

Celebrating Women in Leadership

Introduction

Consider the following questions:

1. What issues still face women today in western Europe and North America?
2. In what parts of the world are women still deprived of basic human rights?
3. How many female leading political or institutional figures can you name?
4. Can you name any woman connected with the war against Ukraine? Is this question significant?

A Brief History of International Women's Day

Coming just a month after the International Day for Women and Girls in Science, which we celebrated on 11th February, the 8th March brings us **International Women's Day**.

International Women's Day (IWD for short) grew out of the labour movement at the beginning of the last century. In 1908, 15,000 women marched through New York demanding shorter working hours, better pay and the right to vote. One year later the Socialist Party of America declared the first Woman's Day.

Clara Zetkin, a communist activist and advocate for women's rights first suggested the creation of an international day at an International Conference of Working Women in Copenhagen in 1910. The 100 women present, from 17 countries, agreed unanimously as the first IWD was celebrated in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland in 1911.

Clara's idea for an International Women's Day had no fixed date.

It wasn't formalised until a wartime strike in 1917, when Russian women demanded "bread and peace"; four days into the strike the tsar was forced to abdicate and the provisional government granted women the right to vote.

The strike began on **8th March** and this became the date that International Women's Day is celebrated.

Over fifty years later, in **1975**, the United Nations Organisation started celebrating the day and now this is a global day hailing the social, political, cultural and economic achievements of women and also for a call to action to raise awareness of continued inequality.



International Women's Day

The theme for this year's observance is "Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow". This theme is succinctly expressed in the slogan and hashtag "#BreakTheBias", announced with these simple concepts:

- Imagine a gender equal world.
- A world free of bias, stereotypes, and discrimination.
- A world that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive.
- A world where difference is valued and celebrated.
- Together we can forge women's equality.
- Collectively we can all **#BreakTheBias**.

Whether deliberate or unconscious, bias makes it difficult for women to move ahead. Knowing that bias exists isn't enough, action is needed to level the playing field.

Are you in? Will you actively call out gender bias, discrimination and stereotyping each time you see it?

Will you help **break the bias**?

Cross your arms to show solidarity.



The question of women from past to present

Over the centuries important female voices have spoken out about the struggle of women to affirm their rights and to demand equality. We might choose just a few to illustrate this and to inspire all of us, women and men alike, as we travel along the long road to gender equality:

- “I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives.” (Jane Austen – from “Persuasion”)
- “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” (Eleanor Roosevelt)
- “We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.” (Maya Angelou)
- “Women and girls have always faced hurdles. But that’s never stopped us. We’ve sacrificed, fought, campaigned, succeeded, been knocked back, and succeeded again. In a race for justice, we’ve leapt over countless obstacles to win our rights.” (Emma Watson, actress and activist)
- “I raise up my voice - not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard... We cannot succeed when half of us are held back.” (Malala Yousafzai)
- “There's something so special about a woman who dominates in a man's world. It takes a certain grace, strength, intelligence, fearlessness, and the nerve to never take no for an

answer.” (Rihanna, recently appointed ambassador for the newly-independent Republic of Barbados)

The World Today

Much progress has been made, yet much remains to be achieved in so many fields – political rights and representation, equal participation in education, culture, the economy, business, society, the threat of gender discrimination and of moral, physical and sexual violence.

We look with some satisfaction at some of the leading emerging female figures of the western world:

- Ursula von der Leyen – President of the European Commission
- Roberta Metsola – new president of the European Parliament
- Christine Lagarde – president of the European Central Bank
- Kamala Harris – holder of three “records” as the first woman, the first Afro-American and the first Asian- American vice President of the USA.

Yet when we raise our eyes to look beyond our own local and national realities, we realise, of course, that we are living in a happy island of **relative** tranquillity and equality. The recent past brings up the tormented question of women’s and girls’ rights in Afghanistan after the Taliban were allowed to take control in September of last year, reminding us of the courageous voice of the young **Malala Yousafzai** who spoke out so clearly for the right of girls to go to school.



Campaigns like **#MeToo** have again opened our eyes to the arrogant dominance of men in parts of the world that we consider socially progressive and egalitarian. While we look with respect and admiration at one of the great female figures of our day – Queen Elizabeth II who is to celebrate the historic landmark of 70 years of reign, we are also filled with dismay and scorn by the ignoble arrogance of Prince Andrew, stripped of his titles and military honours but able to buy his way out of the ignominy of public justice.

War and Peace – the role of women

This year, however, any “celebration” of Women’s Day is necessarily overshadowed by events that less than two weeks ago took the world by surprise and that have shaken so many of our reassuring certainties.



This photograph of the third round of peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, held in Belarus on 7th March contrasts with another image referring to the war being waged against Ukraine:



The first image sadly highlights the absence of women in conflict negotiation, while the second photograph highlights the fact that women and children are suffering no less (and in many ways more) than the male belligerents both attackers and defenders.

The United Nations Organisation has long been conscious of this and in the last two decades has issued very specific resolutions:

2000 - RESOLUTION 1325

*Urges Member States **to ensure increased representation of women** at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict*

2008 RESOLUTION 1820

*Urges the Secretary-General and his Special Envoys to **invite women to participate** in discussions pertinent to the prevention and resolution of conflict, the maintenance of peace and security, and postconflict peacebuilding*

2009 - RESOLUTION 1889

*Urges Member States, international and regional organisations to take further measures to **improve women's participation** during all stages of peace processes [...] including by enhancing their*

*engagement in political and economic decision-making at early stages of recovery processes, through [...] **promoting women's leadership** and capacity to engage in aid management and planning, supporting women's organizations, and countering negative societal attitudes about **women's capacity to participate equally***

2013 - RESOLUTION 2122

*Requests the Secretary-General and his Special Envoys and Special Representatives to United Nations missions, as part of their regular briefings, to update the Council on progress in **inviting women to participate**, including through consultations with civil society, including women's organizations, in discussions pertinent to the prevention and resolution of conflict, the maintenance of peace and security and post-conflict peacebuilding*

*Further expresses its intention to include provisions to **facilitate women's full participation** and protection in: election preparation and political processes, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs, security sector and judicial reforms, and wider post-conflict reconstruction processes where these are mandated tasks within the mission*



Women's participation creates a quandary about the end goals of peacemaking: is a peace process primarily a forum for **ending the violence**, or should its focus be on **building sustainable peace**? Those who prioritize stabilization often think that the violent parties are the only legitimate participants, making women's participation less likely. "In life, as in mediation, we often have our most important conversations in a small room," said one mediator.

On the other hand, if the goal of a peace process is to build peace, then it makes sense that individuals and groups who seek peace and who represent the diversity of the citizenry participate. In addition, exclusivity creates a dangerous precedent: "If people have guns, then we talk to them. If they don't wear that badge, then we won't," said one practitioner.

Belligerents and mediators perceive a trade-off between the goals of ending violence and building peace, and pursue mediation in a way that emphasizes favourable **short-term results** even if it ultimately increases the probability that crisis will recur in the long term. Yet if the ideal is both a

cessation of hostilities and a durable peace, this suggests a need to get beyond this “trade-off” framing and identify missing elements that make both short- and long-term success likely. The new

evidence outlined in this report suggests that when women participate meaningfully across a range of models, they increase the chances of both significantly.

In Northern Ireland, **Betty Williams and Mairead Maguire** co-founded the Community for Peace People and mobilized over 10,000 Catholic and Protestant women to march and advocate for peace. They received the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to bring about an end to hostilities.

In Liberia, Leymah Gbowee united Christian and Muslim women in an interfaith movement, the **Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace**. The women acted as intermediaries between Charles Taylor and rebel leaders, staged sit-ins to keep the negotiators from leaving the presidential palace, and even carried out sex strikes in a bid to stop the men from fighting. Their efforts contributed to the exile of Charles Taylor and played a role in bringing peace to their country. It also laid the foundations for the ascent of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female African head of state. In 2011, both Gbowee and Johnson Sirleaf were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

In Colombia, a peace treaty was signed in 2016 to bring an end to the 50-year conflict between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC). The conflict had claimed over 200,000 lives and led to the displacement of about 7 million people. Women made up 20% of the government team and 43% of the FARC negotiating team. It was the first time a gender sub-commission had been included in a peace negotiation. The meaningful participation of women at all levels, from negotiators to local activists, had a hugely positive impact. The final treaty included a range of provisions for women, including the promotion of women's socio-political and economic rights, and measures against gender-based violence.

Unfortunately, these examples are still the exception rather than the rule. In so many ongoing conflicts (including Ukraine), women's potential as peacemakers is ignored.

As we sit in front of our computer and television screens, following events with fear and a growing sense of frustration and impotence, we can only hope and pray that this devastation and inhuman cruelty will find an end.

Women can change society. They can help end war, and bring about lasting peace. It's time they got the chance to do so.

