



MAKING ALL VOICES COUNT – 50 YEARS ON FROM WOMEN GAINING THE RIGHT TO VOTE IN SWITZERLAND

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“Foster gender parity with a triple A approach – awareness, advocacy and action,” says IMD Adjunct Professor of Leadership, Heather Cairns Lee.

Living in Switzerland in February 2021, it is hard to imagine not having the right to vote.

Voting is an important part of political and civic life. It gives people the right and responsibility to use their voice about important issues. The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, recognizes the fundamental right of people to vote and express their voice in fair elections. Yet there remain countries in which this fundamental human right is not acknowledged.

Despite Switzerland being one of the oldest democracies in the world, with men voting in village squares since 1291, Swiss women did not have the right to vote in federal elections until 50 years ago – 7 February 1971. This was not through lack of trying. The year women in Britain got full voting rights – 1928 – Swiss women demonstrated in Bern pulling a large model of snail to protest at the “snail’s pace” of change. They had to wait another 43 years before they got the vote, thanks in part to the advocacy of pioneering women like [Marthe Gosteli](#).

Having the right to vote means having the right to use your voice to influence society to create just and inclusive systems through influencing the legal framework of a country. Today, whichever country we live in, how can we use our voices to build on the legacy of those who have advocated for others? Change happens through people using their voices to raise awareness, advocate for important issues, and take action. This triple A approach is in the reach of all of us – what can you do to make all voices count?

Raise awareness

We don’t see what we don’t see. When we have the right to vote, freedom from violence, or equality of opportunity, we may believe this is “normal” and forget that this is far from normal for others. This is how bias happens – through being blind to those things we take for granted due to our privilege. Although billions of people around the world may take their right to vote for granted, sadly millions of women still do not have the right to vote, nor to inherit property, pass their nationality on to their children, manage their own finances, or have access to equal pay, opportunities or paid maternity leave.

According to research by [UN Women](#), discriminatory laws affect more than 2.5 billion women and girls. There are still more than 50 countries in which the legal age for marriage is different for men and women, and where women are not protected against harmful practices or discrimination. Recognizing the state of gender disparity is a first step to building awareness. As highlighted by the recent session at Davos, [placing gender parity at the heart of the recovery](#), COVID-19 is affecting women more than men as they deal with heightened burdens of domestic care and suffer increased domestic violence as well as decreased income.

There are an increasing number of excellent sources of data about gender including [IMD's research](#) and the institute's newly launched Gender Gap Report. But ask yourself, what sources of data are you using to raise awareness for yourself and others? And how are you raising awareness in your communities?

Increase advocacy

While awareness is the first step to understanding that action needs to be taken, advocacy involves active participation. The importance of using positions of privilege and our voices to support others is vital to achieving gender parity in three domains.

It starts at home. A recent report by [UN Women](#) shows that women and girls are doing more of the unpaid care and homeschooling during COVID-19. Gender bias starts early, with 64% of parents involving daughters and 57% involving sons with home-care tasks. If you have children at home, how are gender roles discussed and distributed, and what message does this send? Advocacy can start at the kitchen table – indeed this is where we learn what is considered “normal”.

It continues in the workplace. Developing caring and inclusive cultures is key to managing the demands of home and professional responsibilities, and to increasing the number of women in the workplace. If you are in a position to influence the culture of a team or organization, what are you doing to advocate for more inclusive policies?

It spreads in society. Social norms influence how people interact and come from what people collectively believe are acceptable expectations and behavior. They emerge informally and often implicitly, and are mainly transmitted and maintained through repeated use. Advocacy is therefore vital to identifying and calling out discriminatory norms. Consider lending your voice to organizations like [Business Professional Women \(BPW\)](#) or [Zonta](#), which have been advocating for women's empowerment, development, and equality over the last century, have clubs worldwide, and consultative status with the UN.

Take action

As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. [International Women's Day](#), March 8, celebrates the political, economic, social, and cultural achievements of women. Will you join the collective action and [#ChooseToChallenge#](#) gender bias to make a positive difference for women? The idea is simple – pledging to choose to challenge inequality. The action may be more challenging – calling out behavior, norms, or practices that are unhelpful to women.

Personally, I [#ChooseToChallenge#](#) by volunteering as the President of [BPW Lake Geneva](#), part of the international professional women's association.

To celebrate BPW Lake Geneva's own 10-year anniversary last year, we chose to sponsor the publication of a book celebrating [50 Amazing Swiss Women](#), published on February 7 to commemorate the date that Swiss women got the federal vote. The book, written and illustrated by six women, highlights the achievements and diversity of 50 pioneering women to showcase inspiring female role models.

In the 50 years since Swiss women got the vote, change has happened through raising awareness, increasing advocacy, and taking meaningful action. And, looking at IMD's rankings in 2020, it has made a difference. Switzerland was ranked first in the [World Talent Ranking](#), third in the [World Competitiveness Ranking](#), and sixth in the [World Digital Ranking](#). One thing is clear: these results don't occur in countries where women do not have the right to vote, or to use their voices and their talents.

There is still much work to be done to make all voices count. As we celebrate Swiss women's suffrage today, how will you raise awareness, increase advocacy, and take action to champion gender parity?