

Timeline of landmarks in the struggle for reproductive rights

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Women have fought long and hard to secure access to family planning and abortion, and reduce maternal mortality. A modern timeline of that struggle tells a story full of highs and lows

[Women](#) have been joining forces to agitate for their right to a better life for centuries, but some of the most significant changes have occurred over the past four decades.

It has been a journey of big leaps, small steps and setbacks. Four international women's conferences, a bunch of UN resolutions and two sets of global goals have all played their part.

Sexual health and reproductive rights remain the most contentious issue, with many women unable to control when and if they have children, or how many. Great strides have been made to reduce maternal and child deaths, increase access to family planning, and improve healthcare. But it has, and continues to be, a battle to hold firm the ground gained.

1975: The year of women

Average global fertility rate 4.17. Global population [4 billion](#)

The UN designates 1975 International Women's Year to promote efforts to end discrimination. The [first of four world conferences on women](#), held in Mexico, is attended by 133 governments and roughly 6,000 NGOs from around the world. Described as the "the greatest consciousness raising event in history", the conference ends with a 10-year action plan to advance women's rights, including targets to improve access to healthcare and increase family planning services.

The [average global fertility rate is 4.17](#). Rwanda, Yemen and Libya are among the countries with the highest rates, with women giving birth to eight children on average. Rates in the US and the UK are some of the lowest, averaging 1.77 and 1.81 respectively. In 1972, the US [legalised birth control](#) for all women regardless of marital status. In the UK, the contraceptive pill was made available to all on the NHS in 1961, but it wasn't until 1974 that clinics could prescribe it free of charge.

1976

The UN's [decade for women](#) begins, with the aim of getting implementation of the action plan agreed in Mexico. In December, the UN development fund for women, Unifem, is established to support programmes that promote women's rights.

1977

The US holds its first [national women's conference](#) in Houston, attended by representatives from across the country. Delegates approve an action plan calling for the ratification of the equal rights

amendment, low-cost and high quality childcare, the definition of rape to be expanded to include marital assault, and the option to use Medicaid to pay for abortions.

1979

The UN adopts the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (Cedaw). Considered an international bill of rights for women, the treaty makes clear that reproductive rights are “the most vital concern of women” and states that they must have access to information and advice on family planning, and other healthcare services. The convention has been ratified by 189 states.

1980: Progress and global gags

Average global fertility rate 3.7. Global population 4.4 billion

The [second world conference on women](#) is held in Copenhagen to assess progress at the midpoint of the decade of women. Representatives from 145 countries attend. In what will become a running theme in the decades that follow, the conference confers praise on governments that have taken steps to consider women in their development plans, but criticises the lack of money and political will to see them through, resulting in little meaningful change for women in many countries.

The [global population](#) reflects a growth rate of more than 18% over the past decade.

1984

At a conference on population in Mexico, Ronald Reagan, the US president, introduces a new policy that prohibits any overseas organisation currently receiving US funding from obtaining money from other partners for work that involves abortion. The [Mexico City policy](#), otherwise known as the “[global gag rule](#)”, follows restrictions on aid imposed under the [Helms amendment](#), passed in 1973. Helms banned the use of US aid for abortion as a form of family planning, but did allow organisations to source money from elsewhere for this purpose.

1985: 10 years on

Average global fertility rate 3.5 Global population 4.8 billion

To mark the end of the decade of women, the [third world conference on women](#) convenes in Nairobi to assess achievements. Attended by 1,400 delegates from 157 countries, the conference finds that gender equality remains a distant dream for many women. More needs to be done to end violence against women, say participants, who highlight the central role women play in development. The conference agrees strategies to overcome barriers to gender equality, and promote women’s participation in peace and development. These measures include pressing governments to get more women into decision-making roles.

The [US stops funding the UN population fund](#) (UNFPA) under the [Kemp-Kasten amendment](#), which prohibits foreign aid to organisations deemed to be involved in coercive abortion or involuntary sterilisation.

1989

As he leaves office as president of Chile, Augusto Pinochet amends the constitution to ban abortion in all circumstances. The country is now one of five (excluding the Holy See) with absolute bans – the others are El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Malta and Nicaragua. Latin America and the

Caribbean have the highest rates of unsafe abortion in the world.

1990

Globally, the average maternal mortality rate stands at 385 deaths for every 100,000 live births, which over the year equates to about 532,000 women dying as a result of pregnancy and childbirth. Areas with the highest number of deaths include east and southern Africa, where 913 women will die for every 100,000 live births, and west and central Africa, where 1,100 mothers die for every 100,000 births..

The global population has increased by about 15% over the decade and now stands at approximately 5.3 billion.

1993

Bill Clinton becomes US president and rescinds the global gag rule. He also resumes funding to the UNFPA.

Violence against women is recognised as a human rights violation by the world conference on human rights in Vienna, and the UN general assembly adopts the [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women](#), which defines the forms of violence and a framework to tackle it.

1994

At the the [international conference on population and development](#), in Cairo, 179 countries recognise that women's reproductive health and rights should be the cornerstone of all programmes seeking to address population and development. Member states agree to cut maternal mortality rates and ensure universal access to reproductive healthcare. The Holy See, which has permanent observer status at the UN, says the inclusion of family planning in the document doesn't change the stance of the Catholic Church and it "does not consider abortion or access to abortion as a dimension of these terms".

Radhika Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka becomes the first special rapporteur on violence against women.

1995: Beijing blueprint

Average fertility rate 2.8. Maternal mortality rate [369 \(for every 100,000 live births\)](#). Global population 5.7 billion

The [fourth world conference on women](#), held in Beijing, delivers a 12-point blueprint for women's empowerment that is hailed as the most progressive yet. Signed by 189 member states, it includes a call for accessible, high quality healthcare and - by 2000 - a 50% reduction in the maternal death rate as of 1990, with the figure to be halved again by 2015. The proposed framework also calls for expanded family planning services and an end to child marriage. The US first lady, [Hillary Clinton](#), [pronounces](#) that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights", while the president of Peru denies that his country is following [a policy of forced sterilisation](#).

2000

The UN security council passes the landmark resolution [1325](#), which recognises the crucial role women play in conflict resolution and peace building, and also acknowledges their unique experiences of war and what they need in the aftermath. Over the next 15 years, [seven more](#)

[resolutions](#) on women, peace and security will be passed, including those that recognise rape as a weapon of war, and giving women a greater role in all stages of peace processes. By 2015, seven out of 10 peace agreements will include references to gender and women, but [funding remains a major barrier](#) to ensuring women in fragile settings get the full support they need. And women are still largely absent from the negotiating table.

The UN general assembly [adopts the Millennium Declaration](#).

2001: Millennium challenges

Average fertility rate 2.6. Maternal mortality 332. Global population 6.2 billion

The world adopts eight [millennium development goals \(MDGs\)](#) to end poverty and hunger, drawn from the Millennium Declaration. Among them is a pledge to promote gender equality and empower women, cut infant deaths and reduce the 1990 maternal mortality rate by three-quarters within 15 years. By now, the global average maternal mortality rate stands at 332 deaths for every 100,000 live births. Inroads have been made to reduce rates across Africa, but the figures still show 766 deaths for every 100,000 births in east and southern Africa, and 973 for every 100,000 births in west and central Africa.

George W Bush is sworn in as US president and reintroduces the global gag rule, but waits a year before reintroducing Kemp-Kasten.

2005

Universal access to family planning is added as a target to MDG 5. While global contraceptive prevalence rates have doubled since 1990, only 22% of women are using some form of contraception. Research shows that women who have completed secondary education are more likely to use contraception.

2009

The US president, Barack Obama, [rescinds the global gag rule](#). The World Health Organisation estimates that each year 47,000 women die from complications arising from unsafe abortion, which accounts for about 13% of all maternal deaths. Obama resumes funding for the UNFPA.

2010: Family planning takes centre stage

Average fertility rate 2.5. Maternal mortality rate 246. Global population 6.9 billion

The [MDG to tackle maternal mortality](#) is way off track. The average yearly rate of decline is 2.3%, less than half the 5.5% required to meet the goal. Some progress is made in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia, where rates have respectively fallen from 870 to 640, and 590 to 280, deaths for every 100,000 live births. Progress on contraceptive use has slowed since 2000 and take up in sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania remains very low.

The UN, aiming to accelerate its work towards gender equality, merges the work of four separate strands of the organisation to create [UN Women](#). The newly formed organisation has a big brief – from addressing violence against women to economic empowerment and promoting women in leadership – but a [small budget](#). Michelle Bachelet is the agency's first executive director.

2011

The UN human rights council [adopts the first UN resolution](#) on sexual orientation and gender identity, which calls for an end to discrimination.

2012

Donors pledge \$2.6bn to increase access to family planning in 69 countries with the lowest prevalence rates. The [FP2020 partnership is established](#) to accelerate and monitor progress. It aims to reach an additional 120 million women and girls by 2020.

Campaigners [express anger](#) at the failure of the UN Commission on the Status of Women to adopt agreed conclusions, because of arguments over women's reproductive rights. Each year, religious and conservative groups attempt to undermine negotiations at the annual forum.

The UN general assembly passes a resolution to [ban female genital mutilation](#). An estimated [3 million girls are at risk](#) of being cut each year.

2014

The UK hosts a summit to end sexual violence in conflict, and [122 countries pledge](#) to do so. The event is attended by Hollywood actor and UNHCR special envoy Angelina Jolie, who co-sponsors the gathering together with William Hague, Britain's foreign secretary.

The UN general assembly adopts a ["historic" resolution to end child marriage](#). Campaigners predict that, without any action, by 2050 [1.2 billion women](#) will have been married while still girls.

After stepping down as head of UN Women in 2013, Bachelet is sworn in as president of Chile for the second time. She makes [overturning the abortion ban](#) a priority.

2015: Missed targets and new opportunities

Average fertility rate 2.4. Maternal mortality rate 216. Global population 7.3 billion

Figures released to mark the deadline of the MDGs show the number of women dying as a result of childbirth and pregnancy has dropped by 45% worldwide since 1990. Deaths have fallen by 64% in southern Asia over this period, while sub-Saharan Africa registers a 49% fall. But these two regions still account for 86% of maternal deaths globally. Millions of women remain without care from trained healthcare workers when giving birth, and do not attend antenatal classes.

Contraceptive prevalence rates have risen to 64% globally among married women or women in a union, but huge disparities remain between regions. The UN says that if families have one fewer child by 2030, the estimated world population [will fall from 9 billion to 8 billion](#).

In September, UN member states adopt [17 sustainable development goals](#). Goal three aims to reduce global maternal mortality rates to a maximum of 70 deaths for every 100,000 live births by 2030, and to ensure universal access to family planning. After a fraught campaign, activists manage to secure a goal to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls, with targets including the elimination of female genital mutilation and child marriage.

After 35 years, [China drops its one-child policy](#). There have been fears that the resulting low fertility rate was driving the country towards a demographic crisis. The [UN predicts](#) that India's population will overtake China's by 2022.

2016

The UNFPA announces it is [facing a \\$140m shortfall in its budget](#) as major donors divert money away from the agency to support the refugee crisis nearer home.

India's supreme court orders the government [to close sterilisation camps across India within three years](#), after a four-year battle by campaigners. Between 2013 and 2014, almost 4 million sterilisations were performed in India, mostly on women. The country has been plagued with accusations of forced sterilisation since the 1970s.

The first trial at the international criminal court to focus on the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war [ends in the conviction](#) of Jean-Pierre Bemba, the former vice-president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Meanwhile, [Hissène Habré](#), the former president of Chad, is found guilty of crimes against humanity, summary execution, rape and torture. He is the first former head of state to be personally convicted of rape. The appeal court will go on to acquit him of the rape charge, but uphold all other charges.

2017

The US president, Donald Trump, [reinstates the global gag rule](#) on his first full day in the White House, expanding the ban to include all health programmes, not just family planning. Women's rights campaigners say the move will be devastating for women. And the US defunds the UNFPA. In his budget, Trump announces there will be no funding for international family planning. The US was previously the world's largest bilateral donor for family planning.

Driven by the Dutch, other states and organisations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation raise €181m to help plug the gap, as part of the [She Decides campaign](#). While the money raised is impressive, it is a small fraction of the \$600m a year the US spends on family planning.

The global population stands at 7.5 billion, but the UN [revises its growth figures](#) to exceed 8 billion by 2023. By 2050, population figures are predicted to reach 9.8 billion. Half of the growth will come from nine countries: India, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, the US, Uganda and Indonesia.

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