

International Women's Day 2021

SLIDE 1 - WE would like to begin by wishing everybody today a very happy International Women's Day! Whilst the day itself was on Monday the 8th, we as a school shall be continuing our celebrations across the week. This event is a global one, celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity. International Women's day has occurred for well over a century, with the first IWD gathering in 1911 supported by over a million people in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland.

SLIDE 2 - Prior to this the Socialist Party of America, United Kingdom's Suffragists and Suffragettes, and further groups campaigned for women's equality. Today, the event belongs to all groups, collectively everywhere.

The path to women's equality has been long and challenging and each stage provided an important focus in forging the gender agenda further along. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, women activists fought hard for formal equality, with the focus largely on securing the right to vote and equal pay for equal work. These two issues - women's voice and participation in government, and the gender pay gap - largely remain key priorities over a century later.

SLIDE 3 - Fast-forward to the 1970's and widespread feminist action saw women rallying, protesting, and lobbying hard for inclusion, influence, and equality. However, popular campaigns included 'fix the women' which were well-meaning in trying to help women become more confident, visible, well-networked and assertive - but many reinforced a notion that women needed to "act like men" and "fit" into existing patriarchal structures if they were to succeed. By the 2000s, this shifted to intersectional feminism, a notion that recognised how different aspects of a women's identity can create further areas of prejudice; for instance a gay black woman would be subject to not only sexism, but racism and homophobia as well.

SLIDE 4 - Recent years have seen the encouragement of men to be as equally involved in feminism as women, with figures such as Emma Watson who in her 'HeforShe' speech to the United Nations in 2014 revealed the ways that men are restricted by patriarchal societies, sharing many of the ideas that were discussed at our earlier International Men's day. Men as advocates and champions of change has been recognized as a major trend in accelerating women's equality and is something that today we strongly encourage.

SLIDE 5 - And so here we are. Recent movements like #Metoo and #Timesup have helped to put gender inequality firmly on the agenda. We are moving to a very exciting time in history where the much of the world now "expects" equity, diversity, and inclusion. But we are still not there, both structurally and socially. In the UK although women make up 51 per cent of the population, they only make up 34% of MPs and 32% of judges. This means that in politics and the law, women's voices are not getting heard. This lack of female representation spreads further.

SLIDE 6 - Whether it be in the world of technology, sport, health or creatives, many women have been constantly underrepresented or overlooked. In 2019 the gender pay gap was 17.3% in the UK, which means that on average, women were paid approximately 83p for every £1 men were paid, and at the current rate it will be 70 years before that gap eventually closes. It is evident that there is far further for us to go before equality is reached.

SLIDE 7 - Everyday sexism is also a prevalent issue in the UK. This comes in many forms such as the sexualisation of women in the media, catcalling, derogatory language, period poverty, sexual harassment and the unrealistic body expectations that are constantly set for women. These are only a handful of examples. This constant exposure to sexism, which for many begins as a child, is unacceptable and must be constantly confronted.

SLIDE 8 - That is why this year's theme for International Women's day is #choosetochallenge. A challenged world is an alert world and individually, we are all responsible for our own thoughts and actions - all day, every day. We can all choose to challenge and call out gender bias and inequality. We can all choose to seek out and celebrate women's achievements.

SLIDE 9 - Challenging gender stereotypes and pushing for more diverse representation of women are crucial steps to achieving equality and the list of women that have been selected for this year's poll highlight just a handful of female trailblazers and pioneers who inspire young girls worldwide to rise to the rewarding challenge of fighting gender inequality. Collectively everyone everywhere can strive for women's equality and continue to make positive gains. Advocacy, inclusive mindsets, and tangible action are needed from everyone.

We encourage you to take part in the #choosetochallenge photo campaign with your hand high to show your commitment to choose to challenge inequality, call out bias, question stereotypes, and help forge an inclusive world. Let's use this International Women's day to truly forge the agenda and make a difference for women of the current and girls of the future.