset/0cb2b7e5-0c13-4a28-875f-4bfd8629cf6a/dfc3d011-8f63-43f6-9ed8-4b444333a1d0/2023-AnnualReport.pdf?language=en-CA, accessed 29 May 2026.

Canadian judiciary

Canada's court system reflects the country's federal structure.⁴⁰ Each province and territory has its own lower and superior trial courts, as well as provincial/territorial courts of appeal. These courts operate hierarchically, and at the apex of this structure is the Supreme Court of Canada. The federal government has its own system, including the Federal Court, the Federal Court of Appeal and the Federal Tax Court. These courts hear civil matters that fall under federal jurisdiction, such as immigration, patents and maritime law. The Supreme Court of Canada is the final court of appeal for the country and hears appeals from both federal and provincial court systems.

The provincial and territorial level courts (lower courts) handle most criminal matters, family and youth matters, traffic violations and small claims civil disputes. Provincial and territorial court judges are appointed from among members of the Canadian legal profession by the Minister of Justice in the province or territory in which the judge sits. The provincial and territorial superior courts have jurisdiction to handle more serious criminal and civil cases, and often act as an appeal court for decisions of the lower courts. The trial level superior courts are also known as the Court of King's Bench, Supreme Court or Supreme Court of Justice. Each jurisdiction also has a Court of Appeal, acting as the highest court within that provincial or territorial system. Justices of all superior trial courts and courts of appeal are appointed by Canada's Justice Minister after consultation with the judiciary and legal profession of a given jurisdiction. The Justice Minister also appoints the justices of the Supreme Court of Canada and the Chief Justice of Canada.

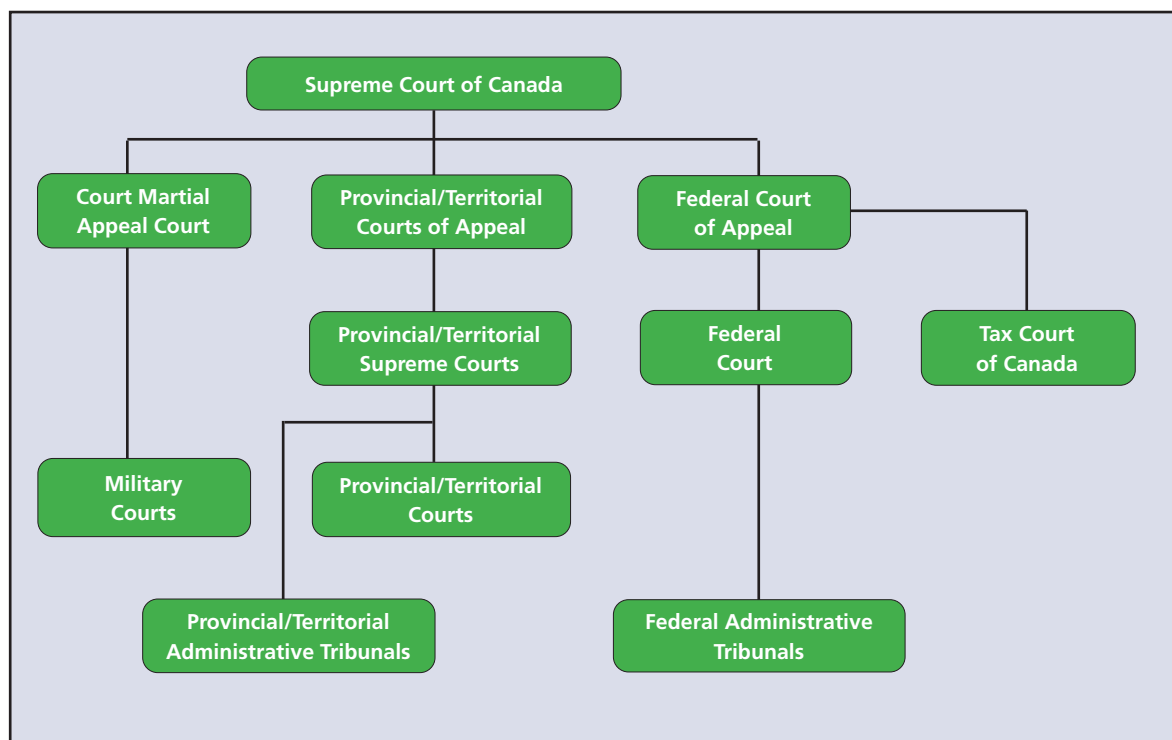


Figure 3: Canada's court system

Source: *How the Courts are Organized – Canada's Court System* (Justice Canada)

40 This overview of the Canadian court system is based on information available on Justice Canada's website. 'How Does Canada's Court System Work?' (Justice Canada) www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/ccs-ajc/01.html, accessed 30 March 2026.

Women serve as judges at all levels of Canadian courts, from the provincial and federal courts to the Supreme Court. Following the appointment of Justice Mary Moreau in 2023, the Supreme Court of Canada achieved a female majority for the first time in history, with five of the nine justices being women.⁴¹ The number of women judges across the country has increased over time, with more than half of the judges appointed since 2016 being women.⁴²

As of 1 October 2025, there were 22 women judges on the Federal Court and nine women judges on the Federal Court of Appeal, out of a total of 41 and 14 judges respectively. As of October 2025, women make up 583 of 1,190 (approximately 49 per cent) federally appointed judges across all courts.⁴³ The proportion of women judges varies across the country. While the Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs tracks these demographics closely, provincial court data is often released in disaggregated annual reports by judicial councils. There is a strong trend towards gender balance in the provincially appointed judiciaries, though progress varies by region. As of 31 March 2024, women comprised 52 per cent of full-time provincial court judges in British Columbia, maintaining a female majority on the bench.⁴⁴

Across Canada, there are ongoing efforts to increase diversity on the bench, with a goal of creating a judiciary that better reflects Canada's population. These efforts have also focused on increasing the number of other underrepresented groups on the bench, including Indigenous and racialised individuals. To advance these goals, the federal government has made the process of judicial appointment more transparent and implemented measures to attract a more diverse pool of candidates.

Working towards gender equality

Women began entering the Canadian legal profession in noticeably larger numbers in the early 1970s. By the end of that decade, one in three law students was a woman.⁴⁵ This large-scale entry marked a major change from earlier periods, such as the 1950s, when women were actively discouraged from pursuing a legal career.⁴⁶ This trend has continued until the present day, leading to a significant demographic shift in the profession. By the early 1990s, 20 years after the initial influx, female students accounted for roughly half of law school students across the country.⁴⁷ As noted above, today, women make up nearly half of all practising lawyers in Canada, though they remain underrepresented in senior leadership and partner roles.⁴⁸

41 Jordan Hamilton, 'A Female Majority: The Women Justices of the Supreme Court of Canada' (Cox & Palmer, 7 March 2024), see <https://coxandpalmerlaw.com/publication/a-female-majority-the-women-justices-of-the-supreme-court-of-canada/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

42 'Statistics regarding Judicial Applicants and Appointees (October 29, 2024–October 28, 2025)' (Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada), see <https://fja.gc.ca/appointments-nominations/StatisticsCandidate-StatistiquesCandidat-2025-eng.html>, accessed 30 March 2026.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Annual Report 2023–2024* (Provincial Court of British Columbia), 6. See <https://provincialcourt.bc.ca/system/files/AnnualReport2023-2024.pdf>, accessed 30 March 2026.

45 Mary Jane Mossman, 'Portia's Progress: Women as Lawyers – Reflections on Past and Future.' (1988), 8, *Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice*, 252–268, at 257

46 *Touchstones for Change: Equity, Diversity and Accountability* (Canadian Bar Association, 1993), 47. See www.cba.org/our-impact/committees/equality/resources/touchstones-for-change-equity-diversity-and-accountability, accessed 30 March 2026.

47 *Ibid.*, 25.

48 See n 31 above.

Many women faced both barriers to entry to the profession and discrimination within their subsequent practice of law. By the late 1980s, women lawyers began to speak out about these negative experiences and to call for meaningful change. Many legal organisations responded by taking steps to better understand the barriers women encountered in entering and remaining in the profession, and to identify potential solutions. Several law societies established committees to study these problems and make recommendations for change. In 1991, the CBA established a Task Force on Gender Equality in the Legal Profession (CBA Task Force), chaired by the Honourable Bertha Wilson, the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada.⁴⁹

The CBA Task Force undertook extensive research and consultation across Canada, establishing provincial and territorial sub-committees to achieve its broad mandate. At the CBA Annual Meeting in August 1993, Madame Justice Bertha Wilson delivered the report, and, in her remarks, called on all members of the legal profession and the judiciary to work toward achieving gender equality in the profession. Given the Task Force’s findings of systemic discrimination, she underscored the extent of change required, acknowledging that it would take at least two decades to reach this goal.

The 293-page report, entitled *Touchstones for Change: Equality, Diversity and Accountability*, sparked a long-term campaign for equity, diversity and inclusion in the legal profession and beyond (Touchstones Report). These ‘Touchstones’ refer to the core principle of fairness and the need for systemic change to ensure equal rights and opportunities for all, while also embracing unique differences and holding individuals and institutions accountable. The report received widespread media coverage in Canada and elicited a range of responses from members of the legal profession.

The Touchstones Report identified many barriers to entry into the profession in law schools, bar admission programmes and the articling system. It examined how individual and systemic discrimination operated through sexual harassment, discrimination in the assignment of work and opportunities for advancement, and inadequate accommodation for childcare and other family responsibilities. The report also highlighted the disproportionate impact of these barriers on women lawyers. Notably, it studied these problems across different forms of legal practice (small and large law firms, in family law, for in-house counsel, within administrative tribunals, in law schools) and the judiciary.

An important outcome of the Touchstones Report was a greater understanding within the legal profession that working toward gender equality necessitates understanding that ‘women’ is a simple term used to denote a nuanced and diverse collection of people across Canada. Women are not a homogeneous group but are rather shaped by multiple factors such as race, ethnicity, indigenous status, religion, gender, class, disability and sexual orientation. The term also includes sexually and gender diverse people.⁵⁰ This complexity can be best understood as intersectional identities that shape how women lawyers are perceived and treated by others. This intersecting approach is now widely adopted across Canada and is reflected across the broader legal and policy landscape.⁵¹ The recommendations of the Touchstones Report were

49 See n 46 above, xv.

50 See n 33 above.

51 See for example, ‘The National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence’ (Government of Canada), www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/gender-based-violence/intergovernmental-collaboration/national-action-plan-end-gender-based-violence.html, accessed 30 March 2026.

highly focused and detailed, calling on all legal institutions and leaders to take practical steps to dismantle barriers to equality.⁵²

The report's legacy continues to inform efforts to achieve equality in Canada and beyond. Over the past 30 years, various events have reflected on the progress made, including most recently the CBA's 2023 podcast series that explores progress and future steps.⁵³ These retrospective events offer an opportunity to celebrate positive change while drawing attention to persisting inequalities in the profession, with a goal of promoting successful initiatives and developing new strategies in the landscape of changing legal practices.

Despite significant progress over more than thirty years, gender equality has not yet been achieved. Sex-based discrimination and harassment remain a serious barrier to the retention and advancement of women in the legal profession. Women report being disrespected by clients, colleagues, and sometimes even judges based on their sex; many also expressed the perception that they are not regarded as equals.⁵⁴

Legal institutions have implemented many of the Touchstone Report's recommendations but larger systemic barriers and a male-orientated culture in legal practice persists, particularly in private practice. Reflecting broader Canadian society, women lawyers continue to bear more responsibility for childcare and eldercare than male lawyers, and the failure of law firms to recognise and accommodate this reality contributes to persistent gender inequality. The billable hour fee model, identified in the Touchstone Report as highly problematic, continues to negatively affect women.⁵⁵ Some women lawyers report experiencing a shift to the 'B team' when they become mothers.⁵⁶

There is evidence that the current structure of the legal profession adversely affects the mental and physical wellbeing of all lawyers. The *National Study on the Psychological Health Determinants of Legal Professionals in Canada* revealed that over half of the respondents experienced significant psychological distress and burnout.⁵⁷ Notably, these rates were significantly higher among women, younger professionals, and those from marginalised groups, underscoring that burnout remains a critical issue for the Canadian

52 For example:

- the *Private Practice* chapter calls for all law firms to establish in-house equity committees on a permanent basis and that the mandate and operations of these committees be reviewed on a regular basis;
- the *Government Legal Departments* chapter recommends that departments identify and implement measures to ensure fair allocation of work to both female and male lawyers; and
- the *Corporate Counsel* chapter recommends that corporate legal departments take a leadership role by implementing employment equity programmes to encourage the recruitment and hiring of women from minority groups, whether or not the corporation as a whole has an employment equity programme.

53 'Touchstones 30th Anniversary – The Bertha Wilson Task Force' (CBA), see www.cba.org/resources/publications-and-podcasts/touchstones-30th-anniversary-the-bertha-wilson-task-force/, accessed 30 March 2026. See also, for example, Elizabeth Sheehy and Sheila McIntyre, *Calling for Change: Women, Law and the Legal Profession* (University of Ottawa Press, 2006).

54 *The Retention and Advancement of Women in Manitoba's Legal Profession* (Law Society of Manitoba, 29 August 2022), 5. See <https://lawsociety.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-Retention-and-Advancement-of-Women-in-Manitoba-Final-Report.pdf>, accessed 30 March 2026.

55 See n 37 above.

56 *Ibid.*, 12.

57 N Cadieux, J Cadieux, M-M Gouin, P-L Fournier, O Caya, M Gingués, M-L Pomerleau, E Morin, AB Camille, J Gahunzire, *Research report (preliminary version): Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada. National Study on the Psychological Health Determinants of Legal Professionals in Canada, Phase I* (Université de Sherbrooke, Business School, 2021) (project sponsored by the CBA and the FLSC), 27, 47. See https://flsc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/EN_Preliminary-report-Cadieux-et-al_Universite-de-Sherbrooke_FINAL.pdf, accessed 30 March 2026.

legal community and has disproportionate impacts.⁵⁸ The report also indicates (akin to the Touchstone Report) that one of the risk factors affecting professionals working in Canadian legal environments is the fear of starting a family, which affected more women than men in the sample.⁵⁹

In a recent survey of lawyers in their first ten years of practice, 63 per cent of respondents stated that they were in a state of psychological distress, and 40 per cent said their mental health affected their work.⁶⁰ The national study revealed that young female lawyers experienced a slightly higher percentage of psychological distress by comparison with their male counterparts.⁶¹ The gap between men and women is greater among the most experienced professionals. Fifty-seven per cent of women with more than 15 years of experience appear to be experiencing a situation of burnout, compared to 40 per cent of more experienced men. These findings are significant and highlight how persistent stress over the course of a career widens the gap between men and women in the profession.⁶²

In 2022, a series of roundtables were held across Canada to examine why women continue to leave the practice of law. The themes identified are similar to the ones identified in the Touchstone Report decades earlier: (1) structure of the profession, particularly the focus on billable hours; (2) competing work and family demands, including maternity leave challenges; (3) lack of mentorship; and (4) sexism and sexual harassment. As bluntly stated in the Manitoba roundtable report, ‘not enough has changed’.⁶³

One important indicator over time has been the retention rates of women lawyers, particularly in larger law firms. A 2018 study by the Law Society of British Columbia found that the attrition rate was 26 per cent for women (with 21 per cent non-practising and five per cent ceased members), compared to 18 per cent for men (with 12 per cent non-practising members and six per cent ceased members). The study notes that while the choice to leave practice is an individual one, certain common factors, such as a lack of mentorship, the need for greater flexibility, and control over work-life balance contribute to attrition.⁶⁴ The retention rate in that province has improved since then, but more women than men leave practice in their 30s, and the percentage of women lawyers begins to decrease for 15- to 19-year calls to the bar.⁶⁵

Female associates and partners consistently move from private law firms to government and corporate (in-house counsel) employers. There is a perception that government and other corporate environments better understand and accommodate the different realities that women lawyers often face (such as by topping-up maternity leave benefits). An increasing number of female lawyers also leave large, prestigious

58 *Ibid.*, 47.

59 *Ibid.*, 161-163.

60 This survey was carried out by the same team of researchers as the national study cited at n 57, at the request of the Jeune Barreau de Montreal. See Mayssa Ferah, ‘La santé mentale des jeunes avocats bat de l’aile’ (*La Presse*, 28 October 2025), www.lapresse.ca/actualites/justice-et-faits-divers/2025-10-28/etude/la-sante-mentale-des-jeunes-avocats-bat-de-l-aile.php?sharing=true, accessed 30 March 2026.

61 This finding is consistent with the 2021 IBA study, *Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study* (IBA, 2021), see www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-report-Mental-Wellbeing-in-the-Legal-Profession-A-Global-Study, accessed 30 March 2026.

62 See n 57, 187.

63 See n 54 above.

64 ‘Supporting Women Lawyers in BC’ (Law Society of BC et al, 2022), see www.lawsociety.bc.ca/about-us/priorities/equity-and-diversity-centre/supporting-women-lawyers-in-bc/, accessed 29 May 2026.

65 Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee, *Retrospective Analysis of Gender in the Legal Profession in BC (1992–2017)* (Law Society of BC, 2018).

firms to establish their own practices. While this movement can be considered empowering, it also sheds light on a fundamental problem within the legal sector.⁶⁶

A second important indicator is the assessment of women’s advancement to senior positions in private practice, in-house counsel departments and in the public sector. Law societies and the CBA have taken steps to encourage women to seek leadership positions within these organisations with great success. For example, as part of its Women’s Resource Centre, the Law Society of Ontario offers a resource kit that includes a guide to leadership in law firms and a guide to business development, among other tools. The CBA’s Manitoba Branch has a Women Lawyers’ Judicial Information Program for women lawyers interested in applying to become a member of the Bench.⁶⁷

A third indicator is the wage gap between male and female lawyers. The clearest evidence of this gap is found in surveys of in-house counsel earnings carried out by the Counsel Network in partnership with the Canadian Corporate Counsel Association, conducted periodically between 2009 and 2024. In 2020, the study revealed that the average base salary for male in-house lawyers was \$177,000, which is \$19,000 higher than the average female base salary of \$158,000. This gap had not changed since the previous study in 2018.⁶⁸ The 2024 study shows that women continued to earn less than men on average, however, for the first time, women reported higher average salaries in some roles, such as Assistant/Associate General Counsel and General Counsel Executive Level.⁶⁹ Although Canadian data on the wage gap in private practice is limited, available reports ‘paint a dim picture’.⁷⁰ Associate salaries tend to be more standardised, but there is a pay discrepancy at partner level. Women equity partners tend to be paid significantly less than their male counterparts; the gap widens with seniority.

The CBA’s Women Lawyers Forum (WLF) released a report titled *Pay Equity in the Legal Profession* in March 2022, which identified a lack of transparency around compensation, inequitable file allocation and a disproportionate burden of non-billable work for women as key contributors to the gender pay gap.⁷¹ The report, based on a national roundtable, also sets out 19 specific recommendations for how legal employers, law societies and governments can work to achieve pay equity.⁷² Three of the report’s main strategies are highlighted:

- **Increase transparency:** Law firms and employers should increase transparency around compensation structures to allow for accountability and ensure fair pay.
- **Promote cultural shift:** Firms should encourage a culture shift that supports parental leave for both men and women.

66 Ruhana Chowhan, ‘The Rise of Female-Led Law Firms in Canada’ (CBA, 8 April 2025), see www.cba.org/sections/women-lawyers/member-articles/the-rise-of-female-led-law-firms-in-canada/, accessed 30 March 2026.

67 As a few of many examples, see ‘Guide to leadership in law firms’ (Law Society of Ontario) at <https://lso.ca/lawyers/women-s-resource-centre/excelling-at-work/guide-to-leadership-in-law-firms>, or the Women Lawyers’ Judicial Information Program offered by the Manitoba Branch of the CBA.

68 *The 2022 In-House Compensation & Career Survey* (The Counsel Network, 30 June 2022), see www.thecounselnetwork.com/the-2022-in-house-compensation-career-survey, accessed 30 March 2026.

69 This may be due to a higher concentration of males in director-level roles. See *The In-House Compensation & Career Survey 2024* (The Counsel Network) at www.cbapd.org/DocViewer.aspx?id=78505®ion=NA, accessed 30 March 2026.

70 See n 37 above.

71 CBA Women Lawyers’ Forum, *Pay Equity in the Legal Profession* (CBA, 2022), see <https://cba.org/getmedia/1c504158-30d0-4611-a4de-f5f16913281d/CBA-WLFPayEquityReport.pdf>, accessed 30 March 2026.

72 *Ibid.*

- **Develop solutions:** The report calls for practical solutions from legal employers, law societies and governments to help close the gender pay gap.

Many Canadian law societies and the CBA have created resources and networks to offer women lawyers greater access to mentorship opportunities and other support for advancement and retention. The CBA promotes women's stature and influence within the legal profession in Canada and offers programmes and networking opportunities to support them.⁷³

In 2008, the Law Society of Ontario launched its Justicia Project with the aim of retaining more women lawyers in private practice and supporting their advancement to senior and leadership positions.⁷⁴ Several other Canadian law societies followed suit.⁷⁵ The Justicia Projects involve collaborations between the law societies and more than 50 law firms, working together to identify and adopt best practices on a variety of issues affecting women in private practice. Numerous resources, including model policies, have been developed and made available for law firms and women lawyers. In 2023, the Law Society of Ontario updated its approach, launching a Women's Resource Centre on its website.⁷⁶

73 For example:

- *The Equity and Diversity Guide and Resource Manual for Successful Law Firms and Legal Organizations* (CBA, 2007);
- *Madame Justice: Profiles of Women Judges in Canada* (CBA), see <https://cba.org/sections/women-lawyers/madam-justice/>;
- Touchstones 30th Anniversary Podcast miniseries (CBA), see <https://cba.org/resources/publications-and-podcasts/the-every-lawyer/>;
- Cecilia I. Johnstone Award (CBA), see <https://cba.org/Sections/Women-Lawyers/Awards/Cecilia-I-Johnstone-Award> (all accessed 30 March 2026).

74 'Justicia Project' (Law Society of Ontario), see [https://lso.ca/lawyers/equity-supports-resources/the-justicia-project-\(1\)](https://lso.ca/lawyers/equity-supports-resources/the-justicia-project-(1)), accessed 30 March 2026.

75 'Saskatchewan Justicia Project' (Law Society of Saskatchewan), see www.lawsociety.sk.ca/initiatives/saskatchewan-justicia-project/ and *Retention and Re-engagement Task Force Final Report* (Law Society of Alberta, 2014), see https://documents.lawsociety.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/17164523/rrtf_final_report_2014_11_07.pdf. Both accessed 30 March 2026.

76 'Evolution of the Justicia Project' (Law Society of Ontario), see <https://lso.ca/lawyers/women-s-resource-centre#history-and-evolution-of-the-justicia-project-4>, accessed 30 March 2026.

Women’s representation across the legal profession: 2025 status

Overall picture: all lawyers

Sector	Female lawyers (%)	Female partners/senior (%)	Female members – leadership/executive/management committee (%)
Law firms	43	35	36
In-house counsel	59	59	48
Public sector	60	60	53
Judiciary	48	N/A	49
Total	53	51	47

Figure 4: Gender representation across the legal profession – 2025 status

Female lawyers and senior female lawyers by sector

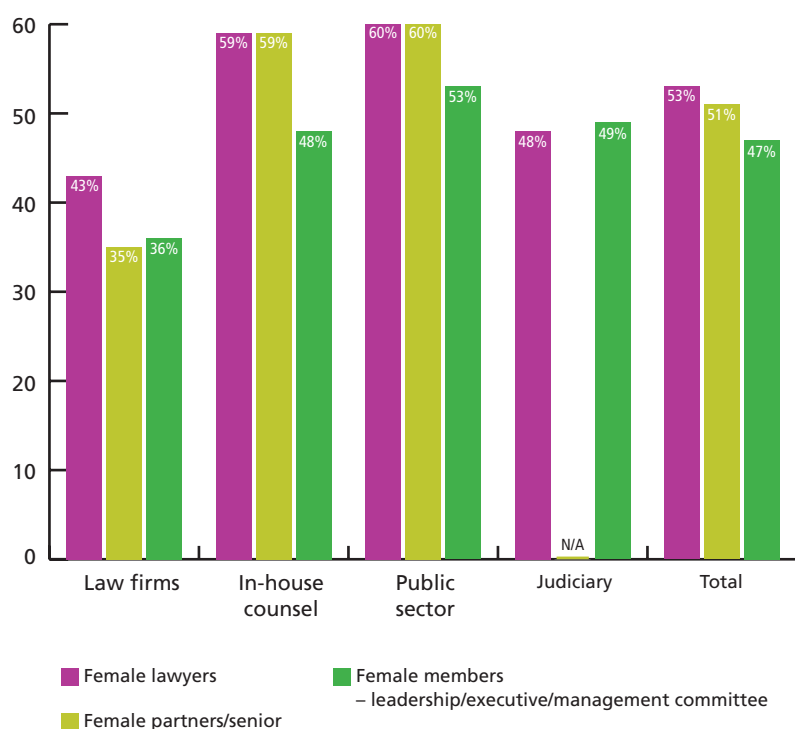


Figure 5: Female lawyers and senior female lawyers by sector

Women make up almost half of lawyers across Canada’s legal profession and represent 53 per cent of lawyers within legal organisations responding to the survey. The proportion of women dips slightly to 51 per cent at the partner/senior level and then drops to 47 per cent at the executive/management level. Within the survey sample, approximately 60 per cent of lawyers working as in-house counsel and in the public sector were women. In contrast, women represented 43 per cent of lawyers in law firms. The percentage of women partners was substantially lower at 35 per cent, with a similar percentage of 36 per cent female representation on law firm boards, executive and management committees. Women are strongly represented at senior legal levels in the corporate and public sectors.

Representation in the judiciary

Canada has made major progress in achieving gender parity on the Bench.⁷⁷ In 1993, women comprised 18 per cent of federally appointed judges. By 2016, that proportion had increased to 30 per cent. More recently, the federal government has prioritised the appointment of women, Indigenous persons and visible minorities. The number of women on the federal bench rose from 44 per cent in 2021 to 47 per cent in 2023,⁷⁸ and to 49 per cent in 2025.⁷⁹ Notably, there is currently a majority of women on the Supreme Court of Canada, with five out of the nine judges being female.⁸⁰ Given the small number of leadership positions, the gender balance in Canada's courts has fluctuated over time, though this too is trending upward. One study reported that the position of chief justice was held by women in 40 per cent of the federal courts, 26 per cent of other federally appointed courts (superior trial courts and courts of appeal), and 37 per cent of provincial and territorial courts.⁸¹

Of the courts which responded to the survey (across the federal, provincial and territorial appellate and superior courts), 48 per cent of judges were female, and women held 49 per cent of leadership positions in these courts. Most Canadian courts do not have a formal designation of 'senior judge', and seniority is based solely on the year of appointment.

Representation in part-time practice

Sector	% of lawyers	% of part-time lawyers who are women
Law firms	4	20
Corporate sector	0	0
Public sector	2	84

Figure 6: Women in part-time practice

Part-time work is common in the Canadian labour market. The national average of part-time workers is 18–20 per cent of the workforce,⁸² although this varies across regions and fluctuates monthly. The proportion of women working part time is roughly double that of men (24 per cent women compared to 13 per cent men). The rate of part-time work in the Canadian legal sector is relatively low, at under five per cent, compared to the labour market as a whole. According to the survey results, a substantial majority of part-time lawyers in the public sector are women, whereas in law firms, a majority are men. Indeed, the figures are almost inverse, with women comprising 20 per cent of part-time firm membership but 84 per cent of part-time public sector legal employees.

In Canada, judges of all courts are appointed on a full-time basis. Full-time and virtually permanent appointment (subject to mandatory retirement at the age of 75 and removal only in case of incapacity

77 'Gender Results Framework: Data table update on federally appointed judges' (The Daily, 2023), see <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240222/dq240222e-eng.htm>, accessed 30 March 2026.

78 *Ibid.*

79 See n 42 above.

80 'Judges' (Supreme Court of Canada), see www.scc-csc.ca/about-apropos/judges-juges/, accessed 30 March 2026.

81 'Diversity among federal and provincial judges' (Policy Options, 4 May 2016), see <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/2016/05/diversity-among-federal-provincial-judges/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

82 'Proportion of workers in full-time and part-time jobs by gender, annual' (Statistics Canada, 9 January 2026), see www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410032703, accessed 30 March 2026.

or serious misconduct) is seen as an essential aspect of judicial independence and, in particular, the underlying constitutional principles of security of tenure, financial security and administrative independence.⁸³ The major exceptions are supernumerary judges (retired judges of the superior courts who choose to continue serving on a part-time basis). In some jurisdictions, additional categories of court officers perform some judicial functions on a part-time basis. In the British Columbia provincial court, for example, ‘Judicial Justices’ deal with pre-trial court appearances in criminal matters, trial scheduling, some small claims, traffic and some bail matters.⁸⁴ The distinction generally lies in the scope and nature of the cases handled, with full-time appointments reserved for the most demanding and constitutionally significant judicial roles requiring complete devotion and isolation from potential conflicts of interest.

Workplace initiatives across the legal profession

The survey asked whether legal workplaces monitor gender balance overall, and particularly at more senior levels. Ninety-three per cent of law firms, corporations and public sector organisations monitor gender representation both generally and at senior levels within their organisation. Almost all respondents have measures in place aimed at increasing the number of women in senior positions. The responses from the judiciary were more nuanced since monitoring and leadership training functions are the responsibility of external organisations, notably the Federal Commissioner for Judicial Affairs, which monitors gender balance, and the National Judicial Institute, which provides training to judges across Canada.⁸⁵

Initiative popularity and perceived effectiveness

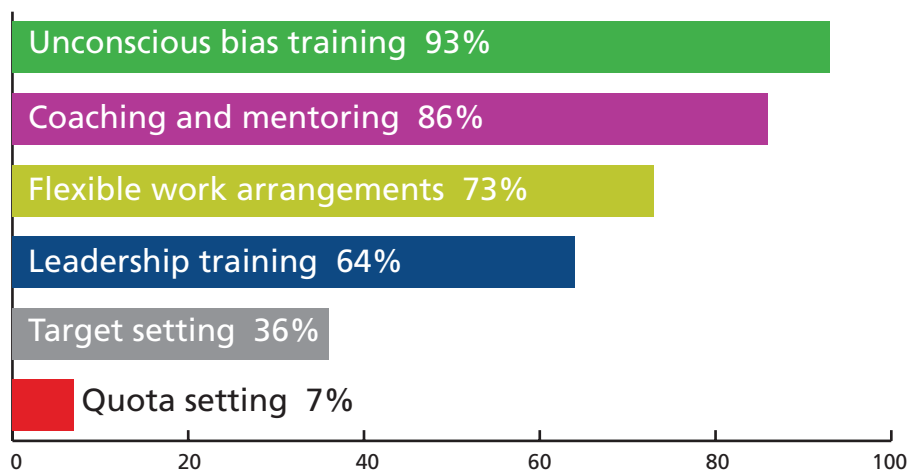


Figure 7: Initiative popularity

According to the Phase 1 survey, the most popular initiatives to improve gender representation across all sectors are unconscious bias training, coaching and mentoring programmes for women, and flexible working arrangements. All legal organisations rated these equality-promoting efforts as very effective or

83 See n 37 above.

84 ‘Judicial justices’ (Provincial Court of British Columbia), see <https://provincialcourt.bc.ca/about-court/judges-and-justices/judicial-justices>, accessed 30 March 2026.

85 After including responses from the judiciary, the percentage is lowered to 82.7 for overall monitoring and 72.4 for monitoring senior positions.

somewhat effective. While the setting of quotas and targets was the least popular, it was rated as the most effective by those legal organisations that employed them.

Initiative	Very effective (%)	Somewhat effective (%)
Unconscious bias training	80	20
Coaching and mentoring	69	31
Flexible work arrangements	76	24
Leadership training	91	9
Target setting	100	0
Quota setting	100	0

Figure 8: Initiative effectiveness

The Women in Law Project Phase 2 survey asked individual women lawyers to identify the initiatives that had the greatest impact on their careers. The Canadian respondents reported that flexible working was the most impactful workplace initiative – 32 per cent of Canadian respondents said that it was the initiative that had the greatest impact on their careers. Seventeen per cent said coaching/mentoring was most impactful, and for six per cent it was leadership training.

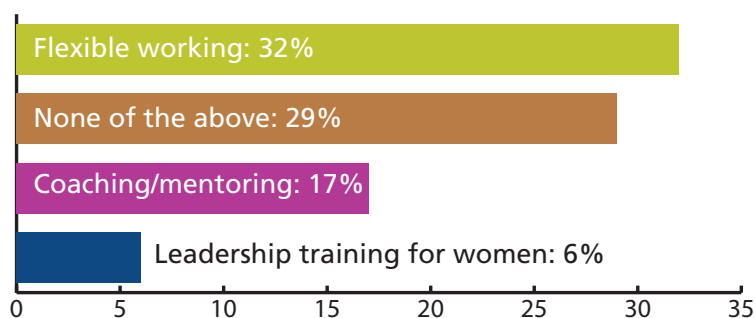


Figure 9: Initiative effectiveness in Canadian Phase 2 survey responses

Sixty-two per cent of Canadian Phase 2 respondents reported that their requests for remote working were approved, while five per cent reported that their requests were denied (the remainder indicated that they had not requested these arrangements or that this was not applicable). The experience of working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic has boosted the acceptability of flexible arrangements.

Workplace initiatives: sector breakdown

Law firms

All law firms that responded to the survey reported that they provide coaching and mentoring, leadership training, unconscious bias training and flexible working arrangements for firm members. These initiatives ranged in scope and approach, with several having existed for as little as two years to others for as long as 25 years. Most firms adopted a mixture of formal and informal methods to coach, mentor and provide leadership training. In several cases, formal programme evaluations were carried out regularly, including through participant feedback, performance outcomes and demonstrated impact. Law firms emphasised that these efforts were designed to support and advance women, strengthen the retention of women leaders, and increase their representation in partnership and leadership roles. One Canadian Phase 2 respondent highlighted the relationship between mentoring and retention:

“ I think that access to mentors is the single most important factor in career development. I had excellent mentors of both genders who were supportive and provided exceptional learning opportunities. This is the key to maintaining individuals in practice.
(Advocate, Canada)

Other positive knock-on effects were also recognised. For example, with reference to its mentoring programme, one respondent organisation stated, ‘it has enhanced engagement and retention among participants, as well as fostering cross-functional relationships and networking opportunities’.

Law firms also have a long history of accommodating lawyers through flexible alternative work arrangements; for the most part, these continue to be implemented on an ad hoc, case-by-case basis, rather than in an open and standardised manner. In addition to the general acceptance of these customised accommodations, some law firms offer hybrid work models. These arrangements can include adjusted work hours, temporary workload modifications, leave programmes and other support tailored to ‘individual health, caregiving, and equity-related needs’.

“ Flexibility to work from home was a game-changer in terms of ability to achieve work/life balance.
(Private lawyer, Canada)

Some firms are moving toward broader, sustained approaches to institutionalising flexibility through the development of alternative paths. On behalf of another firm, the respondent wrote:

“ We have promoted various career paths at the firm which offer flexibility. We are seeing an increasing number of individuals interested in this possibility and it has resulted in improved retention and recruitment in certain areas.

Unconscious bias training is seen as an essential aspect of a broader learning curriculum. Law firms generally found it more effective to embed this training into overall firm functioning, as well as through formal training modules. Several firms assessed its effectiveness through participant feedback surveys,

engagement metrics, and evaluations of awareness and application of inclusive behaviours in daily work and team dynamics. Feedback indicated that such training supports:

“ ... increased self-awareness and helps promote more inclusive approaches to interviewing, feedback, and collaboration across the firm.

While less popular, law firms that employed target-setting practices also considered them to be effective. By setting an aspirational goal of increased diversity and representation within the partnership and leadership roles, firms enhanced their accountability and made it more likely that the goals would be achieved. One respondent stated:

“ We continuously monitor the composition of our Executive Committee and other senior leadership roles to identify trends and assess the effectiveness of the process. This has led to intentional sponsorship and increased visibility of women, strengthened our leadership pipeline, and reinforced our commitment to inclusive governance and equitable access to decision-making roles.

Another respondent stated:

“ We had set a target of 40 per cent representation of women in the income partnership and 30 per cent in the equity partnership by December 31, 2024. Shortlists for partner promotions also had a target for diverse representation to help us reach our goal which was met well in advance of the deadline in 2023.

Several respondents also mentioned the development of internal and externally linked affinity groups, such as women’s networks and dedicated programmes supporting lawyers taking parental leave.

The corporate sector

The corporate sector’s approach to promoting gender balance was similar to that taken by law firms, except that the policies and programmes used were designed to operate across the entire organisation and to increase its representativeness in a more comprehensive way. A corporate in-house lawyer responding to the Phase 2 survey highlighted the importance of flex-time:

“ Flexible work arrangements have allowed me to both continue my career and grow in it, and balance my other personal or family commitments. While this initiative may not singlehandedly ‘advance’ my career, it has allowed me to remain in my career and follow its natural growth trajectory.

(Corporate in-house lawyer, Canada)

The public sector

The public sector takes a direct approach to improving its gender balance through positive measures. While more lawyers, particularly women, worked part-time, fewer reported that formal flexible work arrangements were available.

“ Work frequency can be adjusted (three, four days a week); also remote work options are available. The impact has allowed for improved work/life balance and improved morale.
(Government legal department)

Another government legal department highlighted the role of a multifaceted approach to the creation of a ‘diverse, equitable, anti-racist and accessible workplace free from discrimination and harassment, where everyone belongs’. The key to achieving this goal through ‘diversity pathways’ includes coaching and mentoring, leadership and development programmes, recruitment shortlists and succession plans.

The judiciary

Gender equality issues and workplace initiatives are within the control of the Federal Commissioner of Judicial Affairs for the federal judiciary, and of the provincial and territorial governments for the provincial and territorial judiciaries. These include, for example, the appointment process, the full-time nature of appointments and other conditions of work, and access to external resources for education and training. These constitutional and statutory arrangements must be kept in mind when reviewing the judicial responses to the survey.

Two workplace initiatives that are within the control of the chief justices and judges are: (1) coaching and mentoring; and (2) flexible work arrangements. A majority of survey responses received from the judiciary (73 per cent) reported that mentoring is provided to all judges. The usual practice is for the chief justice to assign a mentor to all judges upon appointment. In some cases, the newly appointed judge is invited to choose their mentor; in other courts, this process is more ad hoc. Mentoring is regarded as highly effective by the courts and valuable by both mentees and mentors. Several chief justices reported regularly meeting with both mentors and mentees throughout the early years of judicial service and, in some cases, participating in the development of an education plan for the newly appointed judges. Courts with less formal mentorship programmes considered these initiatives as only somewhat effective.

In a substantial portion of courts (40 per cent), judges have access to flexible work arrangements. One chief justice responded:

“ Except for sitting days (the scheduling of which is also flexible), judges are free to be as flexible as they want with working hours, so long as the work gets done.

Another stated:

“ The [c]ourt has a well-supported work-from-home option, as well as flexible, voluntary rota switches, which are not measured but support judges with caregiving responsibilities, health concerns, or other issues to fulfil their work obligations while balancing other demands.

All courts that provide access to flexible working arrangements considered them to be effective or somewhat effective.

The responses on unconscious bias training reflect that, at the federal level, this education is provided by the National Judicial Institute (NJI). All federally appointed judges receive unconscious bias training at the outset of their appointment. Several additional training opportunities for judges are offered on an ongoing basis by the NJI and sometimes by the courts themselves. Courts report generally on their education activities but there is no specific measurement of the impact of unconscious bias training (beyond increased knowledge and awareness among judges).

Comparison with jurisdictions studied to date

Women account for close to half of the legal profession in Canada and show strong representation across the sector. Within the survey sample, women represented 53 per cent of all legal professionals across respondent organisations. This proportion remains relatively stable at senior levels, with women comprising 51 per cent of partners and senior lawyers/equivalent, and 45 per cent of those holding executive and management-level positions.

When viewed in a comparative context, Canada performs more strongly than many jurisdictions in terms of women's progression into senior legal roles. In contrast to jurisdictions such as England and Wales, where women represent a majority of the profession but hold a significantly smaller share of senior positions, Canada demonstrates more limited attrition between overall participation and seniority. However, as observed in other jurisdictions, representation nonetheless declines most noticeably at the higher levels of leadership.

Sectoral differences in Canada reflect trends seen in other jurisdictions. Women are particularly well represented in the corporate and public sectors, accounting for approximately 60 per cent of in-house counsel and public sector lawyers within the survey sample. This mirrors patterns identified in jurisdictions such as Türkiye, where women's representation at senior levels is strongest in the corporate sector, and contrasts with countries such as Brazil, where women are well represented in the public sector overall but underrepresented in senior roles.

Private practice in Canada continues to display more pronounced gender disparities than other legal sectors, consistent with findings across multiple jurisdictions. Women constitute 43 per cent of lawyers in law firms, but only 35 per cent of partners, with similarly low representation among those holding executive management committee positions (36 per cent). This gap between overall representation and leadership mirrors trends observed in jurisdictions such as Spain and Chile, where women's progression into senior private practice roles remains limited despite strong participation at entry and mid-career levels.

In terms of workplace initiatives, unconscious bias training and coaching and mentoring are the most popular initiatives among Canadian respondents. This differs slightly from other jurisdictions covered, with flexible working being the most popular initiative, on average, followed by coaching and mentoring; unconscious bias training was one of the least popular initiatives among other jurisdictions covered by the Women in Law Project.

Overall, Canada compares favourably with many jurisdictions in terms of women's representation across the legal profession, particularly in the corporate and public sectors. Nevertheless, as in most jurisdictions covered by the report, the underrepresentation of women in leadership and governance structures indicates that achieving gender parity at the highest levels of decision-making remains an ongoing challenge.

Conclusion

Three decades after the publication of the landmark Touchstones Report, the legal profession in Canada is demonstrating encouraging progress towards gender equity. Women now comprise a significant proportion of the profession and have achieved near parity overall (or surpassed it, as in Quebec, where there are more women practising law than men). These gains in representation are not consistently mirrored at senior levels, particularly in private practice. The persistence of this imbalance highlights that further efforts are required to ensure that women are equally represented at all levels of practice. In other legal workplaces, such as in-house and public sector legal departments, advances are even more demonstrable. Here, women have equalled and in some cases, exceeded, their male colleagues at senior levels. At the same time, many women lawyers continue to experience discrimination and harassment within the profession, resulting in personal hardship, retention challenges and a persistent gender imbalance in diminished wellbeing. Wage disparity also remains an issue.

Publicly available data regarding the judiciary demonstrates strong and consistent progress in achieving gender equality. Here, sustained and widespread parity is within grasp across the Canadian judiciary.

The long-term commitment to gender equality demonstrated by federal, provincial and territorial governments, legal institutions, professional bodies and individual organisations provides a strong foundation for continued advancement. Monitoring for gender balance and unconscious bias training are seen as essential and permanent initiatives, often extended to other groups who have experienced historical and continuing discrimination.

Coaching and mentoring programmes emerged as the most widely adopted and highly regarded initiatives in supporting women's career development in the legal profession and the judiciary. Flexible working arrangements are commonly implemented and demonstrate a commitment to accommodating family responsibilities, which continue to disproportionately affect women's legal careers. Mentoring and flexible work arrangements are also important to the judiciary. Target setting for senior roles in private practice, and corporate and government legal departments, has a smaller uptake.

Desk research reveals that women lawyers are collaborating more than ever to develop alternative forms of practice, workplace solutions and resources to address persistent challenges. Professional associations and some law firms are supporting these initiatives. With continued strategic effort and close monitoring, the Canadian legal profession has the potential to further consolidate its progress and serve as a model for inclusive legal culture and a leader in accommodative, healthier legal practice.

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Appendix 1: Data tables

Overall picture: all lawyers

Sector	Female lawyers (%)	Female partners/senior (%)	Female members: leadership/ executive/management committee (%)
Law firms	43	35	36
In-house counsel	59	59	48
Public sector	60	60	53
Judiciary	48	N/A	49
Total	53	51	47

Popularity of gender initiatives: sector breakdown

Initiative	Total (%)	Law firms (%)	Corporate sector (%)	Public sector (%)	Judiciary (%)
Unconscious bias training	93	100	100	60	100
Coaching and mentoring	86	100	100	60	73
Flexible work arrangements	73	100	33	80	40
Leadership training	64	67	100	40	N/A
Target setting	36	33	33	40	N/A
Quota setting	7	0	33	0	N/A

Perceived effectiveness of gender initiatives

Initiative	Very effective (%)	Somewhat effective (%)	Not effective (%)
Target setting	100	0	0
Quota setting	100	0	0
Leadership training	91	9	0
Unconscious bias training	80	20	0
Flexible work arrangements	76	24	0
Coaching and mentoring	69	31	0

Appendix 2: Survey questions

1 What type of organisation do you work for?

- Law firm
- Corporation with in-house counsel
- Public sector
- Judiciary

2 We'd like to start by asking some general profiling questions about the lawyers/judges who are employed in your organisation.

	Number
a) Total number of lawyers/judges	
b) Lawyers/judges who work on a part-time basis	
c) Lawyers/judges at a partner/management/senior level	
d) Lawyers/judges at a partner/management/senior level who work on a part-time basis	

3 This question asks about the lawyers/judges who are female. Please enter approximate numbers for the following:

	Number
a) Total number of lawyers/judges who are female	
b) Female lawyers/judges who work on a part-time basis	
c) Female lawyers/judges at a partner/management/senior level	
d) Female lawyers/judges at a partner/management/senior level who work on a part-time basis	

4 If your organisation is a law firm, how many individuals sit on your management structure (Partnership Council/Management Board/Executive Council or equivalent)?

Number: _____ Not applicable

5 Of the senior individuals identified in question 4, how many are female?

Number: _____ Not applicable

6 Do you monitor the gender balance in your organisation overall?

Yes No

7 Does your organisation monitor the gender balance in your organisation for lawyers/judges at senior level?

Yes No

8 Is the gender monitoring data referred to in questions 6 and 7 shared with the leadership of the organisation?

For the public sector, is gender monitoring data shared with the leadership of the department or elsewhere within government?

- Yes No Not applicable

9 Does your organisation have any of the following initiatives/policies in place addressing gender equality and/or seeking to increase the number of women reaching positions of seniority?

Tick all that apply

- Quota setting for senior role positions
- Availability of greater flexible working arrangements (post Covid-19 restrictions)
- Leadership training for women
- Target setting for senior role positions⁸⁶
- Unconscious bias training
- Coaching/mentoring programmes

Other: _____

- None of the above

10 If you marked any of the measures outlined in question 9, please provide a brief description of each measure/s.

For **each** measure, please include how it works, how it is measured, and the impact it is having.

⁸⁶ Targets v quotas: targets tend to be aspirational, quotas tend to be mandated (sometimes set externally by a body with authority to impose them on organisations).

11 If you marked any of the measures outlined in question 9, for each measure, please detail approximately how long that measure has been in place.

Please enter the approximate number of years for **each** measure.

12 In your view, how effective has each initiative/policy been in supporting gender equality and/or increasing the number of women reaching positions of seniority in your organisation?

- Very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Not effective

13 Does your organisation have any other diversity-related initiatives in place (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, etc)?

- Yes No

14 Following up on question 13, please describe how one of these initiatives or policies works.

Please include how it works, how long it has been in place (approximate number of years) and the impact it is having.

15 What else do you want us to know about other initiatives coming in the future?

16 Would you like to associate your organisation's name with the feedback you have provided about policies and initiatives?

If you select 'No' below, your survey data will remain confidential and only reported in aggregate.

- Yes No Not applicable



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