Women's Day Today

Nearly 100 years old, International Women's Day today marks an ongoing worldwide battle to ensure equal rights for half the globe's population on issues such as work, voting and abortion. One of this year's key events will be a massive Women's Day meet this weekend in Liberia, hosted by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, to focus on the future of women in the world. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are among 400 leading women, several of them heads of state, expected at the gathering—which also marks a milestone for Liberia, still recovering from its 1989-2003 civil war and hosting its first such high-profile event since the late 1970s.

Conceived in 1910, International Women's Day was recognised by the United Nations in 1977. The origin of marking a day for women's rights is actually American—although, like many such symbolic days, clouded in uncertainty and competing claims. In the United States, the country's long-defunct Socialist Party of America celebrated a National Women's Day on February 28, 1909.

But it was a year later, at an International Socialist Women's conference in Copenhagen, that the notion was born of an international day to celebrate the female sex—at a time of mounting anger over unequal treatment in politics and the workplace.

On March 19, 1911, the day was commemorated for the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, with more than a million women and man coming out onto the streets. A massive women's protest in the Russian city of Saint Petersburg in 1917 to protest the price of bread and to welcome soldiers home from the World War I front on March 8 (February 23 in the Russian calendar) helped spark the Russian Revolution and cement the day in history.

Today, the March 8 tradition remains strong in communist countries: in China, for example, female workers are granted a half-day off. Elsewhere, it gained momentum alongside the broader feminist movements of the 1970s, when women seized the symbolism of the day to mark their demands for equal political and social rights. In 1977, it was officially declared by the UN General Assembly as the United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace.

And at a 1995 UN Women's Conference in Beijing, representatives from 189 countries agreed that gender inequalities affected the well-being of all the world's population—both men and women. Today, the day serves as a reminder of the fields in which women must still battle for fundamental rights, and where they remain victims of violence and enduring inequalities.