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Johnman C, Sim F, Mackie P

International Women's Day

Each year, on the 8th March, thousands of events are held across the world to celebrate International Women's Day.¹ Its history lies with the socialist working women's movement of the early 20th Century and was marked for the first time, in 1911 by more than one million men and women attending rallies about women's right to vote, hold public office, improve vocational training, working conditions, and an end to discrimination. In 1977, the United Nations General Assembly officially declared an International Women's Day with a resolution proclaiming a United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace to be observed by Member States.²

More recently, International Women's Day aims to recognise the achievements of women, but also the challenges women face - with a strong focus on the rights of women and gender equality. A popular quote used to promote International Women's Day comes from Gloria Steinem, who suggests that "the story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organization but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights,"³ – echoing many of our own definitions of public health^{4,5,6} and our focus on collective action to improve and promote health, and work towards equity in health by minimising avoidable unfair disparities in health – some need the bigger box of opportunity to see over the fence!

Some notable achievements of women which can be recognised include: Marie Curie being the first person to ever receive two Nobel Prizes; New Zealand women voting for the first time in nation-wide elections as early as 1893; Valentina Tereshkova's journey into space; introduction of Equality Pay legislation; access to sexual and reproductive health services; and Kailash Satyarthi and Malala Yousafzay winning the Nobel Peace Prize "for their struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education."⁷ However, we know there are numerous challenges to women's equality globally, including: poverty, violence against women, parental rights, involvement in political and economic decision-making processes, educational attainment, and pay disparity.

The gender wage gap received much media attention in 2015, as Hollywood stars spoke out about the disparity – Patricia Arquette's call to arms included: "we have fought for everybody's equal rights, it's our time to have wage equality once and for all".⁸

Californication* aside, it was still seen as a man getting paid more money than a woman to do the same job. The Fawcett Society's report⁹ suggests that the gender pay gap for men and women working full-time in the UK is 14.2%, with Equal Pay Day falling, last year, on the 9th November 2015 – the date after which women effectively work for free!** Sadly, it has

been in early November for the last 3 years, reflecting how little progress seems to be made in closing the gap in salaries for men and women. Similar gender pay gaps are seen in many countries across the globe. Even in Iceland, which the World Economic Forum ranks as number one (and has been for the last 7 years) for having the lowest overall gender gap when taking into account four key measures: political empowerment; educational attainment; economic participation and opportunity; and health and survival, there is still a gender pay gap and women still seem to have limited representations in executive management positions.¹⁰

Women's empowerment and equality is highlighted as being a necessary foundation for "a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world" by the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - the new universal set of goals, targets, and indicators, which follow and expand on, the Millennium Development Goals¹¹ In addition to there being a goal dedicated to achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls (SDG 5), it is also seen as having a critical role in all the SDGs as both an objective and part of the solution. For example, SDG 4 is to "Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning" and that "and has the target to "eliminate gender disparities in education... " by 2030. It was standing up for such access to education that resulted in the shooting of Malala Yousafzay. Despite being the victim such a violent attack, as a survivor Malala continues to fight for universal access to education. Public Health has discussed such violence against women in a previous editorial¹² and there is also a SDGs target to "eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation" by 2030.

Osborne *et al* ¹³in their review: "health literacy: applying current concepts to improve health services and reduce health inequalities", highlight the association between low educational attainment and low health literacy. They also discuss how the average literacy level in Indian women villagers was a stronger correlate of childhood vaccinations uptake than individual literacy level. Therefore women's empowerment and equality is a means to improving health literacy and health literacy is seen as way of increasing patient empowerment and is a facilitator of choice.

For 2016, the theme of International Women's Day will be "Make it Happen", let's hope the SDGs begin to address the important and global issue of the rights of women and gender equality.

*Term used to describe the spread of the negative aspects of Californian culture

**based on when the average female full-time salary has been reached but the average full-time salary for men continues - making up the 14.2% extra by the end of the year.

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11. <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>
12. Johnman, C., Mackie, P., and Sim, F. (2014) There is a beast in everyone. *Public Health*, 128(11), pp. 957-959.
13. (This is the Health literacy review)