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Women's Rights: A Global Timeline

From Wollstonecraft's radical manifesto to #MeToo and beyond. 28 milestones spanning suffrage, education, workplace equality, and political leadership across every continent. Sources: UN records, legislative archives, Nobel Committee.

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1792-01-03

Wollstonecraft publishes A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

[feminism, education, philosophy, United Kingdom]

Mary Wollstonecraft argues that women are not naturally inferior to men — only uneducated. Her treatise demands equal access to education and rational citizenship. It becomes a founding text of feminist philosophy.

1848-07-19

Seneca Falls Convention: birth of organized suffrage

[suffrage, United States, activism]

300 people gather in Seneca Falls, New York, for the first women's rights convention. Elizabeth Cady Stanton reads the Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence, demanding voting rights and legal equality.

1893-09-19

New Zealand becomes first country to grant women the vote

[suffrage, New Zealand, legislation]

Governor Lord Glasgow signs the Electoral Act after years of campaigning led by Kate Sheppard. New Zealand becomes the first self-governing nation where all women can vote in parliamentary elections. Australia follows in 1902.

1907-03-15

Finland elects the world's first female MPs

[suffrage, political leadership, Finland]

19 women win seats in the Finnish Parliament — the first female members of any national legislature. Finland had granted universal suffrage in 1906, making it the first European country to do so.

1918-02-06

UK: Suffragettes win partial voting rights

[suffrage, United Kingdom, legislation]

The Representation of the People Act grants British women over 30 who meet property qualifications the right to vote. It follows decades of militant campaigning by Emmeline Pankhurst's WSPU. Full equal suffrage comes in 1928.

1920-08-18

19th Amendment: American women win the vote

[suffrage, United States, legislation]

The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is ratified, prohibiting voting discrimination based on sex. It caps a 72-year campaign since Seneca Falls. In practice, many Black women remain disenfranchised until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

1934-12-05

Turkey grants women full political rights

[suffrage, political leadership, Turkey]

Turkey amends its constitution to grant women the right to vote and run for parliament. 18 women are elected in the 1935 general elections. Turkey precedes France (1944) and Italy (1946) in women's suffrage.

1945-06-26

UN Charter affirms gender equality

[international law, United Nations, equality]

The United Nations Charter, signed in San Francisco, becomes the first international agreement to affirm equal rights of men and women as a fundamental principle. Delegates from Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico push for its inclusion.

1948-12-10

Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines women's rights

[international law, United Nations, human rights]

The UDHR, drafted with Eleanor Roosevelt as committee chair, declares that all human beings are 'born free and equal in dignity and rights' without distinction of sex. Article 16 establishes equal rights in marriage.

1949-06-01

Simone de Beauvoir publishes The Second Sex

[feminism, philosophy, France]

De Beauvoir writes 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' The 1,000-page treatise analyzes how societies construct femininity. It sells 22,000 copies in its first week in France and becomes a cornerstone of modern feminism.

1960-06-23

The Pill approved for contraceptive use in the U.S.

[reproductive rights, healthcare, United States]

The FDA approves Enovid as the first oral contraceptive pill. By 1965, 6.5 million American women use it. The Pill transforms reproductive autonomy and economic participation for women worldwide.

1963-06-10

U.S. Equal Pay Act signed into law

[workplace rights, gender pay gap, United States, legislation]

President Kennedy signs the Equal Pay Act, prohibiting sex-based wage discrimination for substantially equal work. At the time, women earn 59 cents for every dollar men earn. Enforcement gaps persist for decades.

1966-01-19

India elects Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister

[political leadership, India, head of state]

Indira Gandhi becomes India's first female Prime Minister and one of the first women to lead a major democracy. She serves a total of 15 years across two terms, steering the world's second-most populous nation.

1975-10-24

Women's Day Off paralyzes Iceland

[activism, Iceland, workplace rights, gender pay gap]

90% of Icelandic women refuse to work, cook, or care for children for one day to demonstrate their economic value. Banks, factories, and schools close. The strike leads directly to the Gender Equality Act of 1976.

1977-06-05

Kenya's Wangari Maathai founds the Green Belt Movement

[activism, Kenya, environment, Nobel Prize]

Maathai launches the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, empowering rural women through tree planting and environmental conservation. Over 51 million trees are planted. In 2004, she becomes the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

1979-12-18

CEDAW: international bill of rights for women

[international law, United Nations, human rights, legislation]

The UN General Assembly adopts the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. It defines what constitutes discrimination and sets an agenda for national action. 189 states ratify it — the U.S. remains a notable exception.

1980-06-29

Iceland: world's first democratically elected female president

[political leadership, Iceland, head of state]

Vigdis Finnbogadottir wins Iceland's presidential election, becoming the first woman in the world elected head of state in a direct popular vote. She serves four consecutive terms until 1996.

1984-08-01

Australia's Sex Discrimination Act

[legislation, Australia, workplace rights]

Australia passes the Sex Discrimination Act, making it unlawful to discriminate on the basis of sex, marital status, or pregnancy in employment, education, and services. It establishes a Sex Discrimination Commissioner.

1995-09-15

Beijing Declaration: platform for women's empowerment

[international law, United Nations, human rights]

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing produces a platform for action signed by 189 governments. Hillary Clinton declares 'women's rights are human rights.' The platform covers 12 critical areas from poverty to violence.

2003-10-03

Rwanda leads the world in female parliamentary representation

[political leadership, Rwanda, legislation]

Following the 2003 elections, Rwanda's parliament is 48.8% female — the highest proportion in the world. By 2008 it crosses 56%, becoming the first country where women hold a majority of parliamentary seats.

2006-01-16

Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: first elected African female head of state

[political leadership, Liberia, head of state, Nobel Prize]

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is inaugurated as President of Liberia, becoming the first elected female head of state in Africa. She wins the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her work advancing women's participation in peace-building.

2014-10-10

Malala Yousafzai wins Nobel Peace Prize

[education, Nobel Prize, Pakistan, activism]

At 17, Malala becomes the youngest Nobel laureate for her campaign for girls' education in Pakistan after surviving a Taliban assassination attempt in 2012. Her advocacy brings global attention to the 130 million girls out of school worldwide.

2015-12-12

Saudi Arabia grants women the right to vote

[suffrage, Saudi Arabia, legislation]

Saudi women vote and run in municipal elections for the first time. 20 women win council seats across the kingdom. The reform follows a 2011 decree by King Abdullah. Women still cannot drive until 2018.

2017-10-15

#MeToo goes global

[activism, workplace rights, sexual harassment]

Actress Alyssa Milano's tweet revives Tarana Burke's 2006 'Me Too' phrase. Within 24 hours, 12 million Facebook posts use #MeToo. The movement exposes systemic sexual harassment across industries in over 85 countries.

2018-01-01

Iceland mandates equal pay certification

[gender pay gap, Iceland, legislation, workplace rights]

Iceland becomes the first country to legally require companies with 25+ employees to prove they pay men and women equally. Companies that fail certification face daily fines. The World Economic Forum ranks Iceland #1 in gender equality.

2020-12-30

Argentina legalizes abortion

[reproductive rights, Argentina, legislation]

Argentina's Senate votes 38-29 to legalize abortion up to 14 weeks of pregnancy, after decades of campaigning by the 'green wave' movement. Argentina becomes the largest Latin American country to do so, influencing regional debate.

2021-09-18

Afghanistan bans girls from secondary education

[education, Afghanistan, human rights]

The Taliban government bars girls above sixth grade from attending school. By December 2022, women are also banned from universities. The UN calls it 'gender apartheid,' affecting 3.5 million girls and women.

2022-09-16

Iran's Woman, Life, Freedom protests erupt

[activism, Iran, human rights]

The death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in morality police custody sparks nationwide protests across Iran. 'Woman, Life, Freedom' becomes a global rallying cry. Over 500 people are killed and 22,000 detained in the crackdown.