

ASU experts share insights on gender equality across the globe

By S. Norton, ASU News

March 6, 2025

International Women's Day has its roots in the American labor movement. In 1908, 15,000 women in New York City marched to protest against dangerous working conditions, better pay and the right to vote; the first National Women's Day in the U.S. was held the following year.

On March 8, 1917, women in present-day St. Petersburg, Russia, staged a strike to protest food shortages, poor living conditions and World War I. To commemorate the efforts of these women, International Women's Day was established on March 8, 1921.

To mark this year's International Women's Day, faculty from The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences discuss obstacles women have overcome, laws that have been passed and what still needs to be accomplished to achieve gender equity around the world.

Note: Answers have been edited for length and/or clarity.

Latin America

[Hinojosa](#) is a professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies and dean of social sciences within The College. She studies women's political representation in Latin America and their access to political power, with a particular focus on women as candidates and elected officials and the obstacles women face in pursuing political careers.

Question: Can you explain gender quotas and the role of gender quotas in Latin America?

Hinojosa: In quite a large number of countries of the world, there are positive action measures in place to increase women's representation in politics. In some cases, countries have reserved seats for women. A certain number of seats in the legislative body might be set aside for women, so women have some representation. In other cases, gender quota legislation has been passed. That's what we see in almost every single country in Latin America. Instead of setting aside specific numbers of seats for women, the way reservations would do, we have gender quotas in place that require that a set percentage of candidates being put forth by a political party must be women.

The idea of a gender quota for women candidates might sound strange, but outside of the United States, most political parties across the globe have a lot of power to determine who their candidates will be. Obviously, though, how many women are elected plays out differently depending on the kinds of electoral rules that each country has.

Q: Aside from running for office, what types of activism do Latin American women utilize to mobilize and engage their communities? Are there similar mobilization strategies to women in other regions?

Hinojosa: In many ways there's much more of a culture of in-the-streets activism in Latin America than there is in the United States. Women there, just like men there, tend to engage in more types of activism that actually entail going out into the streets with signs, going out into the streets and marching and making specific demands, sometimes they're even going out to streets with pots and pans and banging on them to get their point across.

What we've recently seen in Latin America over the last five years is ... many women are demanding greater autonomy over their own bodies in a number of different ways. These protests have been known as the purple wave, as the color women wear to protest gender-based violence, and the green wave, as the color women wear to demand abortion access. Women have managed to bring a lot of attention to their causes and have made it clear to those in government that there are a lot of women demanding these changes.

United States

Woodall is a professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies and assistant dean in the Office of Student and Academic Programs in The College. She has had an interest in women in leadership roles from a young age. A required college reading assignment of "Nine and Counting: The Women of the Senate" sparked her passion for studying the American Senate. Her areas of interest are gender and political candidates, gender and negative advertising and media mis/disinformation.

Question: How has policy shaped/changed when women have become more politically involved?

Woodall: Prohibition and the temperance movement were led by women. Joining the Civil Rights Movement and learning from civil rights leaders really paved the way for the women's rights movement. Legislation such as the Violence Against Women Act would not have come to the forefront without pressure from women.

The Year of the Woman (in 1992) was when more women ran for office than ever before. That first year after, a bill was sponsored and then ended up being passed to have women included in clinical medical trials. Women were not a part of clinical medical trials until 1993. Many of the organizational efforts to enshrine in states' constitutions reproductive health were led by women in many different states.

Q: What are unique political challenges women face in the United States, and what are some notable laws that have been passed to address these challenges?

Woodall: One is underrepresentation. Women are more than half of the population in the United States, but we do not have parity in any bastions of power. There have been improvements, but women have always been underrepresented, or men are overrepresented. You can look at it from either angle.

Another is gender bias. Everyone has gender stereotypes, men and women. With leadership, how we think of leaders and how we think of women don't usually mesh well. When people are asked what they want in a leader, they say, "I want somebody strong, I want somebody assertive or aggressive, I want somebody who doesn't care whether they are liked or not."

People generally have expectations that women should be kind, thoughtful and empathetic. These things aren't bad! But when we're evaluating a leader, people often have different expectations on how a leader should behave, and women leaders are often disadvantaged here.

United Kingdom and the Commonwealth

Harper is an associate professor at the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies within The College. He is a general historian of Britain and the British Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries. He published a book about the British Empire's honors system, or the way the state has valued or devalued certain forms of work, and how that has changed over time.

Question: What are unique political challenges women in the United Kingdom face, and what are some notable laws that have been passed to address these challenges?

Harper: A lot of political and social challenges faced by women in Britain are parallel to ones in the United States. Women got to vote around a similar time in Britain to the United States. Women (in Britain) got partial suffrage in 1918 and then full suffrage in 1928.

The 1970s are a key decade in terms of law because that's when you have laws about equal pay in 1970. Then there's the anti-sex discrimination law in 1975. I think in a broader sense, though, the major ongoing political and social challenges for women are the same challenges that animated '70s activism, which are around how society values and genders work.

The British Empire is different. New Zealand was the first country to have equal suffrage in 1893. New Zealand was a settler colony and started in 1840. There was a kind of self-conscious drive toward political reform and political innovation from a fairly early point. That's where women getting the vote very early in New Zealand comes in. There are fewer barriers for political innovation. New Zealand being a small, relatively egalitarian colony (in the Commonwealth) means that, I think, politics have generally been more egalitarian than a lot of other places.

Q: How did Queen Elizabeth impact women's movements in the United Kingdom?

Harper: There are two core points. One is that voluntary work is very gendered in Britain and it's very important in Britain. For as long as there's been a welfare state in Britain, governments have been pushing for a kind of dual-welfare state that combines state action with existing voluntary institutions. The monarchy is involved with this important sector, which is broadly gendered as more of "women's work."

This is a kind of dangerous gendering because this is largely unpaid work. The queen was obviously paid; she was extremely wealthy. But I think this association between the queen and voluntary service distanced the monarchy from these kinds of core questions of equal pay, political representation and political rights.

The second thing, the British monarchy, king or queen, is not supposed to get involved in any kind of politics of the government. They're a symbolic figurehead of government, but they are constitutionally not allowed to intervene in politics publicly. What we had for about 70 years in Britain, the most famous, richest and probably most consistent role model for women, was the one woman in the country who could not talk about politics: the queen.

Africa

[Munir](#) is an assistant teaching professor at the School of Politics and Global Studies within The College. Her academic research focuses on three areas of social phenomena: gender, environmental politics and legal systems. She is an expert on the relationship between women's

rights and natural resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

Question: Your work focuses on gender politics, law and environmental conflict. How do these topics impact African women?

Munir: In much of the Global South, women play crucial roles in managing natural resources, advocating for legal rights and driving social justice initiatives. However, they also face systemic barriers, from discriminatory legal frameworks to the disproportionate impact of climate change and land dispossession. For me, these three areas — gender politics, law and the environment — form a crucial nexus where human well-being, economic empowerment and social justice intersect. Despite structural inequalities, African women have demonstrated remarkable agency in shaping policies, leading grassroots movements and creating sustainable solutions for their communities.

One of the most powerful examples of this agency is the late Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement, originally called the Trees of Peace campaign. She single-handedly led a movement to reforest eastern Africa. African women are also creating women's co-ops for husbandry. African women are the driving force behind something called "merry-go-round savings," which is when there is economic hardship due to environmental degradation in rural Africa, 12 women will get together to create a savings account to start small, environmentally-based businesses. Then every month, one of the 12 women gets the pot of money. In Uganda and other countries, women have used land disputes as a catalyst for creating business cooperatives, accessing legal training to understand their rights, and founding microloan programs to support other women in agriculture.

Q: Aside from running for office, what types of activism do women utilize to mobilize and engage their communities? Are there similar mobilization strategies to women in other regions?

Munir: Women's activism in Africa goes beyond running for office, using collective action, cultural symbols and economic resistance to drive change. In Nigeria, "sitting on a man" is a protest tactic where women physically surround a male leader, refusing to leave until he meets their demands. This method, dating back to the Aba Women's War of 1929, is still used today in labor and political protests.

There is something in West Africa called "the curse of nakedness," which is the idea that if a woman who already has children is topless or naked, she will go in public and shame a man ... The symbolic message is, "This body I have that you're seeing naked creates life, and you, as a man, are engaging in behaviors that harm my children and other children." This tactic has been used by women trying to reform Nigeria's oil industry and was key in Liberia's 2002 Women's Peace Movement to pressure warlords to sign a peace agreement ending the civil war, ultimately helping

elect Africa's first female president.

Economic resistance is also common. Market women's strikes disrupt trade to protest unfair policies, similar to agricultural boycotts in Latin America and wage-withholding campaigns in the Middle East. Across the world, women use collective action, symbolic protest and economic disruption to fight for justice and shape political change.

Middle East

[Talebi](#) is an assistant professor in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies and is a social-cultural anthropologist by training. Her research areas include self-sacrifice and martyrdom, violence, memory, trauma, revolution and more in contemporary Iran.

Question: How has political unrest in the Middle East impacted gender equity and equality in the region?

Talebi: I think it's been quite positive. Even though, for instance in September 2022, following the death of Mahsa Amini, we saw the absolutely awful backlash from the government. Not just suppression and violent measures, with which the demonstrations and people were treated and massive arrests, and now executions on a daily basis, so it's been awful in that regard.

But one thing that again and again, regardless of all this, we see in Iran is women coming out, despite the fact that every single time a woman walks out on the street there is the possibility of death. Regardless of that, they are dancing on the street. Women are now singing in the street, dancing on the street, doing amazing work like gymnastics on the street. Everything has become public. There's no way the government can keep trying to attack.

Q: What work is there still to be done?

Talebi: As a scholar, I think our work is important and the way we come to connect our work to much larger issues than the academic world; bring it to activists and to the grassroots. Also, do a different kind of research that is not just building on the top button issue or statistical work but considers the everyday life of the people, and think about complex histories.

For instance, we talk about violence against women. We do not talk about the conditions that allow for that kind of violence. We do not talk about colonial legacies and how these governments come about.

If I can do anything in my job as a professor, it is to show the connectivities of history and remind everyone that each of us as a citizen of this world have to be responsible to create a better world

for ourselves.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

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