

The Origins of Women's Day

Women's Day is now celebrated all over the world on the 8th March; however, the origins of this celebration are quite controversial. One of the most common **beliefs** is that Women's Day originated from a dramatic accident that happened at the beginning of the 20th century in the Triangle **Shirtwaist** Factory, a **blouse** factory in the USA, where more than a hundred women were working.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire happened in Manhattan, a **borough** of New York City, on 25th March 1911, and was the one of the **deadliest** industrial disasters in U.S. history. The fire caused the death of 146 workers – 123 of which were women and girls. Most of the victims were recent immigrants, many of them coming from Italy; the oldest victim was 43 years old and the youngest, 14 years old. The factory was located on the 8th, 9th and 10th floors of a tall building, which still exists today. When the fire spread, many of the workers could not escape from the burning building because the doors to the **stairwells** and exits were locked; at that time locking up fire exits was a common practice to prevent workers from taking unauthorised breaks and to reduce **theft**. As they could not leave the burning building, many of the workers died from burns, smoke inhalation or injuries caused by falling off the building while trying to escape from the fire.

The fire seemed to have started in a **scrap** bin, where a great amount of scraps of cloth had been thrown. Even if smoking was forbidden



inside the factory, it is reported that workers did not always respect the prohibition and threw cigarettes inside those bins too.

After this tragedy that shocked the city, a number of government commissions and workers' associations were created in order to improve safety in workplaces by investigating factory conditions. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory owners were taken to **trial**; however, they were not sent to prison, but only made to pay very low **finer**: this shows that the idea of safety in the workplace was not very important at that time.

Adapted from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangle_Shirtwaist_Factory_fire

belief: *credenza, opinione*

blouse (o shirtwaist): *camicetta*

borough: *quartiere*

deadliest: *il più mortale*

fine: *multa*

scrap: *scarto*

stairwell: *vano scale*

theft: *furto*

trial: *processo*

How is Women's Day celebrated in Italy?

1  Complete this summary with the given words. There are two unnecessary words.

bin • blouses • burns • conditions • fire exits • fined • fire • investigation • safe • smoke • trial • working

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was located in New York City and produced **1.**
 Many immigrant women and girls worked there; some of them were very young. One day, a
2. spread in the factory, probably caused by a cigarette thrown into a scrap
3. Most of the workers could not escape the fire because all of the **4.**
 were closed; this was quite common at that time because the owners did not want workers to take
 unauthorised breaks during **5.** hours and tried to avoid thefts. For this reason, most
 of the workers could not escape from the building and died of **6.** inhalation and
7.; others tried to jump out of the windows, but, as the factory was on high floors,
 they did not survive the fall. This tragedy was a shock for the whole US nation and for New York City
 in particular. From that day on, some associations were created in order to control working
8. in factories and to prevent such accidents from happening again. However, the
 importance of working in **9.** conditions was not common at the time and there
 were no laws for employers; for this reason, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory owners were just
10. a very low sum of money and not sent to prison.

2  **PAIR WORK** List some examples of behaviour at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory that go against modern safety rules.

➤ *The bins were full of pieces of cloth that could catch fire.*

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3  **PAIR WORK** Make a list of the safety rules that should have been followed to prevent the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire.

➤ *Bins should have been emptied regularly.*

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4  **GROUP WORK** Search the Internet for further information about this accident and answer the questions after discussing in groups.

1. Why do you think Women's Day originated from this tragedy?
2. What were the general working conditions and salary at the time of the accident?
3. Why do you think workers were mainly women and immigrants?
4. What do you think about the owners' trial?
5. Have you heard of other deadly accidents in workplaces in more recent times?
Do you know what the consequences for the managers were?