

International Women's Day

by Yon Hui Bell

After the federal government proclaimed Women's History Week in 1982, it expanded almost imperceptibly until by 1987 it filled the entire month with women-centered activities. Now, conferences, forums, poetry readings, movie screenings, international craft bazaars, and charitable socials continue for the whole of March in many large cities. Yet, the lives of American women, especially working-class, LGBTQ, and women of color, have not benefited from this frenzy of activity.

Though we are celebrating annually, a 2015 United Nations report found women's rights in America greatly lacking in comparison with the rights of many of their international counterparts. Violence against women, including sexual assault; the objectification of women and girls; the legal obstruction, physical intimidat-

ion. In 1908, about 15,000 women workers from the textile industry marched through New York City demanding the right to unionize and the right to vote. They were also remembering and protesting the police brutality encountered by women workers in a demonstration in 1857. The first National Woman's Day in the United States followed in 1909 with upwards of 30,000 women in attendance. The tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City on March 25, 1911, which took the lives of more than 140 immigrant women workers, galvanized women workers to be at the center of subsequent IWD events, and the 1911 event was the first officially recognized International Women's Day.

Women's struggles were not confined to the United States, and news of these American women's demonstrations inspired



2008 International Women's Day March, San Antonio Tx

tion, and moral brainwashing shrouding reproductive rights; the over-incarceration of women; the devaluation of women's work; the high rates of maternal and infant mortality — that the list is too long to continue clearly reflects the atrocious position of American women. To add insult to injury, the United States is one of only seven countries to not ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Considering the deplorable condition of so many women in America, we must be careful of Women's History Month. Though many of the activities sponsored during the month of March are informative and helpful, too many of the activities, their excessive quantity and decorous quality, obscure and diminish the real history and political importance of International Women's Day.

The origins of IWD are not just about female celebration and solidarity. Rather, they were decidedly political, and a collective response to women's economic exploitation and political margin-

organizers of the Second International Conference of Women in 1910 to proclaim "...the socialist women of all countries will hold each year a women's day, whose foremost purpose it must be to aid in the attainment of women's suffrage. This demand must be handled in conjunction with the entire women's question according to Socialist precepts. The Women's Day must have an international character and is to be prepared carefully." The Women's Day protest in St. Petersburg in 1917 for "Peace and Bread" ignited the revolt that eventually brought down the Russian Empire. With these powerful roots, Women's Day Marches have been and still are a powerful fixture of political protest in countries all over the world.

The Women's Marches after Trump's Inauguration brought millions of people on to the streets to protest the election of a venomously dangerous hatemonger and his Alt-Right minions. The awe-inspiring turnout, the mass mobilization, brought

hope to many that the character of the country would not be determined by its newly elected leaders.

Yet the question has been asked and still lingers: Of what use were the marches? What did they accomplish? Are they going to bring down the regime?

Who marched? Did only white, middle-class women march? Did only urban people march? Did marching help bridge the rural

– urban divide that many rightly claim is rupturing the nation? Did we proclaim Black Lives Matter, but not raise our voices for LGBT rights? Did we march for reproductive rights, but not against Islamophobia? Did we march for people, but not the planet that sustains us? Will we remain divided by the diversity of our struggles, our races and creeds, while the right marches under the unified banner of a white God and militarized country? This was the first march for so many people – will it be their last?

I do know, fortunately, that history can guide us. The history of

and inequality. But when we confront history, we cannot despair. When we return home after the march, we cannot become resigned. We must also see and remember the history of millions



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of people all over the world who have resisted injustice and hatred and helped bring human civilization forward. The history of resistance is the spring from which we must drink

in order to continue the struggle every day for the rest of our lives. There is no stopping because all of life depends on our resistance. Every day is a march.

I return to the words of our historical sisters: “This demand must be handled in conjunction with the entire women’s question . . . The Women’s Day must have an international character and is to be prepared carefully.” The entire women’s question brings to mind the words of the feminist poet and scholar Adrienne Rich. She exhorts us to understand “feminism as more than a frivolous label



women’s marches should show us that we can change political reality. The women who marched and fought for labor rights and unions did change working conditions. The women who marched for political equality did gain the right to vote. The women who marched against an exploitative oligarchy did topple an empire. We can be hopeful.

History also tells me that the situation we are in is not new. The racism, sexism, classism, and hate are not new. Just ask the Native Americans, ask any LGBT person or person of color over fifty, ask any descendent of a Japanese-American who was rounded up and interned. The repercussions for resisting will also not be new: ask the victims of McCarthyism, ask the Black Panthers and the Brown Berets, ask the Ploughshareers.

The struggle for justice and equality is not new. Perhaps the replacement of the American Entrepreneur with this caricature of American Capitalism will cause many of us to confront history for the first time, to study it and trace the deep roots of this current unrest

. . . [to] conceive of it as an ethics, a methodology, a more complex way of thinking about, thus more responsibly acting upon, the conditions of human life.” The international character reminds us to always respect diversity – diversity of race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, in short, of humanity. And finally, to prepare carefully, to be careful of others, to be careful of strategy, to be careful of this charge that we have to bend businesses, topple governments, and change the world.

Join us on March 4th to remember history, to support and celebrate current struggles for justice and equality, and to join the resistance. If we can envision a better world, we can create it. Please visit [Mujeres Marcharán](http://MujeresMarcharán) or the SAIWD Facebook page or check sawomenwillmarch.org

Bio: Yon Hui Bell is an educator at San Antonio College. She believes the personal is political and that true change develops from careful examination of that interplay. She is also the mother of three amazing human beings.