

# Study: The Canada–US gap in women's labour market participation, 1997 to 2015

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The proportion of women aged 25 to 54 who participated in the labour market has risen in Canada over the last two decades, while it has fallen in the United States.

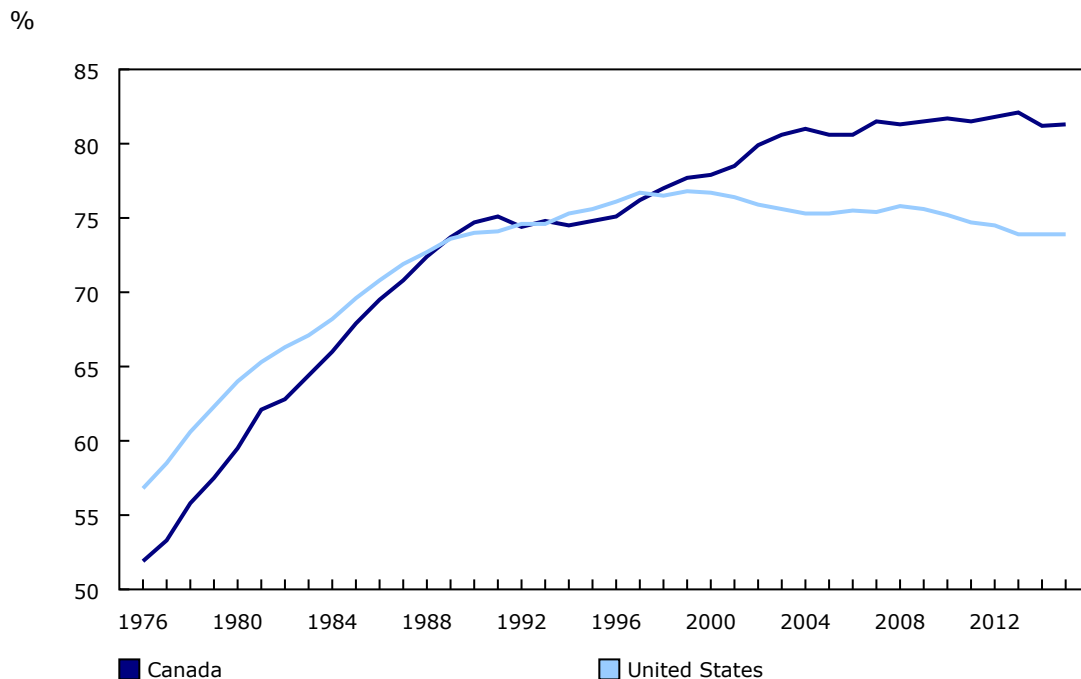
In 1997, female labour force participation rates in Canada and the United States were almost identical, with 76% of Canadian women aged 25 to 54 and 77% of American women in that age group participating in the labour force.

By 2015, the female participation rate had increased to 81% in Canada, while it had declined to 74% in the United States. These results come from the new study, "[The Canada–U.S. gap in women's labour market participation.](#)"

In the 1970s and 1980s, the participation rates of women increased steadily in both countries, and were slightly higher in the United States.

After a few years of relative stability during the 1990s, the rates began to diverge. From 1997 to 2015, the participation rate of women aged 25 to 54 increased by five percentage points in Canada, but fell by three percentage points in the United States.

**Chart 1**  
**Labour force participation rates in Canada and the United States, women aged 25 to 54, 1976 to 2015**



**Source(s):** Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey (3701), adjusted for comparability with US data; United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.



## **Significant gains for women aged 45 to 54 in Canada**

In Canada, the overall participation rate of women increased largely because of a rise in the participation rate of women aged 45 to 54.

The participation rate of Canadian women in this age group increased by 10 percentage points (from 72% to 82%) from 1997 to 2015.

By comparison, the participation rate among American women in the same age group declined from 76% to 74%.

Divergence was also evident among younger women. For those aged 25 to 44, the participation rate increased by three percentage points (from 78% to 81%) in Canada, but fell by three percentage points in the United States (from 77% to 74%).

## **Differences more pronounced among less-educated women**

Among women aged 45 to 54, Canadian women with lower levels of education recorded significant gains in their labour force participation rate. For example, Canadian women in this age group with a high school diploma or less increased their participation rate from 64% in 1997 to 72% in 2015.

In contrast, their US counterparts became less likely to participate in the labour market, as their participation rate declined from 68% to 64% over the same period.

The decline in participation rates seen among younger women in the United States was also more pronounced among the least educated. From 1997 to 2015, the participation rate of US women aged 25 to 44 with a high school diploma or less declined from 70% to 62%.

The participation rate of their Canadian counterparts also declined, but by a smaller margin (from 68% to 65%).

The result is a reversal from 1997, when less educated women in the United States were more likely to work than their Canadian counterparts.

By 2015, Canadian women with lower levels of education were more likely to participate in the labour market than US women with the same level of education.

## **Education has a positive effect on women's labour market participation rate in both countries**

From 1997 to 2015, the proportion of women aged 25 to 54 who had a university degree almost doubled in Canada, increasing from 18% to 35%. In the United States, that same proportion rose from 26% to 38%.

In both countries, rising levels of female education had an influence on participation rates, but did not fully explain the difference between Canadian and US participation rates.

In Canada, the increase in educational attainment was behind almost all of the increase in the participation of Canadian women aged 25 to 44, but accounted for about one-third of the increase among women aged 45 to 54.

In the United States, the participation rate of women would have declined even further in both age groups without the positive contribution of rising educational attainment.

This suggests that other factors lie behind the Canada–US gap in female participation rates.

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**Note to readers**

*This study uses data from the Canadian Labour Force Survey and the US Current Population Survey to examine the growing gap in participation rates between Canadian and US women. To make the two sources comparable, adjustments were made to the Canadian data to make them comparable with the US definition of the labour market.*

*Among men, the difference was smaller between the two countries. In 1997, the labour force participation of men was 92% in the United States and 91% in Canada. In 2015, the rates were 88% for the United States and 90% for Canada.*

**Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [3701](#).**

The article, "[The Canada–U.S. gap in women's labour market participation](#)," is now available in *Insights on Canadian Society* ([75-006-X](#)), from the *Browse by key resource* module of our website, under *Publications*.

For more information, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; [STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca)).

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