

DOUBLE DISCRIMINATION

First Nations women
continue to fight
for equality

An Act of Unfairness

The Canadian government created the *Indian Act* in 1876. The Act decided who qualified as an “Indian,” and could receive tax and education rights, among other things. This is known as having status.

When a status First Nations man married a non-First Nations woman, all of his rights applied to her. But a First Nations woman who married a non-First Nations man lost all her status rights, and her children were not considered to be First Nations. She could not live on a reserve (which we now call a First Nations community) or even be buried there. If she married a man from a different First Nation, she became part of his nation. If he died or they got divorced, she lost all her rights.

Mary Two-Axe Earley, a Mohawk from Quebec, lost her First Nations status when she married an American man. But she didn't accept the unfairness of the *Indian Act*. In 1968, she made her case to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. After her husband died, she moved back to her home in the Kahnawake First Nations community, but no longer had the right to own property or vote because of her marriage. In 1975, the community said it was going to kick her out of her house. She took her story to an international women's conference and then to the Canadian government.



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In 1971, two Ontario women — **Jeannette Corbiere Lavell**, an Anishinaabe from Manitoulin Island, and **Yvonne Bedard**, an Onondaga from Six Nations — went to court to fight for their rights in separate cases. Both lost.

In July 1979, a group of Maliseet women from Tobique, N.B., marched 110 miles (about 175 kilometres) to Ottawa to protest 110 years of the Indian Act's unfairness to women. Later that year, one of the women, **Sandra Lovelace**, shown at right, went to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations. The committee told the Canadian government the act broke international human rights agreements.



CP Images, Senate of Canada



The Canadian government passed **Bill C-31 in 1985**. It gave First Nations women back their status rights, which they could now pass on to their children.