

International Women's Day: a century of slow progress

Women across the globe celebrate the centenary of IWD, but one thing remains clear – so much still has to change

Caroline Davies

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International Women's Day centenary is celebrated by Annie Lennox, Gaby Roslin and Paloma Faith in London.
Photograph: Samir Hussein/Getty Images

Much has changed in the 100 years since one million women took to Europe's streets for the first **International Women's Day** (IWD) demanding the right to work, the vote and an end to discrimination.

But as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters echoed their spirit, joining rallies and celebrations across much of the globe to commemorate the centenary, one thing was clear: much still has to change.

How, asked Michelle Bachelet, the first executive director of UN Women, would those "courageous pioneers" view the world today? "I suspect ... with a mixture of pride and disappointment," she said in an address marking the anniversary.

Women from Nepal to the Philippines used IWD to draw attention to the challenges many of them continue to face.

More than 1,000 marched on Congress in Manila to urge support for a reproductive health bill, which seeks to improve access to information on contraception but faces strong opposition from influential Roman Catholic bishops. On an average day, 11 Filipino women die giving birth, according to the UN.

At a rally by the All Nepal Women's Association (Revolutionary) in Kathmandu, women waved placards reading "End violence against women" and "Ensure equal pay for equal work". Hundreds of those gathered had family members who disappeared during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and were demanding to know their whereabouts. The rally's coordinator, Jayapuri Charti, reminded the crowd that the sacrifice by 2,500 women in the people's war was to ensure equal rights for all Nepalese women.

In the UK, more than 400 events were held. They included a mass march across the Millennium Bridge, in London, led by the musician Annie Lennox, social activist Bianca Jagger and actor Cherie Lunghi, who released doves to highlight the plight of women in Afghanistan.

They were joined by Helen Pankhurst, great-granddaughter of Emmeline Pankhurst. "Women in Afghanistan are our modern-day suffragettes, standing up for their rights despite threats of violence," said Pankhurst. Hetty Bower – aged 105 and herself a former suffragette – was guest of honour at a wreath-laying at Pankhurst's statue in London, as women members of the parliamentary Labour party, plus Labour leader Ed Miliband were photographed with her. "She remembers the foundation of IWD 100 years ago," Miliband marvelled.

Bachelet, the former Chilean president, chose to celebrate the day in Liberia with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first democratically elected female president in Africa. "The last century has seen an unprecedented expansion of women's legal rights and entitlements," Bachelet said. "The advancement of women's rights can lay claim to be one of the most profound social revolutions the world has seen.

"But despite this progress over the last century, the hopes of equality expressed on that first International Women's Day are a long way from being realised. Almost two out of three illiterate adults are women. Girls are still less likely to be in school than boys.

"Every 90 seconds of every day, a woman dies in pregnancy or due to childbirth-related complications."

In Russia, and some other countries, IWD is a holiday and a cross between Valentine's Day and Mother's Day, where men traditionally present yellow mimosas and chocolates to the women in their lives.

Their attachment stems from the official birth of IWD – it was then called International Working Women's Day – as a socialist event, originating in Denmark but swiftly embraced by Austria, Germany, Switzerland, eastern Europe and Russia, where it was said to have been the first stage of the 1917 revolution. But in many areas today it has lost its political flavour. Tuesday's celebrations included a Miss Russia beauty pageant.

In China, where it is also a holiday, female office workers engaged in staged pillow fights, while dozens of woman soldiers took part in a fashion show. Other events included a housewives' talent show and a pancake-making competition.

In the US, Michelle Obama and secretary of state Hillary Clinton marked the day by presenting Women of Courage awards to those advocating women's rights and empowerment, often at great personal risk.

In all more than 2,000 events around the world were planned, details of which are posted on the **IWD's website**, which managed to survive three separate "denial of service" attacks throughout the day.

Women's campaigner and Australian entrepreneur Glenda Stone, who founded the website, said: "A decade ago International Women's Day was disappearing. Activity in Europe, where International Women's Day actually began, was very low. Providing a global online platform helped sustain and accelerate momentum for this important day."

Comments in chronological order (Total 22 comments)

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Staff

Contributor



MrPiggles

8 March 2011 10:11PM

Be careful what you wish for. Shiela's wheels RIP.

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MarshallStack

8 March 2011 10:23PM

"Every 90 seconds of every day, a woman dies in pregnancy or due to childbirth-related complications."

Would you be happier if a few men didn't make it out of the delivery room?

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AneliyaEssex

8 March 2011 10:46PM

Would you be happier if a few men didn't make it out of the delivery room?

As death in childbirth does seem to be gender specific, how about some more grown-up and thoughtful quips.

Oh and call your mum if you still have one. If you don't, remember something positive about her if you can.

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bantics

8 March 2011 11:01PM

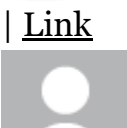
interesting to get a bit of background on the day. here's an optimistic feminist's perspective bantics.wordpress.com

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leta

8 March 2011 11:15PM

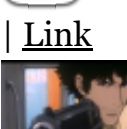
As women only account for 10% of the prison population it shows how far away true equality is.

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Phynicks

8 March 2011 11:26PM

"Every 90 seconds of every day, a woman dies in pregnancy or due to childbirth-related complications."

Okay

what does this have to do with gender equality?

If anything it just highlights the physical differences between men and women which should make it pretty obvious how men and women can't really truly be equal.

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evantej

8 March 2011 11:44PM

[O]ne thing was clear: much still has to change'.

Really?

- Reproductive health bill in south-east Asia

- Violence against women in Nepal

- Equal pay for women in Nepal

- Women's rights in Afghanistan

- Educational and literacy imbalance is gender specific

- Childbirth-related complications (a medical issue which has absolutely nothing to do with women's rights). No matter how much money is spent the state cannot guarantee that you will not die in childbirth; people simply have to accept that some things are

gender specific. Men accept that they have lower life expectancy, for example. None of this is about women's issues in Britain or Europe, ignoring the implicit criticism about how international women's day is celebrated, thus the picture and historical context is completely irrelevant to issues raised. Solidarity is all well and good, but I am sure the women in the situations above would prefer tangible support than Annie Lennox, Gaby Roslin and Paloma Faith turning up to a rally in London. Judging from this newspost, it does not look like much still has to change at all in Europe and this is proven by the fact that the day is significantly less popular than pancake day, which should be considered a good thing not a bad thing; it means people have not got anything to complain about. The information provided about Manila and the Philippines just shows how negative this movement is. Is it really newsworthy when 1000 people in a country with a population of 91 million people march on congress? I think some perspective and a touch of realism is needed here.

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enzee199

8 March 2011 11:47PM

I think people are slowly waking up to realities.

When I was first at uni about 10 years ago we were debating whether we were now a classless society; talking instead of 'lifestyle tribes' and how feminism could say 'job done' thanks to the generation of bright young female graduates looking forward to a future free of discrimination

Totally wrong on both counts and it seems now both class divides and sexism are back with a vengeance.

Are these two issues connected? Yes, both are about equality, something which the coalition is ddefinitely not keen on promoting whether it's raising VAT or cutting back on Sure-start.

I hope that a new wave of feminism emerges from these attacks on the welfare state.

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Lovetruncleon404

8 March 2011 11:55PM

sing along everyone!

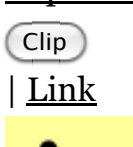
"sometimes, its hard to be a woman..."

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Artemis24

9 March 2011 12:01AM

Equality?

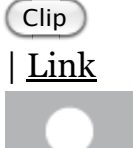
When we have men in the skimpy pants cavorting about to a Duran Duran track in order to flog buy-now-pay-later sofas then, and only then, shall we have ahieved true equality.

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Lovetruncleon404

9 March 2011 12:11AM

Phynicks 8 March 2011 11:26PM "Every 90 seconds of every day, a woman dies in pregnancy or due to childbirth-related complications." Okay what does this have to do with gender equality? If anything it just highlights the physical differences between men and women which should make it pretty obvious how men and women can't really truly be equal.

Okay.

why do women live longer on average than men?

just asking!

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Lovetruncleon404

9 March 2011 12:16AM

just to clarify the above question, two statements above (to me) seem to imply that women are hard done as giving birth is dangerous.

"On an average day, 11 Filipino women die giving birth, according to the UN."

"Every 90 seconds of every day, a woman dies in pregnancy or due to childbirth-related complications."

however, since (as someone pointed out above) men can't give birth (obviously) and yet women still live longer than men, something else causes us to die earier.

so simply put, death during childbirth should be discounted from any argument about equality?

i'm probably wrong or have worded the above incorrectly but hopefully folks can get the gist of what i'm saying.

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Phynicks

9 March 2011 12:40AM

@Lovetruncleon404

Phynicks 8 March 2011 11:26PM "Every 90 seconds of every day, a woman dies in pregnancy or due to childbirth-related complications." Okay what does this have to do with gender equality? If anything it just highlights the physical differences between men and women which should make it pretty obvious how men and women can't really truly be equal.

Okay.

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just asking!

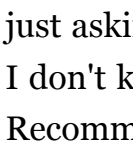
I don't know why women tend to live longer or why this question is relevant

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Ursa

9 March 2011 1:59AM

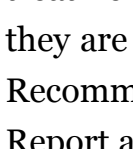
Many women still die in childbirth in many countries because they receive no medical treatment and live in poverty. Gender specific? Of course, because they are women they are not worth spending money on.

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seecem

9 March 2011 2:50AM

It's easy.

If you're a man - imagine yourself being formed in the womb.

Cells dividing - a baby being formed, if there was an absence of androgens you'd be female (apparently).

There are no 2 human beings, only 1 human being with 2 different genders.

Imagine yourself - just as you are - same humour, interests, everything but you've got breasts and a female genitals (you already have nipples) - you have the same sexual urges as you already do as a male - you do everything the same, for the same reasons,

but you've been formed as the same 1 human with female genitals -

Can you imagine how awful it would be to be so utterly disrespected and only desired for sex?

I've come to the conclusion that the treatment of my female - fellow human beings - is, and always has been, utterly disgusting - I wish I could apologise to every female.

I'm trying my best to re-program my brain, I've been doing it for 2 years, it's very hard - but I've never felt as welcomed as I do now, my possible friends have doubled -

Women throughout history have done remarkable things but the men who wrote the history books decided to exclude them, there have been great scientists,

mathematicians, inventors - everything you could name, but "heaven forbid" we men credit them.

The time is now, to stop fearing any competition - everyone needs SERIOUS education on human beings - and true equality.

2nd World War.

When the men of the UK were off in Germany, Italy, Japan, France and Africa, getting their balls blown off by the Nazis - it was the women who worked and made the ammunition - and where are their thanks? They got a "thank you, now p*ss off back to the kitchen" when we "won the War".

And we all, including women themselves, ESPECIALLY women themselves, need to stop making women look like clowns, with their faces all painted, and half of their flesh on show - I love women, I love sex, but making women dress in certain ways, and do certain things, just belittles ALL women.

I know this will never end in my lifetime, and it may never end full stop - but as I'm here and you're reading this, all I can do is apologise and say if I could change it, I would.

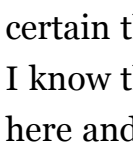
X

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Cyahrem

9 March 2011 3:04AM

evantej

8 March 2011 11:44PM

"None of this is about women's issues in Britain or Europe, ignoring the implicit criticism about how international women's day is celebrated, thus the picture and historical context is completely irrelevant to issues raised. Solidarity is all well and good, but I am sure the women in the situations above would prefer tangible support than Annie Lennox, Gaby Roslin and Paloma Faith turning up to a rally in London. Judging from this newspost, it does not look like much still has to change at all in Europe and this is proven by the fact that the day is significantly less popular than pancake day, which should be considered a good thing not a bad thing; it means people have not got anything to complain about. The information provided about Manila and the Philippines just shows how negative this movement is. Is it really newsworthy when 1000 people in a country with a population of 91 million people march on congress? I think some perspective and a touch of realism is needed here."

I couldn't disagree more.

Is it really only issues in our own back yard that should be of interest to us? The statistics in the article along with those in the James Bond video to mark IWD

"http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/07/james-bond-video-womens-day"

are a pretty damning indictment of humanity as a whole. Shunning others because we may have comparatively better statistics really isn't the way forward.

Also, your second paragraph simply reminds me of those people who say things like

"sexism doesn't exist anymore" and "sexism died when Thatcher became Prime Minister". Such sentiments are utterly false and serve only to highlight how deluded some people are. The "perspective...and... realism" you refer to are needed in recognizing that point.

There certainly is still a way to go before true parity has been achieved, and the sooner people realize that a few years of the likes of "Loose Women" on our TV screens cannot redress centuries of inequality, the better.

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[Cyahrem](#)

9 March 2011 3:14AM

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/07/james-bond-video-womens-day><http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/07/james-bond-video-womens-day>

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[Paumb](#)

9 March 2011 3:28AM

I commend the guardian for their coverage of International Women's Day. A quick search of other leading news sites on the 8th of March and not-a-one had any coverage of International Women's Day on their homepage (though many had coverage of Charlie Sheen's twitter success).

I live in Vietnam where Women's Day is a significant celebration. Posters and signs decorate the city, women's day cards are given and there's a general positive feel to the day as we all, men and women, celebrate the role that women play in society.

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[huristix](#)

9 March 2011 3:39AM

Equal pay for equal work? Given the feminisation of so many sectors of low paid work, better to demand just pay for "women's work". Whether a country is rich or poor, or, as a result of greed and corruption, is rich then poor, women's work continues to be treated as a freebie. The unpaid contribution of women has only just been measured in GDP in some countries. We know now that wiping someone's bum or nose could be more dangerous than working on scaffolding-time for a rethink. And while we're at it, let's talk about the female class divide between the professionals and the women who clean their houses, look after their children, look after their aged relatives- will they be prepared to pay more to pay fair???

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[NoNoNotAgain](#)

9 March 2011 4:48AM

nice to see a headliner on the front page about chalet girls at ski resorts

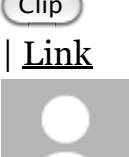
all must be ok then...sheesh

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[Lovetruncheon404](#)

9 March 2011 5:10AM

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[hsutreal](#)

9 March 2011 5:33AM

Got a good bellylaugh out of the Guardian 100 Women with such entries as Margaret Thatcher. Wonder if anyone in the effete petty bourgeois readership has actually given a thought to the misery and destruction that this enemy of the peoples caused to working class women in Britain and in Britain's neocolonial empire, not to mention hand in hand with her US mirror image to working class women everywhere else in the world, Ronald Regan. A match made in heaven, since the B movie actor sold his friends to the HUAC to gain career advancement and ultimately entry to the political arena. I don't doubt that his performance is being repeated today by some of the candidates for the 100.

I could go on, Hilary Clinton, Angela Merkel both arguable war criminals in the context of Afghanistan and Merkel additionally for ther efforts at ethnic cleansing in aiding and encouraging those forces in Germany.

All this of course is only an index to the complete degeneracy that the petty bourgeoisie of the UK has fallen to, as if it's willingness to tolerate any outrage as long as there is personal profit in it wasn't enough.

What a sorry sight you make.

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