
UNIT 15 GENDER AND WOMEN ISSUES

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15.1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years issues concerning the identity, rights and representation of women in any given social setting have acquired considerable importance. Various national and international bodies have evinced attention to such issues as women's cultural subjugation, economic exploitation, political under-representation and crime and violence perpetrated against women. Despite the significant role women play in all realms of life-social, economic, and political, over the centuries women's role in the society has remained largely unrecognised because of conventional notions that women belong to home and so have no role to play in the public domain. Yet, a majority of women today work harder than men to secure their livelihoods, have less control over their income, have fewer opportunities, and are victims of violence with little voice, if at all, in public decision-making.

Thus women form a separate social entity cutting across the boundaries of several social categories like class, caste, race, ethnicity and others. The process of gender construction in particular and the wider economic, social and political institutional arrangements of society in general shape the position of women within each of these categories. In the process of gender construction, women as a collectivity acquire a social identity, which is distinctive from those of the other categories. As the cultural dynamics of the society vary, the patterns of gender construction have also been different reflecting upon the position of women in society in general and in each of these categories in particular.

There are countries with low rate of literacy and more than 80% of its female work force engaged in agriculture and with less than 3% representation of women in the formal political bodies. There are also countries with high level of literacy with more than 80% of female work force engaged in knowledge economics and with higher levels of political participation. What is the status of women in a society, which has higher rate of economic growth, educational and technological advancement and a higher rate of women's work participation? How are the women's issues articulated in these societies? What are the state's responses towards women's issue in these societies? In this Unit we shall be examining these questions in the context of women's status in contemporary Australia.

15.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the demography of women in Australia;
- explain the status of women in employment;
- delineate the emerging facets of crime and violence on women;
- talk about the extent of women's participation in politics; and
- discuss the response of the state to contemporary women's issues.

15.3 WOMEN IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

Australian history is conspicuous because of its masculinity. Women have, in the past, been excluded from its national identity. Australian nation was all about stories of masculine survival, of bush' men, of pioneers and settlers, Anzacs and even "ordinary blokes" which made it difficult to incorporate women in the traditional historical narrative. Women, it was said, were rarely if ever present as actual inventors of Australia and therefore the images of Australia as a nation could not possibly incorporate female experience. Also, since women were excluded from cultural production, Australia and its history were inevitably masculine. Feminist analyses began to make their presence felt only in the 1970s and were mostly about Australian history. They denied most of the myths of nationalist history and argued that there was a need to incorporate women, gender and feminism into mainstream history. Feminist historians like Shirley Fitzgerald and Beverley Kingston challenge the portrayal of late nineteenth century Australian society as egalitarian. There were obvious inequalities of opportunity between men and women.

Australia's reputation as a relatively progressive society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with protective labour legislation and basic and minimum wages was made possible by women's labour paid and unpaid. Therefore Australia had little to offer women, denying their economic contribution and silencing their political voice.

However, by 2004, Australia occupied the eighth place in the world through the Gender Empowerment Measures. The gender related development indicators now show that the life expectancy at birth for female and male are 82.0 and 76.4 years and the estimated income are \$ 26,643 and \$33,259 respectively. Female represent 26.5% of the seats in the parliament, 35% in the position of legislators, senior officials and managers, and 55% of the professional and technical workers. The female economic activity rates in various categories of activities as percentage of male in Australia are as follows: total of economic activity 78%, agriculture 56%, industry 33%, service 135%. (UDDP 2004, World Bank 2004). Against this backdrop, let us examine the status of women in Australian society.

The status of a group in society is widely determined by the state of their demographic status (numerical strength, extent of urban living, life expectancy, literacy and education), family and marriage, labour force participation, participation in the government and participation in economic and political leadership, crime and violence against them, response of the state and the civil societies in accommodating the interests of these groups in the national life. In the following sections of this unit we shall deal with the status of women in the Australian society in terms of some of these indicators.

15.4 DEMOGRAPHIC STATUS

15.4.1 Gender Composition in Population

In 2003 Australia had a total population of 19,881,500 of which 50% were female. The important feature of the Australian population is that it is growing both in size and aging. In 1983 around 24% of the population was aged between 0-14 years of age. By 2003 this has declined to 20% and during the same period the proportion of the older people aged 85 years and above to the total population of Australia increased. Women make up a greater proportion of Australians (65%).

Levels of social, economic and technological development influence the fertility rate. It is now widely recognised that fertility rate of women is not independent of the economic condition of the society. Change in the economy, educational status, work participation, availability and recognition of birth control measures largely determine women's fertility. At present an increasing number of Australian women (around one fourth) choose not to have children-a trend which is similar to other developed countries like US and UK where 22% and 20% of women respectively belong to this category (cf. Woman in Australia, 2004). The Aboriginal and Torres Islander people constitute 2% of the Australian population. The health and the living conditions of these people are not as good as those of the Australian community as a whole. The life expectancy of indigenous women is 63 years while for the average Australian female population it is 82 years. However, they have a higher fertility rate of 2.1, while for the Australian female population as a whole it is 1.7. The indigenous girls are less likely to be at school. Female work participation is lower among them-43% as against 53% for the Australian female population as a whole.

15.4.2 Life Expectancy

There has been phenomenal increase in the life expectancy both for male and female in Australia. At the end of 19th century only 34% of men and 43% of women reached their 70th birthday. By the end of 1999, 76% of male and 85% of female lived their 70th birthday. In 2002 the life expectancy for Australian male and female were 77 and 82 years respectively. In 2001 the proportion of women in the 65-74, 75-84, and 85 and over age categories were 52%, 58% and 69% respectively. Thus women have a higher life expectancy compared to men and there were

more women (198,100) than men (91,400) in the age group of 85 years and above, as of June 2003. This is mainly due to the sharp decline in fertility rate since late 1970 and thereafter. Fertility rate has declined from the post war baby boom (3.6) to 1.75, which is one of the lowest in the world and well below the world average of 2.7.

However, the health status for the indigenous Australians is lower than that of other Australians. The infant mortality rate for the Aboriginals was 10.6 to per 1000 childbirth as compared to 5.3 for all Australians. The life expectancy for the indigenous males and females are 56 and 63 years respectively (ABS 2004).

15.4.3 Spatial Distribution

In 2001 around 10% of Australian women lived in the rural areas, 67% in the major urban areas and the remaining 23% in other urban areas. Significantly the number of women living in urban areas has increased over the decades. It has been accentuated by the fact that most immigrant women settle in major urban areas.

15.4.4 Education

In Australia women have a high rate of participation and retention in education. This trend continues through the secondary to upper most level of schooling. For example, in 2003 the apparent retention rates of 12 years in school for girls and boys were 81% and 70% respectively. There are however regional variations. Girls from remote, rural and regional areas have lower rates of attendance in the non-compulsory 11 years of schooling.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2003, women had high representation in the study of non-school qualification. Women comprised 59% of Graduate Diploma/ Graduate Certificate students, 56% of the Advanced Diploma/Diploma and Bachelor Degree students and 51% of the post graduate students' (Ibid 2004).

15.4.5 Family and Marriage

In the post World War II period different varieties of nuclear families have emerged in Australia. The Office of the Status of Women in Australia states that "in recent decades, the trends of late marriage, high rate of divorce and re-marriage and single living have contributed to increasing numbers of one parent, step and blended families". Again the trends of delayed child rearing, increased childlessness and greater longevity have contributed to an increase in the number of couple only families. Though there is a decline from 85% in 1993, to 83% in 2003, couple families form the most common type of family in Australia.

The corresponding significant aspects of Australian family structure are marriage and divorce. Marriage is declining in Australia. The marriage rates for 1000 males and females in 1982 were 55 and 53; in 2002 these rates declined to 35 and 32 respectively. There has been a decline in the significance of rituals and ceremonies in marriages. In 1982, 39% marriages were performed by a civil celebrant; in 2002 it has increased to 55%. There has also been a phenomenal increase in divorce in Australia. In 2001 as many as 55,300 divorces were granted which was the highest in last 20 years. Indeed the social fabric of Australia is undergoing a rapid change affecting the status of women in this society in diverse ways.

15.5 WOMEN IN EMPLOYMENT

Women's employment has been fundamental to the Australian society across time and place, even though this has not always been acknowledged. The legacy of feminist and labour historians

over the last two to three decades has been to demonstrate unequivocally that women's labour, both paid and unpaid, has contributed immeasurably to the national economy and to Australian social and cultural life.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Australia, there has existed a sector of small-scale production parallel with the large-scale, commanding economy. This has been variously described as 'under-the counter, informal, home-based or family production'. It is within this 'hidden' economy, where the home is a locus of economic production, that women's labour can be found. In the nineteenth century, 'many married women, even when a male provider was present, engaged in extensive earning activities in their homes in order to extend their productive capacities alongside their reproductive responsibilities'. This work has seldom been acknowledged as productive labour in the work of economic historians. But feminist historians increasingly stress the value of women's contribution in the 'hidden' economy.

Women frequently turned their houses into work places. One example among many was the practice of taking in lodgers, or turning homes into boarding houses. For many other women, their home was also the corner shop, or local hotel. While a small number of women were independent entrepreneurs, many more worked alongside their husbands in inns, hotels, shops or workshops, some effectively running businesses while their husbands worked elsewhere.

From the late nineteenth century, women increasingly participated in paid employment in the public sphere. Opportunities for women to enter the 'professions', such as teaching, nursing, science, architecture, medicine and pharmacy, increased at this time, especially as women began to be admitted (in small numbers) into universities and other forms of tertiary education. Women went into medical services, architecture, pilots, and teaching and nursing. While upper-lower and middle-class women were moving into nursing, teaching and other professional areas, working-class women were taking up employment in factories, shops and the service industries in unprecedented numbers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In the late nineteenth century, struggles over women's access to paid employment were integrally associated with the campaign to win women the vote. On the one hand, it was argued that the granting of the vote was a recognition of the value of women's labour to colonial society. On the other hand, the demand for the vote was reflective of the gradually changing role of women in public life. This changing role included increased access to and participation in paid work outside the home.

From the post-World War II period women's work participation has been steadily increasing in Australia. In 1954 women's work participation was only 29%. In mid 1950s it increased to 41% and in 2002 it was 44%. The office of the Status of Women in Australia underlines the following reasons that favourably affect women's work participation:

- Increasing school retention rates for girls and their participation in post school education and training.
- Changes in the nature of work in Australia, which include growth in female dominated industries and occupations, and a greater availability of part time and other flexible working environments.
- Availability of childcare services.
- Introduction of anti-discrimination and equal remuneration legislation.
- Changing societal values regarding women's role" (OSW 2004:52).

Let us examine the form, nature and extent of women's work participation in Australia.

15.5.1 Forms of Contract (Full, Part- and Over-Time Workers)

The Labour force in Australia includes all the able bodied persons aged 14-64 years. They may either be employed, unemployed or job seekers. They may also be full time workers. The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines full time workers as persons who usually work 35 hours or more per week in all jobs. Part-time workers are those who usually work less than 35 hours per week. In 2002, as high as 66% of Australian women were in the labour force, of which around 45% were fully employed and 39% were employed part time. For males, 66% were full time and 11% were part time workers.

There are several reasons like household and childcare responsibilities and other economic and personal reasons for women opting for part-time work in Australia. About 18% of women as against 1% of men mention childcare as reasons for opting for part time work. OSW (2004) has identified the following trends to female employment in Australia

- Women with an employed partner were more likely to be employed.
- Women were more likely to be employed as the child grew older.
- Formal and informal childcare facilities affect women's work participation.
- Employers and work places increasingly acknowledge the need to balance work and family responsibilities. Therefore, provisions like flexible working hours, permanent and part-time work, home-based work, job sharing etc. have been made which encourage women's work participation.

Besides part-time and the full-time employees, there are employees who are entitled to neither paid sick leave nor paid holiday leave and identified as casual (ABS 2001). Women take recourse to casual employment in Australia due to child care responsibilities, and non-availability of suitable alternatives. However, due to the nature of the given contract they are deprived of several benefits in spite of having worked in the same job for a long period of time. Statistics show that 14% of the casual workers are in the same jobs for last five years and 75% for more than one year. The intensity of casual employment is growing in Australia and it accounts for 20% of all employment. What is significant in this context is that majority of casual employees in Australia are women, who are deprived of paid sick or holiday leave notwithstanding the long association with the employer given employment.(OSW 2004).

A large section of women workers in Australia are engaged in unpaid over time jobs. Around 44% of full time women employees working as secretaries, personal assistants, book keepers and travel attendants work over time without getting paid. While more men work over time than female workers, more men are paid for the over time work than their female counter parts. (Ibid 2004).

15.5.2 Industrial Categories

Women workers in Australia are concentrated in specific kinds of jobs. According to the OSW report in 2002 their work participation by various categories is as follows:

A)	Clerical, Sales and Service (Including Advanced, Intermediary and Elementary Levels of these occupation)	51%
B)	Professional	22%
C)	Others	27%

It is important that while women predominate in the health and community services (77%), in education (69%) and in clerical sales and service (89%), they represent only 10% of the trade persons and related activities. They also form only 24% of the managers and the administrators.

15.5.3 Women in Economic Decision Making Positions

In Australia there is a gender gap so far as women's representation in the economic decision making bodies is concerned. According to Census of 2003, only 8.4% of the board seats of the big companies are held by women. 52.7 per cent of the companies have only one women board director, 49.1% of the Australian companies have no female executive manager at all. Only five of the 200 Australian companies had women CEOs in 2003. The Census report also reveals that 4% of all employed women were at the level of managers and administrators in 2003 while for males it was more than 9%. Again women comprise only 25% of managers and administrators. Female managers earn 80% of male managers salary across all industries.

The gender based occupational segregation is also widely prevalent in Australian Public Services. Women form 53% of all permanent employees in the Australian Public Services and occupy only 30% of the senior executive positions. There, however, has been a steady increase in the women's representation in the executive position in the last decade. (Ibid).

Table 1: Managers and Administrators by Gender in Australia 2003

	Units	Women	Men	Female Proportion %
Total managers and administrators	'000	156.6	479.8	24.6
Generalist managers	'000	18.9	113.0	14.3
Generalist managers and administrators	'000	11.4	38.0	23.1
Specialist managers	'000	91.7	247.6	27.0
Resource managers	'000	20.3	37.3	35.2
Engineering, distribution and process managers	'000	11.2	88.1	11.3
Sales and marketing managers	'000	27.6	79.0	25.9
Miscellaneous specialist managers	'000	32.7	43.2	43.1
Policy and planning managers	'000	6.8	6.5	51.1
Health service managers	'000	5.0	3.1	61.7
Education managers	'000	6.7	10.9	38.1
Child care coordinators	'000	5.7	0.6	90.5
Media producers and artistic directors	'000	2.8	5.2	35.0
Farmers and farm managers	'000	46.1	119.2	27.9
Managers and administrators as a proportion of total employed	%	3.7	9.3	..

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Survey May 2003, cf. Women in Australia. 2004

15.5.4 Earnings and Gender Differentials

In the post-war period white collar occupations, especially that of teachers was most active in challenging the male breadwinner principle. The Teachers' Federation of New South Wales demanded equal pay for equal work. As a result of the Teachers' Federation campaign, the New South Wales Industrial Arbitration Act was amended with the addition of Section 88D, 'Equal Pay under Certain Circumstances'.

While the amendment had been introduced in New South Wales in 1959, it was another eight years before other states followed. At the federal level, the campaign for legislative change to enshrine the principle of equal pay took place in the late 1960s. A number of women's organisations were active in this campaign, including the Australian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Australian National Council of Women, Australian Federation of Women Voters and the Union of Australian Women. This campaign resulted in the Arbitration Commission's 1969 equal pay decision. But rather than constitute universal equal pay for women, the reality was that few women benefited from the decision.

Even today, women in Australia earn substantially less than the men. Women's earnings, received as salary and wages is only 84% of the earnings of their male counterparts. Again the gross weekly earning of women is lower than that of the gross weekly earning of men of all age groups. This points towards a gender based wage discrimination as is also reflected in the salary of graduates. In 2003 the median starting salary for male graduates was \$38,000 and for female graduates it was \$36,000 (Ibid 2004).

15.6 CRIME AND VIOLENCE

A number of factors have been associated with fear of crime in Australia and elsewhere. The factor most consistently and strongly associated with fear of crime is gender. Almost everywhere, women in general tend to be more fearful of crime than are men. Australia is no exception. Women are more fearful of being alone in their own homes, and of walking in their neighbourhood at night, than are men. Recent research confirms that women report significantly greater perceived risk and fear of crime than men, regardless of how fear of crime is measured.

This reflects lived experiences. Women's experience with harassment and violence contributes to fear of crime and reflects their perceived risk of abuse by spouses or family members, as much as by strangers.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003, women have been the victims of several kinds of crime in Australian society. Women accounted for 81% of sexual assault, 62% of kidnapping/abduction and robbery, 28% of blackmail/extortion, 29% of homicide and 32% of crimes. Based on 'Women's Safety Survey 1996, it is reported that around 6% of Australian woman aged 18 years above have experienced physical violence or sexual assault by male during the previous year. 30% of woman of the same age group have experienced similar type of violence in the previous 20 years. Significantly the victims knew 85% of the perpetrators. Studies by Watson and Lee 2003 have highlighted the detrimental effect of this violence on women. These abused women had experienced:

- Worse general physical and mental health.
- higher rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideation.
- higher rates of problematic or disordered eating.

- higher rate of smoking and heavy alcohol use.
- higher rates of sleeping (cf. Women in Australia 2004).

15.7 WOMEN IN POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

15.7.1 Patterns of Political Participation

Though Australia was the first country in the world where most women got the right both to vote in 1902 and to stand for the national parliament, they did not succeed in entering the federal Parliament until four decades later. Entry into the higher reaches of government took even longer.

The Australian women's struggle for political participation has a long history. The early part of the twentieth century witnessed a growth in women's organisations lobbying for improved status of women generally, and specifically for work related issues, including equal pay. Many women's organisations involved in action around work-related issues remained independent of political parties. These included the Women's Service Guilds (WSG), the Feminist Club of Sydney, and later the United Associations of Women and the Australian Federation of Women Voters.

Through this struggle they achieved the right to vote at different stages. Women in South Australia had already voted for the election of delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1897, some of them for Catherine Helen Spence, Australia's first woman political candidate. In both South Australia and Western Australia, women voted in the referenda on federation. The other states lagged behind in terms of women's political rights, but the granting of these rights at the federal level had a galvanising effect (AuStat 2001). In 1902 the new Commonwealth parliament granted the right to vote in federal elections, and the right to stand for election to parliament, to male and female British subjects 21 years and older.

Australia was the first nation to grant both these rights to women nationally. A good number of Australian women contested for the new federal parliament in the 1903 election. While none of the women candidates for the federal parliament were successful in 1903, or indeed for another 40 years, the fact that Australian women were exercising their political rights, was an inspiration to women campaigning for the suffrage elsewhere (Women in Australia 2001).

Since the beginning of the early 20th century, several efforts were made to promote this positive image of women's suffrage in Australia. A handful of women were elected to State parliaments before the Second World War, but the major parties remained resistant to the idea of women candidates in anything but seats in the parliament. When the first woman Edith Cowan was elected to the Western Australia parliament in 1921, the newspaper Age editorial was congratulatory but expressed its fears that her example might lead other women to stand for parliament, meaning neglected homes sacrificed on the altar of political ambition (Women in Australia 2001).

During her term in parliament, Cowan succeeded in improving the plight of women in the parliament, having several playgrounds established in Perth and baby health centres elsewhere, making some progress on juvenile justice issues and in introducing two bills in the parliament related to women. The first was the Administration Act Amendment Act 1922, which dealt with the inheritance rights of mothers. The second bill was on the Women's Legal Status Act 1923. This bill has 'prevented anyone being disqualified by sex or marriage from exercising any public function, from holding any civil or judicial office or practicing any other profession'.

It was not until 1943 that the first women were elected to the Australian federal parliament. The time lag between the right to stand and parliamentary representation by women, forty-one years later, was the longest in any western country.

Since the 1970s, women have been increasing their representation in Australian parliaments. This representation is still small and disproportionate to the number of women in the national electorate. During the 1990s various proposals to impose more equitable 'quotas', both within political party structures and parliaments, have been actively promoted in Australia. In Australia the increase in activity around parliamentary representation of women was signalled in 1992 by the formation of the Non-government Women into Politics Coalition (Aus stat 2001).

In the aftermath of Beijing Plus Action Plan, several initiatives have been taken to increase women's participation in the political process. The focus on the issue of representation led to an acceleration of women's representation in Australian parliaments. Major political parties now started fielding women candidates in the winnable seats. The proportion of women in the different State/Territory Legislatures however varies considerably. In 2000, the Australian Capital Territory had the lowest proportion of women, with women forming only 12% of members of the Legislative Assembly. The highest representation was in South Australia and Tasmania with 27.8% each. For detail see Table below.

Table 2: Gender Overview of Australians in Politics: 30 August 2000

	Females no.	Males no.	Females %
Commonwealth Parliament			
House of Representatives	34	114	23.0
Senate	22	54	28.9
Total	56	168	25.0
State/Territory Parliaments			
New South Wales	27	108	20.0
Victoria	34	98	25.8
Queensland	17	72	19.1
Western Australia	20	71	22.0
South Australia	19	50	27.5
Tasmania	11	29	27.5
Australian Capital Territory	2	15	11.8
Northern Territory	4	21	16.0
Total	134	464	22.4
Local government	1,511	5,960	25.3
ATSIC Regional Councils	116	271	30.0

Source: Parliamentary Library; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) (op.cited.OWS 2004, Aus Stat 2001)

Australia occupies 22nd position in the world so far as women's representation in the parliament is concerned. There, however, is a gap between women's representation in the House of Representatives with 23% and the Senate with 29% women's representation. Even though women's representation is increasing, there is no Indigenous woman in Australian Parliament as yet.

At the federal level, in 2000 women formed 6% of Cabinet and 13% of the ministry. In addition women constituted out of 12 Parliamentary Secretaries. The general pattern of women's

representation in the parliament by the various states and territory governments in Australia is shown below:

Table 3: State and Territory Governments, Number and Percentage of Women in Cabinet - September 2000

State/Territory Parliaments	Male no.	Female no.	Females %
New South Wales	17	3	15
Victoria	10	8	44
Queensland	14	4	22
Western Australia	16	2	11
South Australia	12	3	20
Tasmania	7	3	30
Australian Capital Territory	4	1	20
Northern Territory	9	1	10

Source: Parliamentary Library op. Cited. Women in Australia, AusStat, 2004

However, inspite of such increase, there are gender based disparities in women's representation. In 2001, women represented 27% of the elected Local Government Members and 18% of Local Councils had a female mayor. In 2003, 29% of Parliamentarian of Australia was a woman. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council women have a higher representation than the Australian main land. In this Council women constituted 42% of the members in 2003 (Australian Election Commission, cf. Women in Australia 2004).

15.7.2 Women in Local Government

In the wake of new wave of women's movement since early 1970s, women's representation in local government began rising from 1% in 1960 to just over 6% in 1980, 13% in 1986, and over 25% in 2000. Women's representation however continued to lag behind in rural areas. Concern over continuing under-representation of women led to renewed campaigns supported by the Federal and State Governments in the 1990s. Unlike in other countries, the functions of local government in Australia remained for most of the twentieth century restricted largely to "roads, rates and rubbish". Local government was not involved in the provision of education, health and welfare, the areas, which attracted women into local government in other countries. Another barrier to women's participation in local government was the existence of property qualifications that restricted both the franchise and eligibility for local government election, disqualifying more women than men, even though formal sex barriers had been removed.

The tables given below show women's political participation in Australia.

Table 4: Women's Political Rights in Australia

States	Right to Vote	Right to Sit	First Woman elected
South Australia	1895	1895	1959
Western Australia	1899	1920	1921
New South Wales	1902	1918	1925
Tasmania	1903	1921	1948
Queensland	1905	1918	1929
Victoria	1908	1923	1933

Source: Parliamentary Library op. Cited. Women in Australia, AusStat, 2004

Table 5: Women as Local Councilors August 2000

	Females no.	Total no.	Females %	1994 %	1980 %
New South Wales	449	1,752	25.6	20.2	7.8
Victoria	157	594	26.4	20.0	6.9
Queensland	328	1,160	28.3	21.2	3.7
Western Australia	308	1,409	21.9	19.6	4.3
South Australia	208	760	27.4	21.6	6.8
Tasmania	61	285	21.4	16.4	5.8
Australia	1,511	5,960	25.3	20.5	6.2

Source: Parliamentary Library op. Cited. Women in Australia, AusStat, 2004

15.7.3 Women in Political Leadership

At the federal level, Dame Margaret Guilfoyle had become the first woman to be a Cabinet Minister for Social Security (1975-88) in Australia. In her role as Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women in Australia, she introduced the Commonwealth's Sex Discrimination Act 1984.

The first woman to attend a Premiers' Conference as head of government was Rosemary Follett; Carmen Lawrence became Premier of Western Australia (1990-93) and Joan Kirner Premier of Victoria (1990-92). In 1995 Kate Carnell defeated Rosemary Follett to become the first Liberal woman to head an Australian government, a position she held until October 2000.

15.8 CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S ISSUES AND STATE RESPONSE

Australia has a long history of women's movement, which has articulated women's issues for concerted collective action. It is now widely recognised that in the process of internationalisation of women's issues and sustained mobilisation of women, women's movement has entered into a second phase in Australia popularly known as the second wave of feminism whereby women's groups have been more strategically organised than ever before, have been following militant tactics, and increased their awareness about the international traditions of women's movements. The new wave of feminists now highlight the issue of sexism in trade union and in political party, in the persuasion of equal pay, in the family and other organisational forms. They have articulated 'critiques of domestic and family life, where earlier feminists saw fit to accept publicly, the norm

of nuclear family. The contrast can be summed up in the second wave-slogan 'the personal is political' and that there is a need of the political treatment of sexual relations, housework and child care. However, there are variations in opinions among the second wave feminists as well. Many do not see the institution of family being inherently exploitative, and do not agree that it should be removed to make women equal in society (Sawer, M & Simms, M. 1984).

Women's movements are conspicuously marked by the emergence of women's consciousness raising groups, frequent marches, demonstrations, conferences and well organised campaigns and phenomenal media coverage of these events. Several organisations have emerged along with the prevailing trade unions like Women's Action Committee, Women's Electoral Lobby, National Women's Aid Federation, National Abortion Campaign, Federation of Women Voters, and Council of Action for Equal Pay and so on.

Feminist activists now have emerged in all areas of activities- in professions, media, teaching etc. The issues of peace, environment, lesbianism and sexuality, women's rights for equal pay, equal opportunities for employment and education, parental leave and childcare, the abolition of gender role stereotyping in socialisation of children, free and available contraception and abortion, sexual self-determination, rape, domestic violence, more political participation etc. have emerged to be the core issues in women's movements in Australia cutting across the boundaries of radical and socialist feminist groups in Australia. Along with sustained mobilisation women in Australia have emerged as a viable political force to change the social, economic and political agenda of the country.

The Government of Australia has taken several initiatives to improve the status of women in the Australian society. The Beijing Plus Action plan is a very recent one. Let us present an overview of this plan below:

Australia's Beijing Plus Action Plan

In 2000, the National Office for Women in Australia has initiated a comprehensive implementation strategy, which focused on working closely with government departments.

a) Indigenous Women

The Australian Government supports a wide range of measures to improve opportunities for indigenous women and to reduce violence in their lives. A new national indigenous Women's Advisory Group was established to further enhance the Government's work with Indigenous women.

b) Domestic Violence

Eliminating violence from the lives of women and girls is a major priority for the Australian Government. The initiative aimed to test new approaches to preventing domestic violence. Some recent innovative projects include: finding safe way to reduce women and children's homelessness; raising young people's awareness of healthy relationships; trialing models of integrated work between crisis and housing services and the justice system; and grants to indigenous organisations to help them find innovative ways to tackle family violence in their communities. There have also been initiatives for engaging young people and elders to find culturally appropriate alternatives to using violence and restoring self- worth and for building community capacity (through awareness raising and training) for indigenous leaders to take the lead against family violence.

c) **Sexual Assault and Trafficking**

To tackle sexual assault, the Australian Government, in 2001, established the National Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault.

To prevent trafficking at the Federal level, legislations address various aspects of trafficking including: slavery, sexual servitude and organised people smuggling; child sex tourism; organised crime. Australia continues to provide wide-ranging support to other countries, which are working on eradicating violence against women and girls. Australia is working with partner governments and NGOs in developing countries to find ways to change attitudes towards violence against women and children.

d) **Communication Technologies**

Women's access and participation in the media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) is priority for Australia. Australia also supports a suite of information resources for women. Australia's First Women's Portal provides a single point entry to access online government information research, services and resources that are relevant to women- an online facility for accessing data and research for and about women, across variety of issues of importance to women (<http://ofw.faces.gov.au>).

15.9 SUMMARY

Every society has its own cultural apparatus for determining the status of its members in society. Early human societies were more or less egalitarian in their approach in recognising the position of women in society. As society progressed, several discriminatory cultural apparatus emerged to describe the natural differentiation between men and women as natural endowment for gender segregation and social hierarchy. It is at times pointed out that women have been the victims of universal gender hierarchy, and the cultural, economic, social and political practices and institutions of the society are strengthening this hierarchy.

Notwithstanding the higher levels of economic development and technological progress, women in Australia lag behind their male counterparts in several critical areas of life-economic, political, social and cultural. However, it can be stated that Australia has a long history of women's movement and has been able to achieve much in terms of legislations and practices. With the rise of the second wave of feminism in Australia, they have emerged to be organised as a potential social and political force for the actualisation of their potential in the Australian society.

15.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Highlight the position of women in society in a comparative perspective.
- 2) Explain the demographic status of women in Australia.
- 3) Describe women's work participation in Australia.
- 4) What are the emerging facets of crime and violence in Australia?
- 5) Illustrate the form and extent of women's political participation in Australia.
- 6) Discuss the response of the state on contemporary women's issues.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Edna Ryan & Anne Conlon, *Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work 1788-1974* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1975).

Raelene Frances, 'Shifting barriers: *Twentieth Century Women's Labour Patterns*', in Kay Saunders & Raymond Evans (eds.), *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation* (Sydney: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

Kirsten Lees, *Votes for Women - The Australian Story*, Allen and Unwin 1995.

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