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How to be radical on Women's Equality Day

By Aileen Cassinetto

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In a letter to her mother dated Nov. 10, 1930, Frida Kahlo recounted passing through San Bruno on the way to San Francisco from Los Angeles. At the time, San Mateo County's population was a little more than a 10th of what it is now. Prohibition was still in effect, and the Peninsula was known as much for its smuggled whiskey as for its thriving floral industry. Eight miles up the coast from Half Moon Bay, Kiku Tahakashi, a 42-year-old immigrant from Japan, would have been working alongside her husband Yunosuke Takahashi on their flower farm, pioneering what would become the strawflower production in the county.



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Then, as now, women have played pivotal roles in infrastructure industries as well as in various creative and community-building endeavors. For instance, there are more than 300 businesses in San Mateo County ranging from retail to health care that are owned or partly-owned and operated by women. Of these, 52% are categorized as restaurants or food services, which comes as no surprise given that food enterprises have always been a pathway to opportunity especially for many immigrant women. Brisbane's famed 7 Mile House, originally built in 1858 as a toll gate, has been owned and operated since 2004 by Philippine-born Vanessa Garcia. The family- and dog-friendly restaurant also doubles as a community gathering place, supporting fundraisers and special events for various causes.

Overall, food and related industries contributed more than \$1 trillion to the nation's GDP in 2020 and accounted for more than 19 million jobs. The creative industry, on the other hand, generated \$876.7 billion in the same year and supported over 5 million jobs, with nearly half of the workforce being women. While the arts sector has historically undervalued the work of women, artists and culture makers have been a force for change in promoting gender equity and social progress. For instance, East Bay chef and author Samin Nosrat has revolutionized the culinary industry through storytelling, a compelling tool that artists use to shape and sustain structural change. Closer to home, the San Mateo County Women's Art Show has been celebrating the work of women artists for the past 17 years, holding space for untold stories of courage and limitless creativity.

Filoli, a historic house and garden and Bay Area cultural hub under the leadership of Kara Newport, successfully launched and fully executed — in the midst of a global pandemic, rising inflation and a persistent gender wage gap — a pay equity initiative that commits to a living wage for all positions, taking into account what it costs to live in San Mateo County. Also in line with Filoli's commitment to equity, the theme for exhibits and monthly programming in 2023 will focus on women.

Supporting visionary women, women-owned businesses and women-led organizations is especially significant on Women's Equality Day. On Aug. 26, we not only celebrate and uplift all women, we also acknowledge the ongoing struggle for equality, dignity and bodily autonomy. We are reminded, most importantly, that we shape the future when we vote. I especially commend the women who continue to navigate and subvert spaces that systemically oppress them — it takes guts and true grit to do this, and to choose to love, with one's whole radical heart, all that is just and possible.

The San Mateo County Commission on the Status of Women will be at Art on the Square in Redwood City on Friday, Aug. 26, from 5-8:30 p.m., with free notepads and other resources. Please stop by!

Aileen Cassinetto is an author, publisher and county commissioner. She served as San Mateo County Poet Laureate from 2019 to 2022.

