

The International Women's Day

International Women's Day is a day to commemorate the struggle and celebrate progress towards gender equality. Its origins trace back to early labour movements that emerged during the 1900s, and Europe has played a crucial role in its development. This episode of the History and Facts series highlights the key moments that have defined the fight for gender equality.

International Women's Day has its roots in the workers' movements that developed at the turn of the twentieth century. Socialist and feminist activists were the first to push for a day dedicated to women's rights. In 1909, the first unofficial National Women's Day was held in the United States, inspired by female garment workers who went on strike demanding better pay, shorter hours and the right to vote.

Yet, it was in Europe where the idea for a women's day truly took off. In 1910, at the Second International Socialist Women's Conference in Copenhagen, German activist Clara Zetkin proposed an annual international women's day. The aim was to unite women across borders in the fight for voting rights, equal pay and fair working conditions. Her proposal was unanimously adopted.

The first official International Women's Day was celebrated one year later, in 1911, in several European countries, including Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland. Over one million women and men took to the streets to campaign for women's suffrage and labour rights.

A few years later, in 1917, Russian women turned Women's Day into a revolutionary force. On 8 March, women workers in Petrograd, now St. Petersburg, went on strike demanding 'bread and peace'. They protested against war, food shortages and political oppression. Their mobilisation was a key moment in the Russian Revolution, and it led to women gaining the right to vote that same year.

This event cemented 8 March as the official date for International Women's Day, although it was only in 1977 that the United Nations officially recognised the day.

After World War II, the fight for gender equality became part of Europe's democratic transformation. The European Union has always played a key role in advancing women's rights. In 1957, the Treaty of Rome introduced the principle of equal pay for equal work, making gender equality a fundamental part of European integration. Over the decades, the EU has adopted policies on gender equality in employment, parental leave and combatting gender-based violence.

While women's rights have progressed, many challenges remain, such as the gender pay gap, underrepresentation in leadership roles and gender-based violence.

The European Parliament is one of the EU's key institutions that is pushing for progress. As one of the most vocal advocates for gender equality in the EU, it has passed major resolutions and laws to protect women's rights, promote equal opportunities and combat discrimination. For example, in a resolution Parliament

welcomed the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025. This strategy aims to close the gender pay gap and strengthen protections against harassment and discrimination. In March 2023, Parliament also approved rules on pay transparency to ensure women receive equal pay for equal work across all EU countries. The Council then adopted the directive introducing these rules less than one month after.

Parliament is also working to combat gender-based violence. It repeatedly called for the EU to join the Istanbul Convention, a landmark treaty to end violence against women and domestic violence. On 1 October 2023, the Convention entered into force in the European Union even though several EU countries had not individually ratified it.

The European Parliament has also worked to increase female representation in politics. In 1979, when it held its first direct elections and Simone Veil was elected President, only 16% of MEPs were women. Today, that number has risen to nearly 40%, making it one of the most gender-balanced parliaments in the world.

Every year, around 8 March, the European Parliament holds special debates and events to reaffirm its commitment to gender equality.

International Women's Day is not just a date – it is a call to action to strengthen gender equality. After more than a century, the fight for women's rights is still ongoing, and the EU has a key role to play. Because progress does not happen on its own. It takes action.

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