



Australian Government

Office for Women



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A history of International Women's Day

March 8 is celebrated across the world as International Women's Day (IWD), and provides us with an opportunity to recognise the achievements of women and their contribution to society.

It is celebrated in many countries as a national holiday. It is when women, often divided by national boundaries and by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political differences, come together to look back to a tradition that represents a rich history of struggle for equality, justice, peace and development.

IWD is today regarded by many as the story of ordinary women as makers of history, and it is rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women to participate with equality in society. However, the idea of an IWD first arose at the turn of the century, which, in the industrialised world, was a period of expansion and turbulence.

IWD inherited a tradition of protest and political activism. In the years before 1910, from the turn of the 20th Century, women in industrially developing countries were entering paid work in some numbers. Their jobs were sex segregated, mainly in textiles, manufacturing and domestic services where conditions were wretched and wages worse than depressed. Trade unions were developing and industrial disputes were starting to occur.

In continental Europe, some socialists saw the demand for the women's vote as being unnecessarily divisive in the working class movement, while others successfully fought for it to be accepted as a necessary part of a socialist program.

The first IWD was held on March 19, 1911 in Germany, Austria, Denmark and other European countries. German women chose this particular day because, on that date in 1848, the Prussian king, faced with an armed uprising, had promised many reforms, including an unfulfilled one of votes for women. A million leaflets calling for action on the right to vote were distributed throughout Germany before IWD in 1911.

Since those early years, IWD has assumed a new global dimension for women in developed and developing countries alike.

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