International Women’s Day as we know it today is a time to reflect and look for ways to improve the situation of all women around the world.

This special day traces its roots back to various women’s campaigns and events, including working women’s struggle for universal suffrage in North America and Europe in the early 20th century. It was a time of great upheaval in the industrialized world, rocked by demographic change and radical politics.

**Historical events**

The “real” origin of March 8, International Women’s Day, is to be found in two historical events, Women’s Day in North America and Women’s Day in Europe.

**Woman’s Day in North America**

International Women’s Day traces its earliest origins back to an event for women’s voting rights organized by the Woman’s National Committee of the American Socialist Party on the last Sunday in February 1909. Known as Woman’s Day, it became one of the committee’s official activities and was celebrated annually in the United States until 1914.

**Women’s Day in Europe**

In 1910, at the second International Conference of Socialist Women in Copenhagen, the German president of the International Secretariat of Socialist Women, Clara Zetkin, proposed the establishment of a Women’s Day, which would be celebrated every year to demand the right to vote. The proposal was approved unanimously by the delegates of the 17 countries present.

**The Internationalization of March 8**

Following the Copenhagen resolution, International Women’s Day was celebrated for the first time on March 19, 1911, in Germany, Austria, Denmark, and Switzerland, involving mass rallies in which over a million women and men took part.

In 1913 and 1914, women in Europe and Russia held rallies at the end of February and the beginning of March to protest the war and express solidarity with other women.

In 1917, shortly before the fall of the Czar, Russian women ignored instructions from the Bolshevik party and took to the streets to demand bread and their husbands’ return from the war. The demonstration took place on the last Sunday in February according to the Russian calendar, corresponding to March 8 in the modern Gregorian calendar. In 1921, Lenin, then premier of the Soviet Union, proclaimed March 8 Women’s Day in commemoration of the women’s march.
Over the following decades, International Women’s Day was celebrated around the same date in Europe and throughout the world. In North America it was celebrated simultaneously but sporadically until the late 60s.

Since then, International Women’s Day has become a major event, due in large part to the efforts of the feminist movement.

March 8 in Québec

As the 1960s came to a close, interest in International Women’s Day was revived by Québec’s nascent women’s liberation movement. On March 8, 1971, the Front de libération des femmes officially launched a national campaign for free abortion on demand. A march and symposium were organized in Montréal.

Women’s groups, unions, and community organizations also contributed to making March 8 an annual event. The fight against discrimination and demands for better social, economic, and working conditions were among the issues brought to public attention as part of this special day of activities and reflection.

The United Nations contributes to the cause of women and girls

In 1977, the United Nations passed a resolution inviting every country on the planet to set aside a day for celebrating women’s rights and world peace. March 8 became that commemorative day in many countries.

Following a proposal presented by the Government of Canada in 2011, the United Nations has declared October 11 as the International Day of the Girl Child. This recognition is the fruit of a two-year campaign spearheaded by Plan International’s “Because I am a Girl” initiative, whose mission is to put an end to gender inequality and promote the rights of girls throughout the world.

Sources:


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