



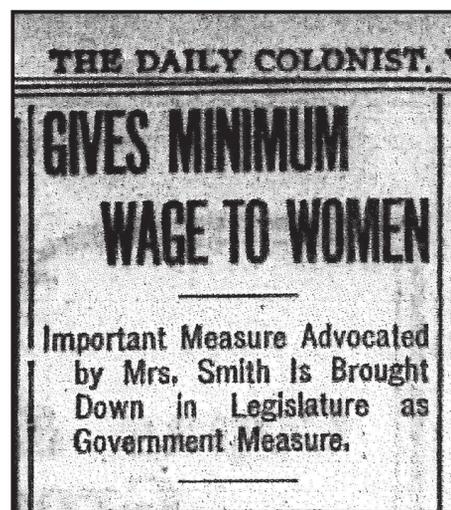
Social Justice Reform for the Benefit of Women in British Columbia

The success of the women's suffrage movement in April 1917 set the stage for the introduction of legislation to improve the rights of women, children and families in British Columbia.

The following historical examples help to illustrate some of the social reform that occurred during the early twentieth century, often through the efforts of pioneering women and men in community groups, the Legislative Assembly, the legal profession and the judiciary.

In spite of these strides, some of this early legislation was only intended to benefit British subjects. Immigrants from various ethnic backgrounds were often excluded from certain rights, and it wasn't until 1949 that suffrage - the right to vote in parliamentary elections - was finally extended to include Aboriginal women and men and various ethnic minorities.

In May of 1917, British Columbia passed the *Equal Guardianship of Infants Act*. By virtue of this Act, British Columbia became the first province to grant mothers the same rights as fathers concerning the care, control and custody of their children. Helen Gregory MacGill, who in 1917 was appointed a juvenile court judge and the first female justice in British Columbia, was an important champion of this change to the legal status of women within marriage.



Introduced as a government bill, the Minister gave full credit to Independent MLA Mary Ellen Smith, the first woman elected to BC's Legislative Assembly, for her efforts to bring the issue of inadequate wages for women to the government's attention. In April of 1918, the Legislative Assembly passed *An Act to fix a Minimum Wage for Women*.

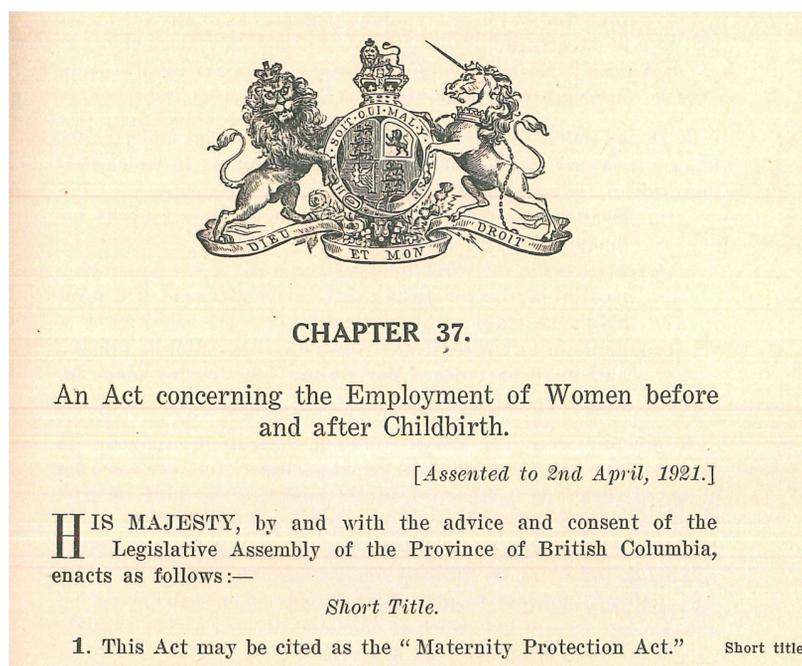
In March of 1918, the Minister of Labour introduced a bill to provide for the creation of a Minimum Wage Board. The Board would review the wages paid to women in different occupations, trades and industries and enforce minimum wages where necessary.



In 1918, Mary Ellen Smith, supported by representatives from various women's charities, labour groups and religious organizations, approached the government to lobby for the introduction of a Mothers' Pension in BC.

Such legislation would enable the province to provide financial support to war widows, women whose husbands were incapacitated, deserted wives and unwed mothers.

Their lobbying efforts were so persuasive that a commission was appointed to review the matter, with public hearings held in seventeen locations around the province. The commission found that there was overwhelming support for the creation of a Mothers' Pension and, in April of 1920, the Liberal government of Premier John Oliver, with the support of Independent MLA Mary Ellen Smith, passed the *BC Mothers' Pension Act*.



In 1921, British Columbia passed the *Maternity Protection Act*, becoming the first province to provide maternity leave for working women.

This legislation enabled women to take a limited leave of absence before and after giving birth and made it unlawful to dismiss women for these absences. A working woman was also permitted thirty minutes twice a day to nurse her child while at work. Employers not abiding by the legislation were subject to hefty fines.