What Is Women’s Equality Day? Here’s What It Represents and Why It Matters

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Women’s Equality Day is celebrated on Aug. 26 each year in the United States to commemorate the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted women the right to vote. This day marks an important milestone in the ongoing struggle for gender equality and women’s rights in the country.

The little-known history of Women’s Equality Day is that the efforts took 42 years to pass and it largely benefited only white women.

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What Women’s Equality Day signifies

The 19th Amendment, also known as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, was first introduced in Congress in 1878. It sought to enfranchise women by granting them the right to vote. However, the amendment faced significant opposition and took several decades to pass.

The women’s suffrage movement, which began in the mid-19th century, gained momentum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Suffragists, led by prominent white women such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone and Alice Paul, fought tirelessly for the right to vote. They organized

rallies, protests and marches to raise awareness about the issue and gain public support.

After years of activism, the 19th Amendment was finally passed reading: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex,” ensuring that women’s suffrage became a part of the U.S. Constitution.

On Aug. 26, 1920, Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby signed a proclamation officially certifying the 19th Amendment as part of the Constitution, and thus, women gained the right to vote nationwide. This day became known as Women’s Equality Day.

Women’s Equality Day is not only a celebration of the 19th Amendment’s passage, but it also serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and women’s rights. It is a day to honor the trailblazing suffragists who fought for the right to vote and to recognize the continued efforts of women in various fields and movements to achieve full equality.

However, for women of color, the road to voting rights was much longer. It took another 45 years for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to pass, addressing voting discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities, including women of color. The Voting Rights Act applied equally to all racial and ethnic minorities and was instrumental in dismantling many of the discriminatory practices that had prevented women of color from exercising their right to vote.

Through the Voting Rights Act, progress was made in increasing voter registration and participation among African Americans and other minority groups, including women of color. However, it is essential to recognize that despite these legislative advancements, challenges to voting rights persist and efforts to protect and expand voting rights continue to this day.

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Why Women’s Equality Day matters

Today, women are still fighting for reproductive rights, voting rights and the lack of caregiving leave policies that adversely affect women, disproportionately women of color. Reflecting on our history is important to understand how to address today’s challenges. Women in the U.S. are centuries away from equality. For women to achieve equality, these issues need to be addressed:

1. Caregiving leave
2. Sexual harassment
3. Gender biases

Women are 70% of primary caregivers and American women spend an average of 3.5 hours more a week on household labor than men. That is why caregiving leave matters to retaining women in the workplace. Caregiving leave needs to be a part of the overall benefits package. This policy should outline the eligibility criteria, the duration of leave allowed, the process for applying for leave and any required documentation. This benefit is often available for anyone that needs time off to care for family members, whether it be for a new child, a sick family member or other caregiving responsibilities. This is especially important for women of color that are three times more likely to experience death or serious health complications during childbirth.

Flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting or flexible hours, along with an inclusive culture that genuinely values caregiving responsibilities. That means managers and HR personnel need to understand the importance of caregiving leave and the company’s policies and lead by example, demonstrating the commitment to caregiving leave and modeling leave as a part of the employee experience.

Despite the success in gaining awareness with the #MeToo movement, sexual harassment is still commonplace in the workplace. The phrase “Me Too” was initially coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 as a way to support survivors of sexual violence, particularly women of color. However, it gained widespread recognition and international prominence when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged people to use the hashtag in response to the sexual misconduct allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein.

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According to a 2018 study by the United Nations, which surveyed 19,000 women across 21 countries, approximately 81% of women and 45% of men reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment or assault in their lifetime. In the workplace, a 2016 report by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which focused on workplace harassment, around 25% to 85% of women reported experiencing sexual harassment at work which varies by definition of harassment. It is important to note that women of color experience harassment are higher levels due to their intersectional marginalized identities.

Lastly, gender biases continue to hold women back from leadership, promotion opportunities and pay equity. The pay equity gap now sits at 82% and only 10% of Fortune 500 CEO positions are held by women. In order for these trends to improve more quickly, unintentional yet harmful views of women in the workplace must be reconciled. Biases that reflect a maternal wall where women are seen as less committed as mothers, a tightrope of gender expression and the prove-it-again bias as well as the tug-of-war that often happens between women need to be addressed.

Recognition of Women’s Equality Day and the work needed to close the gaps for women need to continue year-round. To

accelerate progress, we must confront and dismantle biases and discriminatory practices that hold women back and work towards creating more inclusive and equitable environments for all.

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