

# UNIFORM FEDERAL FRANCHISE IN AUSTRALIA

12 June 2002 marked 100 years since Australia became the first country in the world in which most women were granted the right to vote and stand for parliament in federal elections. Australia, however, was beaten for the honour of being the first nation in which women voted by New Zealand in 1893.

Although New Zealand and Australia led the world in affording federal franchise for women, the early campaign for women's rights was not confined to those countries. The term 'suffrage' - or more accurately, 'women's suffrage' - generally refers to the mobilisation of the women's political rights movement in America, England, Australia and New Zealand between the 1880s and 1920s, but the first wave of feminism created a much wider legal and political identity for women.

Thanks to the work of many courageous women, social emancipation and women's rights had been an increasingly prominent issue for some time. In Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she stated the 'main argument' of the work, "built on this simple principle that, if woman be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge, for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence or general practice".<sup>1</sup>

Following Australia, the next country to afford both the right to vote and stand for Parliament in federal elections was Finland in 1906. By 1919, 19 women were elected to the Finnish national parliament, the Eduskanta.<sup>2</sup> While Australia was a leader in affording women these rights, Australian women had the longest wait - 41 years - between eligibility to stand for national legislature and election to it of any western democratic country.

Although Australian women had to endure this wait, from the very beginning they demonstrated they were determined to enter Federal Parliament. The first occasion women were nominated within the then British Empire was in 1903 when three women were nominated for the Senate and one was nominated for the House of Representatives.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that while the Centenary of Women's Suffrage celebrates 100 years since non-Indigenous women could vote and stand for election in both houses of Federal Parliament, the vast majority of Indigenous Australians were excluded from such elections for some time.

Section 4 of the *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* states "No aboriginal native of Australia Asia Africa [sic] or the Islands of the Pacific except New Zealand shall be entitled to have his named place on the Electoral Roll unless so entitled under section forty-one of the Constitution".

This meant, in theory, that Indigenous Australians who were eligible to vote in state elections were permitted to vote, however it reinforced that Indigenous peoples in Queensland and Western Australia were excluded from any such voting rights. Although not precluded, Indigenous Australians remained under-represented in elections in the other states.

<sup>1</sup> The three Senate candidates were Vida Goldstein, Nellie Martel and Mary Ann Moore Bentley.

# Focus on Women

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## Key issues affecting women



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Despite continuing commitment to the 'White Australia' policy, in 1925 an amendment to this Act extended the right to vote in Commonwealth elections to all naturalised Australians regardless of their race. Granting voting rights to people from India, which at the time was also part of the British Empire, was particularly contentious.<sup>3</sup>

In 1949 another amendment permitted Aboriginal people who had served in the war to vote; however, the right to vote in Commonwealth elections was not formally extended to Indigenous Australians until 1962 when the *Commonwealth Electoral Act* was amended. This year, then, marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indigenous Australians' access to Federal uniform franchise. However, it was not until 1967 that changes to the Constitution brought Indigenous Australians under Commonwealth jurisdiction, empowering the Commonwealth to override discriminatory State legislation and to enact special programs for Indigenous Australians. The 1967 referendum also amended the Constitution to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in official populations counts. Voting was made compulsory for Aboriginal electors in 1983.

The *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1973* reduced the qualifying age for voters from 21 to 18 years, amending the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1902*.<sup>4</sup>

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"If you want anything said, ask a man.  
If you want anything done, ask a woman." -  
English Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher<sup>5</sup>

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Since the 1970s, representation of women in Australia's Parliament has steadily increased. During the 1990s the concept of quotas was floated for both political parties and government as a whole, however representation is still disproportionate considering the number of women that constitute society and the national electorate.

## Before Federation

Women first achieved the right to vote and to stand for Parliament in South Australia in 1894 and the right to vote in Western Australia in 1899. Suffrage societies throughout Australia saw Federation as an ideal opportunity to have female suffrage written into the Constitution, and despite the fact universal suffrage was debated at the Constitutional Conventions this move was defeated - although women ensured men who were in favour of this move were elected to the first Commonwealth Parliament.

There was still opposition to the extension of the franchise to women when the Commonwealth Franchise Bill was debated in 1902. The Bill was debated in the Senate from 9 to 11 April 1902 and passed its second reading without division, and was introduced into the House of Representatives by the Minister for Home Affairs, Sir William Lyne, on 23 April the same year. It passed the House of Representatives the next day. It was considered again by the Senate on 29 May and the House of Representatives on 30 May. The Act received Royal Assent, through the signature of the Governor-General, on 12 June 1902.

## AUSTRALIAN WOMEN' AND THE RIGHT TO VOTE IN STATE ELECTIONS

	Voting rights	Right to stand for Parliament
South Australia	1894	1894
Western Australia	1899	1920
New South Wales	1902	1918
Tasmania	1903	1921
Queensland	1905	1915
Victoria	1908	1923

Source: Australian Electoral Commission<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Australian women who were British subjects, 21 years and older.

## Electoral milestones for women in Australia's Federal Parliament

- 1902 The *Commonwealth Franchise Act* passed, enabling all women (with the exception of Aboriginal women in some States) to sit and vote in elections for the Federal Parliament.
- 1903 Four women are candidates for the federal election - Nellie Martel, Mary Ann Moore Bentley and Vida Goldstein for the Senate, and Selina Siggins for the House of Representatives.
- 1943 Dame Enid Lyons (United Australia Party), in House of Representatives, and Sen. Dorothy Tangney (Australian Labor Party), are elected.
- 1947 Sen. Annabelle Rankin (Liberal Party) becomes Opposition Whip in the Senate.
- 1949 Dame Enid Lyons is the first woman to hold cabinet rank when she becomes Vice-President of the Executive Council in the Liberal-Country Party coalition ministry of Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies.
- 1951 Sen. Annabelle Rankin becomes Government Whip.
- 1962 Aboriginal (women) given vote - enrolling optional, voting compulsory if enrolled.
- 1966 Sen. Annabelle Rankin becomes Minister for Housing, and thus the first woman to administer a government department.
- 1968 Sen. Ivy Wedgewood, Liberal Party, becomes the first woman to chair a Senate committee, the Select Committee on Medical and Hospital Costs.
- 1970 Sen. Ivy Wedgewood chairs one of the first of the Senate's new Legislative and General Purpose Standing Committees, the Health and Welfare Committee. The report concerned an inquiry into handicapped persons in Australia.
- 1973 Federal vote lowered to 18. Elizabeth Reid, first adviser appointed to Prime Minister on matters relating to women.
- 1975 Sen. Margaret Guilfoyle, Liberal Party, becomes the first woman senator to be a member of the cabinet and to administer a government department.
- 1975 Sen. Kathy Martin is appointed Assistant Opposition Whip in the Senate, and later the same year Assistant Government Whip.
- 1983 Sen. Susan Ryan is the first Labor woman Federal minister. As the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, Senator Ryan introduced the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*.
- 1984 Aboriginal voting and enrolling compulsory.
- 1986 Mrs Joan Child, MP, Australian Labor Party, becomes the first woman to be Speaker of the House of Representatives. Sen. Janine Haines becomes the first woman to lead an Australian political party, the Australian Democrats.
- 1987 Sen. Margaret Reid and Sen. Susan Knowles representing the Liberal Party become Opposition Whip and Deputy Opposition Whip respectively.
- 1990 Sen. Janet Powell becomes the second woman to lead the Australian Democrats, and the first woman member of either House to have a private bill passed by both Houses, the *Smoking and Tobacco Products Advertisements (Prohibition) Act 1989*. Carolyn Jakobsen, MP, is elected chair of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party (Caucus), the first woman to hold this position, and Elaine Darling, MP, and Mary Crawford, MP, are elected Vice-chair and Secretary respectively.
- 1993 Sen. Cheryl Kernot becomes the third woman to lead an Australian political party, the Australian Democrats.
- 1996 Sen. Margaret Reid becomes the first woman president of the Senate.
- 1996 13 women elected to the Senate.
- 1998 33 women elected to House of Representatives.  
10 women elected to Senate (total 22).
- 2001 Sen. Natasha Stott Despoja, elected as leader of the Australian Democrats at age 32, becomes the youngest person of any party to hold such a position. 39 women elected to House of Representatives, 16 women elected to Senate (total 55 women elected to Parliament).
- 2002 Ms Jenny Macklin MP elected as Deputy Leader of the Australian Labor Party, becomes the first women to hold such a position in either of the two major political parties (ALP or Liberal/National Coalition).

Source: Australian Electoral Commission<sup>7</sup>

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## Australia in the world context

Australia is currently ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in the world according to representation by women. Women make up 38 of the 150 seats (25.3 per cent) of our lower house and 22 of the 76 seats (28.9 per cent) of the upper house. No country has achieved 50 per cent representation but numbers are rising each year with Sweden at 42.9 per cent.

Of the 190 heads of government, only 11 are women. They are:

- Madior Boye, Prime Minister of Senegal
- Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand
- Tarja Halonen, President of Finland
- Chandrika Kumaratunga, President of Sri Lanka
- Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, President of the Philippines
- Mary McAleese, President of Ireland
- Mireya Moscoso, President of Panama
- Jennifer Smith, President of Bermuda
- Megawati Sukarnoputri, President of Indonesia
- Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia
- Khaleda Zia, Prime Minister of Bangladesh

Source: International Women's Democracy Center<sup>8</sup>

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*"Women have not been socialised to see themselves as leaders, you think about the major fairytales and stories and myths and legends that young girls grow up with, in the United States it's Cinderella... she's waiting for her prince to come and rescue her. He's the hero, he's the leader and she's sitting at home talking to the mice so it's there's not a sense that she can be a leader... she should be a leader. So the young girl doesn't grow up seeing that." - Laura Liswood, Secretary General of the Council of Women World Leaders<sup>9</sup>*

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## International Women's Day

International Women's Day (IWD) is regarded by many as the story of ordinary women as makers of history; and it is rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women to participate with equality in society. In ancient Greece, Lysistrata initiated a sexual strike against men in order to end war; during the French Revolution, Parisian women calling for 'liberty, equality, fraternity' marched on Versailles to demand women's suffrage.<sup>10</sup>

8 March - IWD - is celebrated in many countries as a national holiday. It's when women, often divided by national boundaries and by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political differences, come together to look back to a tradition that represents a rich history of struggle for equality, justice, peace and development.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of an IWD first arose at the turn of the century, which in the industrialised world was a period of expansion and turbulence, booming population growth and radical ideologies.<sup>12</sup>

IWD inherited a tradition of protest and political activism. In the years before 1910, from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, women in industrially developing countries were entering paid work in some numbers. Their jobs were sex segregated, mainly in textiles, manufacturing and domestic services where conditions were wretched and wages worse than depressed. Trade unions were developing and industrial disputes broke out, including among sections of non-unionised women workers.<sup>13</sup>

In Continental Europe, some socialists saw the demand for the women's vote as being unnecessarily divisive in the working class movement, while others such as German Clara Zetkin and Russian Alexandra Kollontai successfully fought for it to be accepted as a necessary part of a socialist program. Other socialists argued that it was more important to do away with property rights in respect to the vote than it was to campaign for the women's vote which, if successful in England, would by implication mean votes for women of property.<sup>14</sup>

There were other divisions within the English women's suffrage movement about the way the movement was autocratically run from the top and about the sort of radical tactics adopted. Sylvia Pankhurst split with her more famous mother and sister over such issues, arguing that the main emphasis should be on connecting with and involving the mass of women, which meant also taking up the concerns of the sorely exploited working class women. She also argued the 'suffragette' movement should link itself with all other oppressed groups.<sup>15</sup>

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*"Parliaments have stopped laughing at woman suffrage, and politicians have begun to dodge! It is the inevitable premonition of coming victory." - Carrie Chapman Catt, International Woman Suffrage Association, 1913<sup>16</sup>*

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The first IWD was held on March 19, 1911 in Germany, Austria, Denmark and some other European countries. This date was chosen by German women because, on that date in 1848, the Prussian king, faced with an armed uprising, had promised many reforms, including an unfulfilled one of votes for women. A million leaflets calling for action on the right to vote were distributed throughout Germany before IWD in 1911. <sup>17</sup>

Russian revolutionary and feminist, Alexandra Kollontai, in Germany at the time, helped to organise the day:

“Germany and Austria... was one seething trembling sea of women. Meetings were organised everywhere... in the small towns and even in the villages, halls were packed so full that they had to ask [male] workers to give up their places for the women.

Men stayed home with their children for a change and their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings. During the largest street demonstrations, in which 30,000 were taking part, the police decided to remove the demonstrators’ banners: the women workers made a stand. In the scuffle that followed, bloodshed was averted only with the help of the socialist deputies in Parliament.”  
- Alexandra Kollontai <sup>18</sup>

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“But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in... I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all - it is very tiresome.” - Jane Austen’s Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, 1817<sup>19</sup>

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## The role of the United Nations

Few causes promoted by the United Nations have generated more intense and widespread support than the campaign to promote and protect the equal rights of women. The Charter of the United Nations, signed in San Francisco in 1945, was the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right. <sup>20</sup>

Today a central organising principle of the work of the United Nations is that no enduring solution to society’s most threatening social, economic and political problems can be found without the full participation, and the full empowerment, of the world’s women. <sup>21</sup>

## A world chronology of the recognition of women’s right to vote and stand for election

Unless otherwise indicated, the date signifies the year women were granted the right both to vote and to stand for election. The countries listed below currently have a parliament or have had one at some point in their history.

- 1788 United States of America (to stand for election)
- 1893 New Zealand (to vote)
- 1902 Australia<sup>i</sup>
- 1906 Finland
- 1907 Norway (to stand for election)<sup>i</sup>
- 1913 Norway<sup>ii</sup>
- 1915 Denmark, Iceland
- 1917 Canada (to vote)<sup>i</sup>, Netherlands (to stand for election)
- 1918 Austria, Canada (to vote)<sup>i</sup>, Estonia, Georgia<sup>iii</sup>, Germany, Hungary, Ireland<sup>i</sup>, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russian Federation, United Kingdom<sup>i</sup>
- 1919 Belarus, Belgium (to vote)<sup>i</sup>, Luxembourg, Netherlands (to vote), New Zealand (to stand for election), Sweden<sup>i</sup>, Ukraine
- 1920 Albania, Canada (to stand for election)<sup>i</sup>, Czech Republic, Slovakia, United States of America (to vote)
- 1921 Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belgium (to stand for election)<sup>i</sup>, Georgia<sup>iii</sup>, Sweden<sup>ii</sup>
- 1924 Kazakhstan<sup>iii</sup>, Mongolia, Saint Lucia, Tajikistan
- 1927 Turkmenistan
- 1928 Ireland<sup>ii</sup>, United Kingdom<sup>ii</sup>
- 1929 Ecuador<sup>i</sup>, Romania<sup>i</sup>
- 1930 South Africa (whites), Turkey (to vote)
- 1931 Chile<sup>i</sup>, Portugal<sup>i</sup>, Spain, Sri Lanka
- 1932 Maldives, Thailand, Uruguay
- 1934 Brazil, Cuba, Portugal<sup>i</sup>, Turkey (to stand for election)
- 1935 Myanmar (to vote)
- 1937 Philippines
- 1938 Bolivia<sup>i</sup>, Uzbekistan
- 1939 El Salvador (to vote)
- 1941 Panama<sup>i</sup>
- 1942 Dominican Republic

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|------|---|------|--|
| 1944 | Bulgaria, France, Jamaica   | 1967 | Democratic Republic of the Congo (to vote), Ecuador <sup>i</sup> , Kiribati, Tuvalu, Yemen (DPR)   |
| 1945 | Croatia, Guyana (to stand for election), Indonesia, Italy, Japan <sup>iii</sup> , Senegal, Slovenia, Togo   | 1968 | Nauru, Swaziland   |
| 1946 | Cameroon, DPR of Korea, Djibouti (to vote), Guatemala, Liberia, Myanmar (to stand for election), Panama <sup>ii</sup> , Romania <sup>ii</sup> , The FYR of Macedonia, Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela, Vietnam, Yugoslavia | 1970 | Andorra (to vote), Democratic Republic of the Congo (to stand for election), Yemen (Arab Republic) |
| 1947 | Argentina, Japan <sup>iii</sup> , Malta, Mexico (to vote), Pakistan, Singapore  | 1971 | Switzerland  |
| 1948 | Belgium <sup>ii</sup> , Israel, Niger, Republic of Korea, Seychelles, Suriname  | 1972 | Bangladesh   |
| 1949 | Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chile <sup>ii</sup> , China, Costa Rica, Syrian Arab Republic (to vote) <sup>i</sup>  | 1973 | Andorra (to stand for election), Bahrain <sup>v</sup> , San Marino (to stand for election)         |
| 1950 | Barbados, Canada (to vote) <sup>ii</sup> , Haiti, India   | 1974 | Jordan, Solomon Islands  |
| 1951 | Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Nepal, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines  | 1975 | Angola, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, Vanuatu <sup>iii</sup>                      |
| 1952 | Bolivia <sup>ii</sup> , Côte d'Ivoire, Greece, Lebanon  | 1976 | Portugal <sup>ii</sup>   |
| 1953 | Bhutan, Guyana (to vote), Mexico (to stand for election), Syrian Arab Republic <sup>ii</sup>  | 1977 | Guinea Bissau  |
| 1954 | Belize, Colombia, Ghana   | 1978 | Nigeria (North), Republic of Moldova <sup>iii</sup> , Zimbabwe (to stand for election)             |
| 1955 | Cambodia, Eritrea <sup>iv</sup> , Ethiopia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru   | 1979 | Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Fed. States), Palau  |
| 1956 | Benin, Comoros, Egypt, Gabon, Mali, Mauritius, Somalia  | 1980 | Iraq, Vanuatu <sup>iii</sup>   |
| 1957 | Malaysia, Zimbabwe (to vote) <sup>ii</sup>  | 1984 | Liechtenstein, South Africa (Coloureds and Indians)  |
| 1958 | Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Lao PDR, Nigeria (South)  | 1986 | Central African Republic, Djibouti (to stand for election)   |
| 1959 | Madagascar, San Marino (to vote), Tunisia, United Republic of Tanzania  | 1989 | Namibia  |
| 1960 | Canada (to stand for election) <sup>ii</sup> , Cyprus, Gambia, Tonga  | 1990 | Samoa  |
| 1961 | Bahamas <sup>i</sup> , Burundi, El Salvador (to stand for election), Malawi, Mauritania, Paraguay, Rwanda, Sierra Leone   | 1993 | Kazakhstan <sup>iii</sup> , Republic of Moldova <sup>iii</sup>                                     |
| 1962 | Algeria, Australia <sup>ii</sup> , Monaco, Uganda, Zambia   | 1994 | South Africa (Blacks)  |
| 1963 | Afghanistan, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Fiji, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Kenya, Morocco, Papua New Guinea (to stand for election)   |      |  |
| 1964 | Bahamas <sup>ii</sup> , Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Papua New Guinea (to vote), Sudan   |      |  |
| 1965 | Bostwana, Lesotho   |      |  |

i Right subject to conditions or restrictions.

ii Restrictions or conditions lifted.

iii Reference to several dates reflects the stages in the granting of rights. It is not uncommon, in countries previously under colonial rule, for women to have been granted the rights to vote and be elected by the colonial administration and to have had them confirmed at the time of accession to independence. Similarly, it is not uncommon, in countries that were formerly part of a federation and in which women were entitled to vote and be elected under the federal legislation, for women to have had these rights confirmed under the constitution of the newly independent state.

iv In November 1955, Eritrea was part of Ethiopia. The Constitution of sovereign Eritrea adopted on 23 May 1997 stipulates; "all Eritrean citizens, of 18 years of age or more, shall have the right to vote".

v According to the Constitution adopted in Bahrain on 6 December 1973, all citizens are equal before the law, and records shows that the majority of the Constituent Council then interpreted that this provision included voting rights for women. However, women were not able to exercise electoral rights in the only legislative elections which took place in Bahrain in December 1973. There is no parliament in Bahrain to date.

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union <sup>22</sup>

## Women's suffrage internationally

Frustrated for so long in their efforts to become voting citizens of their own countries, woman suffragists came to see themselves as sister citizens of the world. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, international women's organisations were established, allowing women from different nations to form lasting bonds with each other. These organisations, with their national affiliates, continue to exist today as the International Council of Women, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and the International Alliance of Women. To this can be added the United Nations Conference on Women, which in 1995 conducted its fourth convocation of women activists from around the world.<sup>23</sup>

The first of these organisations, the International Council of Women, had its beginnings in 1883, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony saw the potential for regular contact among women of different nations. Five years later suffragists within the United States sponsored a grand meeting in Washington, DC, attended by women of 10 different nations, at which the International Council of Women was established. This organisation was not limited to suffragists, but included women with many different reform goals, such as temperance and the cessation of international prostitution.

In 1906 a second international organisation, the International Women Suffrage Alliance, was founded to concentrate on votes for women. Later it became the International Alliance of Women.<sup>24</sup>

Woman suffrage movements have continued to grow around the world. Since 1920, the focus has shifted to Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The movement for woman suffrage has been particularly energetic and sustained in the Philippines. As early as 1909, middle-class Filipino women requested the vote on equal terms with men. When the islands became a Commonwealth in 1934, women's demands for the vote were put off by the government's requirement that a special plebiscite be held among the women themselves two years later. Women from all classes organised and registered for this election, and they voted overwhelmingly in favour of their permanent enfranchisement. In 1986, with the election of Corazon Aquino, the Philippines joined the growing club of nations with a woman as head of state.<sup>25</sup>

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*"To reclaim our past and insist that it become a part of our human history is the task that lies before us. For the future requires that women, as well as men, shape the world destiny." - Judy Chicago, feminist artist<sup>26</sup>*

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It was not until after World War One that the first few women became members of democratic governments. Nina Bang, Danish Minister of Education 1924-26 was the world's first full female cabinet minister. In 1960 Sirivamo Ratwatte Dias Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka became the world's first female Premier Minister and in 1974 Maria Estela Martínez de Perón of Argentina became the first woman president. Today only a handful of countries never had a female member of government in at least a sub-ministerial position, and include Lebanon, Monaco, Saudi Arabia, Tonga and The Vatican. In 1999 Sweden became the first country to have more female ministers than male, 11 women and nine men.<sup>27</sup>

While women's suffrage is now almost universal, history shows long delays between men and women gaining the right to vote in individual countries; the time elapsed between men's suffrage and women's suffrage ranged from one to 134 years, with the average delay for women amounting to 47 years.

There are still countries where women do not yet have the right to vote or stand for election.

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