

MARCH

National Women's History Month:

As recently as the 1970's, women's history was virtually an unknown topic in school curriculum or in general public consciousness. In 1987, the National Women's History Project petitioned Congress to expand the national celebration to the entire month of March.

Since then, the National Women's History Month Resolution has been approved with bipartisan support in both the House and Senate. Each year, programs and activities in schools, workplaces, and communities have become more extensive as information and program ideas have been developed and shared.

Congressional Resolution Designating the Month of March as "Women's History Month"

Whereas American women of every culture, class, and ethnic background have made historic contributions to the growth and strength of our Nation in countless recorded and unrecorded ways;

Whereas American women have played and continue to play a critical economic, cultural, and social role in every sphere of the life of the Nation by constituting a significant portion of the labor force working inside and outside of the home;

Whereas American women have played a unique role throughout the history of the Nation by providing the majority of the volunteer labor force of the Nation;

Whereas American women were particularly important in the establishment of early charitable, philanthropic, and cultural institutions in our Nation;

Whereas American women of every culture, class, and ethnic background served as early leaders in the forefront of every major progressive social change movement;

Whereas American women have been leaders, not only in securing their own rights of suffrage and equal opportunity, but also in the abolitionist movement, the emancipation movement, the industrial labor movement, the civil rights movement, and other movements, especially the peace movement, which create a more fair and just society for all; and

Whereas despite these contributions, the role of American women in history has been consistently overlooked and undervalued, in the literature, teaching and study of American history:

Now, therefore, be it resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that March is designated as "Women's History Month." The President is authorized and requested to issue a proclamation calling upon the people of the United States to observe this month with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities.

March 8: International Women's Day

It happened on 8 March 1857 in one of the first organized actions by working women anywhere in the world, hundreds of women workers in garment and textile factories in New York City staged a strike against low wages, long working hours and inhumane working conditions. Fifty-three years later, in August 1910, at a meeting in Copenhagen, the Women's Socialist International decided to commemorate the strike by observing an annual International Women's Day.

In 1975, during International Women's Year, the United Nations began celebrating 8 March as International Women's Day. Two years later, in December 1977, the General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming a United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace which is commemorated worldwide on March 8th each year.

Why dedicate a day exclusively to the celebration of the world's women?

In adopting its resolution on the observance of Women's Day, the General Assembly cited two reasons: to recognize the fact that securing peace and social progress and the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms require the active participation, equality and development of women; and to acknowledge the contribution of women to the strengthening of international peace and security.

For the women of the world, the Day's symbolism has a wider meaning: It is an occasion to review how far they have come in their struggle for equality, peace and development. It is also an opportunity to unite, network and mobilize for meaningful change.

What can you do?

Join with other groups in your community to hold events or demonstrations in solidarity to recognize and celebrate women's accomplishments in your unions and communities.

Hold a celebration potluck for the community asking people to bring a dish reflecting their heritage. Plan the theme around honoring certain women in your community. (i.e. young athletes, community volunteers, women in law enforcement, etc.)

Plan a parade or demonstration to honor and recognize women's contributions in your union and community.

Pass out early spring flowers to everyone you come in contact with today to celebrate women. Ask others to break off some of their sprays of flowers and pass them along.

Get stories and pictures printed in your newspaper on women and their accomplishments. Don't forget cable television.

Utilize the malls and libraries to get information out on International Women's Day.

March 25: Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (1911)

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, housed on the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors of the Asch building in New York City employed over 600 people, primarily women and girls who worked six days a week sewing "shirtwaists," a fashionable ladies garment of the day. The Triangle's workrooms had inadequate fire escapes and no sprinklers -- conditions the workers had been protesting. Worse, supervisors locked the doors to the workplace from the outside to prevent the women and girls crowded next to each other on benches, from taking breaks during working hours or removing materials. Only one stairway led to the roof.

On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out on the 8th floor where over 300 people worked over tables or machines wet with oil. A spark, either from a cigarette or one of the machines, touched off a fire and within seconds the 8th floor was engulfed in flames. As smoke and flames filled the air, the women rushed to the Washington Place exit, it was locked. About 500 women were trapped; many clung to the breaking fire escape. The single fire escape, which melted during the fire, led to an enclosed courtyard where many people were then trapped. Only one set of stairs led to the roof. Firefighters tried to reach them, but their ladders stopped at the sixth floor. In their hurried attempts to avoid being burned to death, many people jumped out of the windows hand-in-hand from windows, crashing through the nets, and smashing on the sidewalk. Other women, caught inside, died of burns or suffocation. That night, the Twenty-sixth Street pier held 146 corpses. Five others later died in the hospital.

It took one week to identify the dead; seven were unknown. The enraged members of the LGWU planned a funeral for the unnamed women. On a cold rainy day in April, marchers came from all across the city to form one parade. There were so many people at that spot by 3:30 p.m. that the last one waited until 6 p.m. to pass below the arch. The tragedy galvanized working women. Despite arrests and beatings, strikes across the nation increased and union membership escalated. Female labor leaders demanded the vote for women so they could protect themselves by electing politicians who would pass laws to change the sweatshop conditions under which they worked.