



**History of International Women's Day (IWD):** Every year on March 8th, the world comes together to celebrate International Women's Day (IWD), a day dedicated to honoring the achievements of women across the globe and advocating for gender equality. This special day not only commemorates the historical strides women have made in society but also shines a light on the ongoing struggles they face in the quest for equality. The origins of International Women's Day are deeply rooted in the early 20th-century movements for women's rights, which sought to address issues of suffrage, labor rights, and discrimination.

IWD is a testament to the enduring spirit and resilience of women who have led the charge against injustice and inequality. It serves as a reminder of how far we have come and how much further we still need to go to achieve gender parity. Celebrated worldwide through marches, conferences, and cultural events, International Women's Day provides an opportunity for reflection, advocacy, and action towards a more inclusive and equitable world.

In this blog, we will delve into the rich history of International Women's Day, tracing its origins from the labor movements of the early 1900s to its recognition by the United Nations and its significance in the modern era. We aim to highlight the importance of this day in promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls everywhere. Join us as we explore the legacy and future of International Women's Day, a day of global solidarity and a call to action for generations to come.

## Origins of International Women's Day

The origins of International Women's Day (IWD) trace back to a confluence of social movements and historical events at the turn of the 20th century, during a period marked by rapid industrialization, economic expansion, and growing political unrest. Women were at the forefront of advocating for their rights, seeking not only the right to vote but also fair employment practices, better working conditions, and equality. Here's an in-depth look at the origins of International Women's Day:



## Early Calls for Women's Rights

The fight for women's rights had been gaining momentum throughout the 19th century, with various movements advocating for women's suffrage, labor rights, and educational opportunities. However, it was in the early 20th century that these efforts coalesced into the establishment of an international day to highlight women's demands.

## The First National Women's Day

***The origins of IWD can be traced back to the United States, where the Socialist Party of America organized the first National Woman's Day on February 28, 1909.***

This event was held in New York City and was aimed at advocating for equal rights for women, including suffrage. It was a response to the growing discontent among women, particularly those working in the garment industry, who were subjected to harsh working conditions, low wages, and discrimination.

## The Internationalization of Women's Day

The idea to make the day international came from Clara Zetkin, a German socialist and advocate for women's rights. In August 1910, at the International Socialist Women's Conference held in Copenhagen, Zetkin proposed the establishment of an International Women's Day. Her proposal was met with unanimous approval from the over 100 women from 17 countries present at the conference, representing unions, socialist parties, and working women's clubs. Zetkin's proposal did not specify a date, but the idea was to promote equal rights, including suffrage, for women worldwide.

## The First International Women's Day

The first International Women's Day was observed on March 19, 1911, in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland, with rallies and organized meetings that attracted thousands of women. These events focused on women's rights to work, vote, be trained, hold public office, and end discrimination. Notably, less than a week after the first IWD, the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City brought further attention to the critical need for labor reforms and safety standards in the United States, highlighting the dire



conditions many working women faced.

## The Date Becomes Official

***In 1913 and 1914, International Women's Day began to be observed on March 8, a date that has been officially maintained since. The choice of March 8 has various explanations, but it is widely recognized for its association with women's activism in Russia in 1917, when women striking for "bread and peace" in response to World War I initiated a series of events that led to the abdication of the Tsar and the granting of the right to vote to Russian women.***

The origins of International Women's Day are rooted in the struggle for women's rights and labor rights, reflecting a broader movement for social justice and equality. Over the years, IWD has evolved from a day of protest and demand for the franchise to a global celebration of women's achievements and a continuing call for gender equality.





## *History of International Women's Day (IWD)*

### **IWD in the Early Years**

The early years of International Women's Day (IWD) are marked by a blend of activism, struggle, and the burgeoning movement towards gender equality and women's rights. Following its establishment, IWD became a focal point for women around the world to unite in their demands for fair treatment, the right to vote, better working conditions, and equality. This period was characterized by significant events and milestones that laid the groundwork for future advancements in women's rights.

#### **Early 20th Century Activism**

In the years following its first observance, International Women's Day was closely tied to the labor movements sweeping across Europe and North America. Women laborers were at the forefront, advocating for shorter work hours, better pay, and the right to unionize. The textile and garment industries, in particular, saw significant participation from women, who often worked in poor conditions for minimal wages.

#### **The 1911 Tragedy that Galvanized the Movement**

A pivotal moment in the history of IWD occurred on March 25, 1911, with the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City. This disaster, which claimed the lives of 146 garment workers, the majority of whom were young immigrant women, highlighted the dire working conditions and lack of safety standards. The public outcry that followed served as a catalyst for labor legislation in the United States and fueled further activism for women's labor rights globally.

#### **The Role of World War I**

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 brought about significant changes to the societal roles of women. With men drafted into military service, women stepped into roles that were previously unavailable to them, including industrial work, clerical jobs, and positions in public service. This shift not only demonstrated women's capability in the workforce but



also reinforced the argument for women's suffrage and equal rights. The end of the war in 1918 saw many countries granting women the right to vote, a monumental achievement partly attributed to their contributions during the war.

## IWD Gains International Recognition

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, International Women's Day grew in prominence and was celebrated by an increasing number of countries. It became a day not only to advocate for labor rights but also to push for women's suffrage, education, and the right to hold public office. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 saw women gaining unprecedented rights, and March 8th was declared a national holiday in Soviet Russia, further elevating the day's significance.

## The Interwar Years

The period between World War I and World War II saw continued efforts for women's rights, with IWD serving as a platform for these demands. However, progress was uneven and faced many setbacks, including the rise of fascist regimes in Europe that curtailed women's freedoms. Despite these challenges, IWD remained an important symbol of resistance and the ongoing fight for gender equality.



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## **The United Nations' Involvement**

The involvement of the United Nations (UN) marked a significant milestone in the history of International Women's Day (IWD), amplifying its global reach and impact. The UN's engagement with IWD began in earnest in the mid-20th century, as part of its broader commitment to promoting human rights and equality. This phase in the history of IWD underscores the increasing recognition of women's rights as an integral part of the global agenda for peace and development.

### **Formal Recognition and Global Advocacy**

In 1975, during the International Women's Year, the United Nations officially celebrated International Women's Day for the first time. This recognition was a pivotal moment, providing IWD with a formal status within the international community and elevating the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment on the global stage. It was a call



to action for countries around the world to focus on the plight and contributions of women, integrating these concerns into their national and international policies.

## Establishing a Theme-Based Approach

The United Nations began adopting specific themes for International Women's Day in 1996, starting with "Celebrating the Past, Planning for the Future." This thematic approach allowed for the highlighting of particular issues and objectives related to women's rights, making each IWD an opportunity to focus global attention on specific aspects of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Over the years, themes have addressed a wide range of topics, from women's economic empowerment and the role of women in peace and security, to the challenge of gender-based violence and the importance of achieving gender equality in the pursuit of sustainable development.

## The Role of UN Women

In 2010, the United Nations established UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. This organization was created to accelerate progress on meeting the needs of women and girls worldwide. UN Women plays a central role in coordinating and promoting the UN's work in advancing gender equality and has been instrumental in organizing and promoting International Women's Day activities globally. Through advocacy, research, and initiatives aimed at empowering women, UN Women ensures that IWD remains a prominent and impactful event each year.

## Impact and Ongoing Efforts

The involvement of the United Nations has transformed International Women's Day into a global platform for advocating for gender equality and the empowerment of women. The UN's support has helped to mobilize resources, galvanize political will, and raise awareness on a scale that was previously unattainable. It has also facilitated the creation of international frameworks and agreements aimed at improving the status of women, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and



girls.

## Conclusion

As we reflect on the journey of International Women's Day (IWD) from its inception in the early 20th century to its global recognition and celebration today, we are reminded of the incredible strides made towards gender equality and the empowerment of women. The evolution of IWD from a day of protest for women's labor rights to a worldwide celebration of women's achievements across social, economic, cultural, and political domains highlights the progress that has been made, while also underscoring the challenges that remain.

The United Nations' involvement in officially recognizing and promoting International Women's Day has been pivotal in elevating its importance on the global stage. By adopting annual themes that focus on critical issues facing women and girls around the world, the UN has ensured that IWD remains a relevant and powerful platform for change. This international backing has bolstered advocacy efforts, inspired legislation, and mobilized communities to action, driving forward the agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Yet, despite the significant advancements, the journey is far from over. Women and girls worldwide continue to face discrimination, violence, and inequality in various forms. The spirit of International Women's Day calls on us to not only celebrate the achievements but also to renew our commitment to fighting for a world where gender equality is a reality for all.

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