March 8: International Women's Day

**International Women’s Day** (IWD) originated as part of a protest against the abysmal wages and working conditions which women faced in textile factories. On March 8, 1857 women workers in the garment industry in New York City stopped working to draw attention to their conditions; 12-hour days, lack of benefits, sexual harassment, sexual assault on the job and unfair wages. Three years later women garment and textile workers formed their first union, but conditions did not improve significantly. Fifty years later on March 8, 1908, women once again mobilized to ask for change. This time they were also demanding an end to child labour and lobbying for votes for women.

The protests about working conditions did not move the government to change the labour laws until a fire on March 25, 1911 at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory killed 145 women in New York City. They were locked in the building to ensure that they would not take breaks away from their stations even to use the one washroom, which did not work adequately.

The factory conditions which led to the deaths of these women were common in the 1,463 sweatshops existing in the garment industry of the time. The women worked in a sea of flammable materials with no sprinkler systems. The fire escapes, which did exist, were accessed by inward opening doors, many of which were locked. Eighty thousand workers marched through pouring rain to the funeral held for the women who perished while an estimated quarter million watched silently.

The government was silent also. No laws were immediately changed. The following January 11, 1912, fifteen thousand women garment workers went on strike, demanding shorter working hours, an end to child labour, safe working conditions, and equal pay. Their claim was, “Better to starve fighting than starve working.” The women stayed out on strike for nearly three months.

Their slogan and song – “Bread and Roses” – rang through the streets – bread a symbol of economic security, and roses symbolizing social justice and a better life.

Each year on March 8, women around the world take time to reflect on the current status of women and demand equity under the law, safe and equitable working conditions and freedom from violence in society at large.

International Women’s Day commemorates the achievements and accomplishments of women, especially in the workplace. It is celebrated in a variety of ways: parades, health fairs, film festivals, dances, concerts and commemorative buttons. It is a time to feel pride in being a woman and to support other women in their endeavours.

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Use this international day to educate your students about working women in Canada or Ontario.

**Status of Women Canada** produces material and an organizers’ handbook for IWD activities. ([www.swc-cfc.gc.ca](http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca))

**ETFO Provincial** has information, along with other suggestions for activities on their website. ([http://www.etfo.ca/advocacyandaction/womensissues/internationalwomensDay/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.etfo.ca/advocacyandaction/womensissues/internationalwomensDay/Pages/default.aspx))
International Women's Day Activities:
Some Suggestions

- Send roses to the schools in your district with a copy of the “Bread and Roses” lyrics. Invite the women to spend a recess or noon hour together and share the information about International Women’s Day.

- Share the information with students – particularly female students – to give a history of the day.

- Ask that an announcement be made in the school – along with a brief history of the reason for it.

- Write a special diary entry celebrating your own achievements as a woman and what contributions you have made to education.

- Consider your own economic security. Do you know the facts about your family economics?

- Explore statistical information about women in the workforce with your older students.

- Teach a lesson on long term economic planning to your class.

- Have students make posters using the symbols “Bread and Roses” to display on International Women’s Day.

- Share the information you learn about it with someone you think does not understand the need for an “International Women’s Day”.

- Organize a fundraiser and send the proceeds to Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, a Canadian volunteer solidarity group, established in 1996 and committed to raising awareness to the plight of women in Afghanistan. Breaking Bread for Women in Afghanistan is a fundraising project to support education projects for Afghan women and girls by holding potluck dinners across Canada.

http://www.cw4wafghan.ca/
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Bread and Roses

As we come marching, marching,
in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens,
a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance
that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing,
"Bread and roses! Bread and roses!"

As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women’s children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
    Hearts starve as well as bodies;

Give us bread, but give us roses!

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient cry for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
    Yes, it is bread we fight for,

But we fight for roses, too!

As we come marching, marching, we are standing proud and tall.
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
    But a sharing of life’s glories:

Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

by James Oppenheim
What can I do to celebrate International Women’s Day?

The following is a list of suggestions to help you organise an activity to celebrate International Women’s Week. To help to ensure the success of your event, choose an activity that suits both your audience and your purpose. Almost every idea can be adapted to suit a classroom setting.

YOU COULD......

- Spread the word about International Women’s Week. Try sending an e-mail or e-card greeting to friends, family, and colleagues that includes a link to the Status of Women National website (www.swc-cfc.gc.ca).
- Place a special message on your fax cover sheet, your voice mail, your web site, on your computer screen saver, or on your employees’ pay envelopes.
- Put up the poster produced by Status of Women Canada for International Women’s Week on bulletin boards or on the walls in your work place or school.
- Produce and display your own International Women’s Week poster.
- Show a video on issues of concern to women (see the web site for a list of appropriate videos) and hold a discussion afterwards. You may even want to have a special resource person participate by leading the discussion.
- Network and exchange information with local community groups that work to promote women’s equality and rights.
- Hold a discussion on a topic of concern to the women in your workplace or community. Topics could include:
• Set up an information fair with displays featuring local resources for women.
• Hold a “brown-bag” lunch and invite women from several generations to share their personal experiences and efforts to achieve women's equality.
• Interview women who have made a positive difference for women in your community or globally. Write an article about them for a local paper or newsletter.
• Present a show, a concert or a play related to women’s struggles for equality and donate the proceeds to a women’s organization.
• Organize a photo or art exhibit in your local library, the cafeteria at work or school, etc., featuring works created by women. Invite women’s organizations and the general public to attend the activity.
• Organize a fundraising event for a women’s organization or shelter for abused women.
• Create your own celebration with a March 8 brunch, a potluck lunch or international theme.
• Be a role model! Bring your daughter, your niece, your grand-daughter or a young girl you care about to your workplace.

IN YOUR CLASSROOM YOU COULD...

• Ask the students to work on a project about women’s challenges or gender equality. They could write a composition, a poem, a book report, a speech, or do a research paper.
• Lead a discussion on what students can do in their home, at school or in the community to bring women closer to equality.
• Launch a photography, video, drawing, poetry or essay contest in your school this year’s International Women’s Week theme. Perhaps a local store could offer a prize.
• Discuss with the students the history of International Women’s Day and the purpose for celebrating such a special day.