



# about Australia

## women—towards equality

- Women have made significant contributions to every aspect of Australia's development, including its society, culture and economy. However, women in Australia, as in other countries, have had to battle institutional and social barriers as they struggled for equality of opportunity.

### key milestones

**1895:** Women vote for the first time in an Australian election (South Australia)

**1902:** *Commonwealth Franchise Act* passed, enabling all women (with the exception of Aboriginal women in some states) to stand for federal parliament and vote in federal elections

**1921:** Edith Cowan becomes the first woman elected to an Australian parliament (in Western Australia)

**1943:** Dame Enid Lyons and Senator Dorothy Tangney become the first women elected to Federal Parliament

**1947:** Jessie Street appointed as the Australian representative to the newly established United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

**1966:** Bar on married women as permanent employees in the federal public service abolished

**1969:** Equal pay determination by the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission introduces the principle of 'equal pay for work of equal value'

**1983:** Australia ratifies the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

**1984:** *Federal Sex Discrimination Act* passed, to implement the UN Convention domestically

**1988:** Prime Minister launches the first National Agenda for Women, based on the UN Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women

**1989:** Rosemary Follett becomes the first female head of a government in Australia when she is elected Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory

**1992:** Justice Elizabeth Evatt, President of the Australian Law Reform Commission, becomes the first Australian elected to the UN Human Rights Committee

**1999:** *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act* introduced into parliament on 22 September, replacing the *Affirmative Action Act 1986*

Note: The above dates and events are drawn from a detailed timeline developed by the Australian Government Office for Women, which is available online.

Australian women faced setbacks as well as tremendous victories along the road to equality. For example, Australia was one of the first countries in the world to give women the right to vote and to sit in parliament (in 1895 in the state of South Australia and in 1902 federally). Yet the nation's first female federal Cabinet-level minister was not appointed until 1949. And, until 1966, women working in the federal public service had to resign when they married.

The 1970s and 1980s were decades of immense social change, particularly for women. This period saw the emergence of articulate, politically focused women who campaigned in an organised way for equal pay, equal opportunity in education and the workplace, safe contraception, planned parenthood and adequate child-care facilities.

Since then, much has been achieved and women have won greater equality, freedom and choice. Women were awarded 'equal pay for work of equal value' in 1969, and federal legislation to ban discrimination on the basis of sex was introduced in 1984. Other reforms included the introduction of improved child-care facilities and community centres, and government pensions for single mothers.

## Women today

Today, women make up just over half of Australia's total population. More women than men are now educated at secondary schools and universities, and more women than men graduate from university with bachelor degrees.

In 2006, women accounted for 54.8 per cent of all tertiary education students and 47.5 per cent of all students enrolled in vocational education and training courses. The majority were enrolled in

management and commerce, society and culture, and food, hospitality and personal services courses. Women were not well represented in engineering and related technologies or architecture and building courses (4.6 per cent of all women enrolled).

Almost 4.8 million women were in some form of paid employment in January 2008, with a labour force participation rate of 58 per cent, while the unemployment rate was 4.6 per cent (compared with an overall rate of 4.3 per cent for the same month). More than 30 per cent of Australia's small business operators are women.

Women make up more than half of the Australian public service workforce (57 per cent) and hold around 36 per cent of senior executive positions. In the private sector, however, women hold only around 12 per cent of management jobs.

Women hold 34 per cent of all seats on federal government-controlled boards and around 23 per cent of chair or deputy chair positions. However, women hold only 9 per cent of private board directorships.

In the federal parliament in 2008, 30 per cent of members and senators were women. In the Senate there were 27 women, out of a total of 76 senators, and in the House of Representatives there were 40 women, out of a total of 150 members. The position of Deputy Prime Minister is now held by a woman, Julia Gillard, for the first time in parliamentary history.

## Office for Women

The Australian Government Office for Women provides high-level advice to the Minister for the Status of Women and seeks to influence policy and Cabinet and budget

decision-making to ensure women's issues are considered. The Office for Women also:

- advises on legislative issues relating to women
- administers programs, including those established to combat domestic violence and sexual assault
- provides the main platform for consultation between the women's sector and government
- represents government at national and international forums on women's issues.

The Office for Women works closely with other federal government departments and agencies, including the departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Immigration and Citizenship, and Attorney-General's; the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency; the Office of Work and Family; and the Australian Agency for International Development.

## Women's rights internationally

The Office for Women promotes women's human rights at international forums and reports on Australia's progress towards gender equality in relation to UN treaties and Commonwealth countries' gender action plans.

Australia is performing well according to international gender indicators. The 2007–08 UN Human Development Report ranked Australia second in the world on the gender-related development index and eighth in the world on the gender empowerment measure.

Australia is an active participant in deliberations of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. A key international priority for the Office for Women is Australia's implementation of the UN Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which was adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

The Office for Women also has primary responsibility for Australia's obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the main human rights treaty for women, which Australia ratified in 1983.

## Sex Discrimination Act

Australia's commitment to its international human rights obligations is reflected in domestic legislation, such as the *Sex Discrimination Act* 1984. Equality between men and women is a principle that lies at the heart of a fair and productive society. It is also the key goal of the Act, which aims to eliminate discrimination and sexual harassment and promote greater equality in all aspects of the Australian community. Under the Act, individuals can lodge complaints of sex discrimination and sexual harassment with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

## Looking back ...

At the time of European settlement of Australia in 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had been inhabitants of Australia for up to 60 000 years. Women were the main providers, gathering food and hunting small animals, and were responsible

for rearing the children. While women had some independence, they were treated as subordinate to men.

The First Fleet, which sailed from England in May 1787 to establish a British penal colony in New South Wales, carried 750 convicts, including around 190 women. Many of the women were assigned as servants, providing domestic services, to civil and military staff and later to free settlers who began arriving in the new colony in 1792. Accommodation was scarce and some women became prostitutes.

In 1801, a factory staffed entirely by women was established. It provided some accommodation for female workers, who were given jobs such as making rope and convict clothes, spinning wool and doing laundry work. Conditions improved but life for Australia's early pioneer women, who were often isolated, remained bleak.

In the late 19th century, as Australia entered a period of prosperity, employment opportunities for women increased. However, around half of the female workforce was still employed in domestic service for very little pay.

Women started campaigning for a range of social and political reforms, including access to universities and the right to vote and stand for parliament. By 1881, they had gained entry to all three universities then in existence (Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney). Between 1895 and 1908, all state governments granted women the vote and, from 1902, women had the right to stand for federal parliament and vote in federal elections.

During the First World War, more than 2000 Australian women served overseas as nurses. Others contributed to the war effort by taking over the management of family farms or working in factories or as shop assistants,

nurses and teachers. The percentage of women in the workforce increased from 24 to 37 per cent but they were paid only 54 per cent of men's pay.

At the height of the Great Depression, up to one-third of the general workforce was unemployed, and an even bigger proportion of women lost their jobs, as priority was given to men supporting families.

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 brought women back into the workforce in large numbers to fill jobs vacated by men fighting overseas. By 1943, there were around 800 000 women in the workforce. The Australian Government established a Women's Employment Board in response to pressure from women's groups to ensure that women war workers were not exploited. The board ensured that most women received at least 75 per cent of the male wage.

In the postwar period, Australian women returned to the home as servicewomen were demobilised; married women in civilian jobs were often dismissed when male servicemen returned to their prewar jobs. It was not until the 1960s that the proportion of women in the workforce rose above 40 per cent.

## Looking ahead ...

The Australian Government continues to address the needs of women through programs and initiatives to improve women's economic independence and security, safety, health, education and financial literacy. The programs are directed at all women, including migrant and Indigenous women and women with a disability.

The government is continuing to support initiatives to increase women's participation in the workforce and the number of

women in decision-making and leadership roles in Australia. One of its initiatives is *AppointWomen*, a database that gives women the opportunity to register their details to be considered for board appointments. The database equips federal government boards and bodies to consider the best possible candidates for jobs.

Combating domestic violence and sexual assault is a major priority and the Australian Government will continue to fund initiatives to address personal safety issues. The government provides national leadership to address domestic violence and sexual assault through the Women's Safety Agenda.

## Further information

Australian Women's Archives Project  
[www.womenaustralia.info/browse.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/browse.htm)

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity  
Commission  
[www.hreoc.gov.au](http://www.hreoc.gov.au)

National Foundation for Australian Women  
[www.nfaw.org](http://www.nfaw.org)

Office for Women  
[www.ofw.facs.gov.au](http://www.ofw.facs.gov.au)

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