



8th of March Report Women's Rights Team

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by
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Introduction

International Women's Day is celebrated annually on the 8th of March. This report explains why it still remains important for us to celebrate this day, as a day to recognise the achievements women have made to our societies in a patriarchal world. It is also a day to reflect on the incredible advancements that have been made with regards to gender equality, whilst not forgetting about the steps we still have to take to ensure that we live in a gender-equal world. The first chapter covers the history of International Women's Day and the relevance of women's rights as human rights. The report then discusses how the day is celebrated in various countries around the world, before concluding with remarks on the importance of gender equality beyond just valuing women as human beings.

Chapter 1

Origins of International Women's Day

International Women's Day (IWD) is an annual event recognized by the United Nations, which is celebrated on March 8th every year (BBC, 2022). The date originates due to the events of 1908, when 15,000 women in New York marched in demand of their rights, including shorter working hours, better pay, and voting rights. (International Women's Day, n.d.) In the following year, the first National Woman's Day took place in the United States on February 28th, organised by the Socialist Party of America (International Women's Day, n.d.; Pruitt, 2022).

The idea of an International Women's Day was first introduced in 1910 by Clara Zetkin, the leader of the Women's Office for the Social Democratic Party in Germany, during the second International Conference of Working Women in Copenhagen. (International Women's Day, n.d.) The proposal was unanimously approved by the over 100 women at the conference, representing 17 countries (UN Women Australia, n.d.). As such, the concept of a "women's day" was spread in Europe, (Pruitt, 2022) and the first IWD was held on March 19th, 1911, in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland (BBC, 2022).

In 1917, a wartime strike arose in Russia, with women demanding "bread and peace" (BBC, 2022). After four days of strike, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated the throne, and the newly-formed provisional government granted women the right to vote. The strike began on February 23th on the Julian calendar, which corresponded to March 8th on the Gregorian calendar (International Women's Day, n.d.). In the same year, Vladimir Lenin declared Woman's Day an official Soviet holiday (Pruitt, 2022).

With the growth of the international feminist movement in the 1970s, the General Assembly declared 1975 as the International Women's Year and organised the first World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City. In addition, the years 1976-1985 were declared as the UN Decade for Women and established a Voluntary Fund for Decade (UN, n.d.,a).

This year, the UN began celebrating March 8th as International Women's Day. In December 1977, IWD was acknowledged by the UN, as the General Assembly adopted a Resolution proclaiming a UN Day for Women's Rights and International Peace to be observed on any day of the year by Member States (UN, n.d.,c; UNGA, 1977). In 1996, the UN announced the first annual theme for IWD: "Celebrating the past, Planning for the Future" (International Women's Day, n.d.). The celebrations of IWD continued, and as of 2014, it is celebrated in over 100 countries (Pruitt, 2022).

Why Celebrate a Women's Day?

International Women's Day is of great relevance in today's society, as it allows the celebration of the achievements of women's rights, as well as raising awareness of continuing issues and inequality (BBC, 2022). As stated by the UN Secretary-General, "achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world", highlighting the importance of fighting for women's rights and gender equality (UN, n.d.,a).

It cannot be denied that some progress has been made regarding women's rights over the past years. For instance, it is observed that "the global prevalence of child marriage has declined by about ten percent in the past five years" (UN SDGs, n.d.). Nonetheless, the UN warns that full equality and opportunities are still far from being achieved and that the world is not on track to reach gender equality by 2030 (UN, n.d.,a; UN, 2022). According to the Global Gender Gap Report of 2021, it is estimated that it will take 135.6 years to close the gender gap worldwide (World Economic Forum, 2021).

It is relevant to emphasise that Goal 5 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (UN, n.d.,a). Besides this Goal explicitly relating to women's rights, women play a critical role in all of the SDGs, being recognized that women's equality and empowerment is not only an objective, but also part of the solution for other SDGs (UN, n.d.,a). Goal 5 comprises many targets, including ending all forms of discrimination, eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls, ensuring women's equal opportunities for leadership, among others (UN SDGs, n.d.). These targets demonstrate the multiple fields that need to be developed for gender equality to be achieved.

In February of 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres delivered a briefing to the General Assembly on Priorities for 2023. His speech demonstrates very well the many challenges faced by women nowadays and the long path toward achieving gender equality. He stated the following:

But half of humanity is held back by the most widespread human rights abuse of our time. Women and girls in Afghanistan are exiles in their own country, banned from public life, with every aspect of their lives controlled by men. [...] In Iran, women and girls have taken to the streets demanding fundamental human rights, at great personal cost. While the most extreme examples get attention, gender discrimination is global, chronic, pervasive and holds every single country back. There are huge gender pay gaps even in the most advanced economies. Less than one-quarter of countries have reached gender parity in upper secondary education. At the current rate, it could take 286 years for women to achieve the same legal status as men. And things are getting worse. At the international level, some governments now oppose even the inclusion of a gender perspective in multilateral negotiations. We face an intense pushback against the rights of women and girls. Women's sexual and reproductive rights and legal protections are under threat. (UN, 2023)

One aspect that has severely affected the development of women's rights and gender equality over the past few years was the COVID-19 pandemic. As widely reported, the restriction of freedom of movement during the pandemic contributed to the increase of gender-based violence, as women and girls were more exposed to their abusers, while facing a higher difficulty to seek support. (OHCHR, 2020)

The effects of the pandemic have stalled progress in many areas relating to women's rights, including time spent on unpaid care and domestic work, decision-making regarding sexual and reproductive health, gender-responsive budgeting, and women's health services. Moreover, estimates demonstrate that up to 10 million more girls are likely to become child brides by 2030, in addition to the projection of 100 million girls prior to the pandemic. (UN, 2022)

In addition, in the last year a step back was seen in women's rights due to the resurgence of the Taliban, which changed the lives of women in Afghanistan, including imposing more difficulties to access education. (BBC, 2022)

As recognized by the UN, it is of great importance to secure equal access to education, health, and economic resources, participation in political life, equal opportunities in access to employment and to positions of leadership, and to end the multiple forms of gender violence. (UN, n.d.,a) Therefore, the necessity to continue to advocate for women's rights and gender equality is evidenced, as these issues continue to be present and affect multiple spheres of women's lives.

Given these many aspects in society that need to be addressed to full gender equality being achieved, every year IWD focuses on a different theme. In 2023, the theme adopted is "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality", which will focus on the impact of the digital gender gap on social and economic inequalities. (UN Women, 2022) Over the past years, the themes for IWD further included: "Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow"; "Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world"; "I am Generation Equality: Realizing Women's Rights"; "Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change"; and "Time is Now: Rural and urban activists transforming women's lives".

Women's Rights are Human Rights

The field of women's rights is a fundamental part of human rights, seeking primarily the achievement of gender equality. The international community highly recognizes its importance, and the basis of such rights is found in several international instruments. In the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, "*gender equality is both a fundamental human right, and a solution to some of our greatest global challenges.*" (UN, 2023)

The fundamental character of gender equality is a central United Nations value (UN, n.d.,b). Article 1(3) of the UN Charter includes as one of the purposes of the United Nations the following: "promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion" (UN, 1945). As such, it adopts non-discrimination as one of its fundamental principles. (UN, n.d.,b). This Article encompasses the basic idea of women's rights, the enjoyment of human rights, and fundamental freedoms without any distinction of sex.

The Article also demonstrates that the UN's support for women's rights has been present since its foundation in 1945. Furthermore, the UN established its Commission on the Status of Women, through the Economic and Social Council, in its first year, with the intention to be the "principal global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and advancement of women". (UN, n.d.,a)

In the following years, the matter of gender equality continued to be a priority in the work of the United Nations. In 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which also adopts the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Article 1 encompasses the maxim that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". In Article 2, the Declaration determines that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the instrument, without distinction of any kind, including sex. (UN, 1948)

These principles are further embodied in binding instruments, as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both adopted in 1966. Similarly to Article 2 of the UDHR, both of their texts specify that the rights proclaimed in their texts shall be guaranteed without any distinction of any kind, including sex. (UNGA, 1966)

In 1979, the General Assembly introduced another milestone, adopting the first legally binding instrument dedicated solely to women's rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The preamble of CEDAW reaffirms the fundamental and human rights character of women's rights, which is observed in the UN Charter and UDHR, encompassing the principles of non-discrimination and equal rights of men and women. (UNGA, 1979) Among the Articles set forth in the Convention, it is important to emphasise Article 1 of CEDAW, as it provides a definition of the term "discrimination against women", as the following: *Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.* (UNGA, 1979)

As explained by the OHCHR, the discrimination referred to in Article 1 encompasses any different treatment on the grounds of sex, which disadvantages women, prevents society from recognizing women's rights, and prevents women from enjoying human rights and fundamental freedoms. (OHCHR, 2014)

In 1993, the GA adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, which further contributes to the development of women's rights. In its text, it provides a clear definition of violence against women as, in summary, an act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women. (UNGA, 1993)

From these instruments, it can be seen that the principles of non-discrimination and equality between men and women are central to international human rights law. (OHCHR, 2014) Besides these provisions in general international law, it is important to emphasise that the protection of women's rights is also present in regional regimes and instruments.

The European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, in Article 14, provides for the prohibition of discrimination, stating that the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms established in the Convention shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as sex. (Council of Europe, 1950) Furthermore, in 2011 it was adopted the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, aiming at protecting women from all forms of violence and at contributing to the elimination of discrimination against women (Council of Europe, 2011).

The protection of women's rights on a regional level is also seen in the African and American human rights systems. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights contains a prohibition against discrimination, including sex, in Article 2. (OAU, 1981) Furthermore, in 2003 the Charter's Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa ("Maputo Protocol") was adopted, which includes the repudiation of all forms of discrimination against women. (African Union, 2003) Similarly, provisions aiming at combating discrimination on the basis of sex are also found in the Charter of the Organization of American States and the American Convention on Human Rights, in Articles 3(1) and 1, respectively. (OAS, 1948; and OAS, 1969) Additionally, in 1994 the OAS adopted an instrument specifically pertaining to women, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Belém do Pará Convention) (OAS, 1994).

From this brief outline, it is observed that women's rights are protected worldwide, through a wide set of instruments and provisions, on an international and regional basis. Consequently, women all over the world are protected by a broad body of rights, which aim at safeguarding women in diverse spheres of society, with the ultimate goal of achieving gender equality. Accordingly, advocating for women's rights is simply a matter of gender equality, which is a fundamental recognized human right, as opposed to the common misconception that it amounts to privilege. In order for the notion of women's rights to be more widely widespread and respected in society, it is essential that its fundamental character is understood. The starting point of such a change of mentality occurs through the advocating of one basic concept: women's rights are human rights.

Chapter 2

Celebrations Around the World

International women's day (IWD) was first officially recognised by the United Nations (UN) in 1977, it was then established that it should fall on the 8th of March annually (UN, 2023). It is interesting to note – as also mentioned before – that this date is closely related to the women's movement during the 1917 Russian Revolution. Since then, IWD has been celebrated in many countries around the world. The UN has marked it as “a day when women are recognised for their achievements without regard to divisions, whether national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic or political” (UN, 2023). It is the day that the achievements and contributions of women in our society are celebrated and remembered. But how do different countries around the world go about this celebration?

The 8th of March is recognised as an official national holiday in the following countries: Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Chad, Eritrea, Georgia, Guinea-Bissau, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, Lao, Moldova, Mongolia, Nepal, North Korea, Russia, Sierra Leone, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Zambia. It should be noted that it was also an official holiday in Afghanistan before the 2021 Taliban takeover (OfficeHolidays, 2023). The majority of these countries are former Soviet republics which kept the holiday official after gaining independence, not surprising considering how the foundation of the day is Russian. In these cases, if the day falls on the weekend, the holiday is moved to the first following Monday. In Madagascar and Nepal, the day is an official holiday for women only. In China, since 2014, women only are entitled to a half-day holiday. In 2019, Germany became the latest country to declare IWD an official holiday at the discretion of regional governments. In certain other countries, including Australia, Cameroon, Croatia, Chile, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bulgaria, the 8th of March is not an official holiday although it is widely observed (OfficeHolidays, 2023). Regardless of the legal status of the day, it has become customary for men to give women (colleagues or loved ones) flowers and gifts to show their appreciation towards the goal of gender equality. In certain Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, it is mostly celebrated as the equivalent to Mother's Day rather than as a day to mark empowerment and highlight the need for gender equality. It is then customary for children to give their mothers gifts or other tokens of appreciation. Certain other countries hold specific traditions to celebrate the day. In Italy, for example, *La Festa della Donna* is symbolised by women being gifted yellow mimosa blossoms to recognise their economic, political, and social achievements. Mimosas are seen to symbolise female solidarity, and they were popularised by Teresa Mattei, the director of the Italian Women Union, as a flower which is accessible to all regardless of class or geographic location (ICS, 2023). Finally, there are certain countries that observe women's day as a public holiday, but which do not follow the 8th March date. Gabon, Mozambique, South Africa and Tunisia all celebrate the day on other dates more in line with national history.

There has been a longstanding debate as to whether or not IWD should be celebrated as an official holiday. Opinions widely diverge on this (Whiting, 2023). Some argue that it should, to be fully able to celebrate the achievements of women in society as well as the progress that has been made thus far in terms of gender parity. Feminists, however, are more likely to argue that it should not because it is inherently a day of political activism. It has been argued that granting a day off work is a token gesture that does very little to ensure that gender equality is achieved, where it might actually further the gender pay gap and other forms of work-place discrimination that hold women back (REC, 2020). It has also been argued that by granting women the day off work they gain an unfair advantage over

men, defying the purpose of feminism and gender equality in general. Questions can also be raised as to whether days for non-binary visibility or even international men's day (*sic*, unofficially falling on the 19th of November annually) should be viewed as national holidays (BBC, 2023).

All in all, IWD is a day of political activism which harnesses the opportunity to raise awareness about gender disparity. It is aimed at raising awareness about issues impacting women's equality, taking a stance to call out inequality whilst working to forge positive action, highlighting the gains already made and celebrating women's accomplishments in a patriarchal world order (IWD, 2023). IWD is thus increasingly becoming a site of protest, with many cities seeing large-scale demonstrations and protests to highlight the dangers of gender inequality and to bring attention to specific issues such as for example sexual and reproductive health and rights, sex-worker rights, violence against women or work-place discrimination. These demonstrations are often associated with the colours purple, green and white as the official colours of IWD which signify justice, hope, and purity (BBC, 2023). Both women and men engage in protests to show their support to the women's movement, as well as intersecting issues such as climate change or racist immigration policies (BBC, 2023). An especially worthwhile example of such marches is the *Aurat Marches* organised in several Pakistani cities since 2018. Other than protests, certain actions include calls to action through campaigns or other organised events or festivals, philanthropy and fundraising activities, uplifting women through raising visibility and celebrating achievements of loved ones and connecting with like-minded communities.

Why is it Still Important?

Of course, it is undeniable that the past few decades have seen unprecedented advances and immense progress with regards to gender parity. But it is also undeniable that gender equality has not yet been achieved. The past few years have also witnessed increasing restrictions to women's rights globally: take the examples of the United States restricting access to abortion, the recent Taliban takeover in Afghanistan hugely curbing the rights of women, or the recent "Woman. Life. Freedom" protests in Iran against a restricting political leadership (BBC, 2023). These are only some of the examples of how women continue to hold subordinate positions in society, which continues to be an engrained feature of many political and legal patriarchal systems. Thus yes, it is still important and more than necessary to bring attention to the issue of gender equality and women's rights. This also holds true for those countries considered to be progressive in this regard, because nowhere has gender equality actually been achieved. At the current rate, it will take another 300 years for our world to be a gender equal world (UN, 2023).

Gender equality is a question of power, and it is not just a question of women's rights. Fighting against the patriarchy brings more benefits than granting women the same rights as men. There are many instrumental and economic arguments to be made. A more gender equal society in the European Union (EU) would, by 2050, lead to an increase of 9.6 percent in EU GDP and an additional 10.5 million jobs and thus substantial amounts of economic growth (EIGE, 2023). It has also been found that more gender equality would drastically reduce the risk and probability of armed violence, thereby creating much more peaceful and just societies (UN Women, 2015). Beyond the intrinsic reasons for recognising that gender equality is about ensuring the rights of both men and women, there are thus more reasons to continue the quest for gender equality. IWD is a gentle but necessary reminder that we must continue this fight.

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from <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021> tie Karachi and Lahore, figure among the worst in the world for air quality (AQLI, 2022). As pollution levels continue to rise and the air quality degrades, the health of the population keeps degrading to alarming/concerning levels. In this sense, The elevated hazards of “ischemic heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, neonatal morbidity, lower respiratory infections, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, tuberculosis, and blindness” are linked to both indoor and outdoor air pollution (Ahmed et al., 2022), Pakistan's pollution exerts detrimental effects on health and poverty according to the International Growth Center (IGC). In disproportionately impoverished households, serious illnesses typically prompt the urge for medical assistance. However, noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), such as ischemic heart disease and stroke, are incurable and can only be prevented or managed throughout a person's life, thereby resulting in substantial medical expenses (Ahmed et al., 2022). Moreover, young children, particularly those in low-income households, are at a risk of malnutrition due to insufficient dietary intake. What's more, the inadequate sanitation, air quality, and drinking water further contribute to children's inability to properly absorb food, hindering their physical and mental development. As a whole, the evidence indicates that the nation's pollution cont



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