The History Behind International Women's Day

Compiled by Tabassum Mokhduma

INTERNATIONAL Women's Day has been observed since early 1900's, a time of great expansion and turbulence in the industrialized world that saw booming population growth and the rise of radical ideologies. Every year on 8 March the world celebrates IWD to celebrate womanhood, to ensure women's all kinds of rights as well as to give proper recognition to their achievement and the honour they deserve. But this day did not establish its importance overnight. Like many other revolution, it has its own history which started a long time ago.

In 1869 British MP John Stuart Mill was the first person in Parliament to call for women's right to vote. On 19 September 1893 New Zealand became the first country in the world to give women the right to vote. Women in other countries did not enjoy this equality and campaigned for justice for many years.

In 1908 Great unrest and critical debate was occurring amongst women. Women's oppression and inequality was spurring women to become more vocal and active in campaigning for change. Then in 1908, around 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter hours, better pay and voting rights.

In accordance with a declaration by the Socialist Party of America, In the year 1909 the first National Woman's Day (NWD) was observed across the United States on 28 February. Women continued to celebrate NWD on the last Sunday of February until 1913.

In 1910 a second International Conference of Working Women was held in Copenhagen. A woman named Clara Zetkin (Leader of the 'Women's Office' for the Social Democratic Party in Germany) tabled the idea of an IWD. She proposed that every year in every country there should be a celebration on the same day - a *Women's Day* - to press for their demands. The conference of over 100 women from 17 countries, representing unions, socialist parties, working women's clubs, and including the first three women elected to the Finnish parliament, greeted Zetkin's suggestion with unanimous approval and thus International Women's Day was the result.

The very first IWD was launched the following year by Clara Zetkin on 19 March (not 8 March). The date was chosen because on 19 March in the year of the 1848 revolution, the Prussian king recognized for the first time the strength of the armed people and gave way before the threat of a proletarian uprising. Among the many promise he made, which he later failed to keep, was the introduction of votes for women.

Plans for the first IWD demonstration were spread by word of mouth and in the press. During the week before International Women's Day two journals appeared: *The Vote for Women* in Germany and *Women's Day* in Austria. Various articles were devoted to International Women's Day: 'Women and Parliament', 'The Working Women and Municipal Affairs', 'What Has The Housewife Got To Do With Politics?', etc. The articles thoroughly analyzed the question of the equality of women in the government and in society. All articles emphasized the same point that it was absolutely necessary to make parliament more democratic by extending the franchise to women.

The first International Women's Day in 1911 was honoured the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland on 19 March and its success exceeded all expectation. More than one million women and men attended IWD rallies campaigning for women's rights to work, vote, be trained, to hold public office and end discrimination. Meetings were organized everywhere in small towns and even the villages halls were packed so full that male workers were asked to give up their places for women. Men stayed at home with their children for a change, and their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings.

In 1913 International Women's Day was transferred to 8 March and this day has remained the global date for International Women's Day ever since.

For decades, IWD has grown from strength to strength annually. For many years the United Nations has held an annual IWD conference to coordinate international efforts for women's rights and participation in social, political and economic processes. 1975 was designated as *'International Women's Year'* by the United Nations. The United States even designates the whole month of March as 'Women's History Month'.

IWD is now an official holiday in China, Armenia, Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. The tradition sees men honouring their mothers, wives, girlfriends, colleagues, etc with flowers and small gifts. In some countries IWD has the equivalent status of Mother's Day where children give small presents to their mothers and grandmothers.

source:
http://www.internationalwomensday.com/about.asp
http://www.internationalwomensday.com/first.asp