Milestones in the History of Australian Women

1880  Women are admitted to university in Australia.

1902  The Commonwealth Franchise Act is passed, enabling all women (with the exception of Aboriginal women in some states) to vote for the federal Parliament. From this time, women were also able to sit in Parliament.

1903  First federal election of which most (white) women in Australia could vote, and the first time women could stand for election. Four women were candidates for the federal election- Nellie Martel, Mary Ann Moore Bentley and Vida Goldstein for the Senate, and Selina Anderson for the House of Representatives.

1921  Edith Cowan is elected to the Legislative Assembly of the Western Australian Parliament, thus becoming Australia’s first women parliamentarian.

1925  Millicent Preston Stanley is elected to NSW Parliament.

1933  First birth control clinic in Australia is set up in Sydney.

1943  Dame Enid Lyons, representing the United Australia Party, and Senator Dorothy Tangney, representing the Australian Labour Party, are elected to the federal Parliament.

1947  Senator Annabelle Rankin, representing the Liberal Party, becomes Opposition Whip in the Senate, the first woman in the Parliament to hold that office.

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.

1950  Basic Wage Inquiry held - female basic wage but not equal pay established.

1951  Senator Annabelle Rankin becomes Government Whip. 1966 Senator Annabelle Rankin becomes Minister for Housing, and thus the first woman to oversee a government department.

1966  Bar on married women as permanent employees in the Federal Public Service abolished.

1966  First female indigenous woman ordained as an Anglican priest.

1967  Indigenous women finally gain the vote.
1970 Senator Ivy Wedgwood chairs one of the first of the Senate’s new Legislative and General Purpose Standing Committees, the Health and Welfare Committee. The report, concerning an inquiry into handicapped persons in Australia, was the first report to be tabled by these influential committees.

1975 Senator Kathy Martin (later Mrs Kathy Sullivan, MP) is appointed Assistant Opposition Whip in the Senate, and later the same year Assistant Government Whip.

1976 Senator Margaret Guilfoyle, who was appointed Minister for Social Security in 1975, becomes first woman to be a member of Cabinet and to also oversee a government department.

1983 Senator Susan Ryan, representing the Australian Labour Party, is the first Labour woman federal minister. As the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, Senator Ryan introduced the Sex Discrimination Act 1984.

1986 Mrs Joan Child, MP, representing the Australian Labour Party, becomes the first woman to be Speaker of the House of Representatives.

1986 Senator Janine Haines becomes the first woman to lead an Australian political party, the Australian Democrats.

1987 Two women Senators, representing the Liberal Party, Senator Margaret Reid and Senator Susan Knowles, become Opposition Whip and Deputy Opposition Whip.

1990 Senator Janet Powell becomes the second woman to lead an Australian political party, when she succeeds Janine Haines as Leader of 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.

1990 Carolyn Jakobsen is elected chair of the Federal Parliamentary Labour Party (the caucus), the first woman to hold this position, and Elaine Darling and Mary Crawford are elected vice-chair and secretary respectively.

1993 Senator Cheryl Kernot becomes the third woman to lead an Australian political party, the Australian Democrats. She is succeeded by Senator Meg Lees in 1997.

1993 After the 1993 election, Senator Cheryl Kernot is elected Parliamentary leader with over 80% of member’s votes.
1995  Senator Margaret Reid becomes the first woman to be elected as Deputy President of the Senate.

1996  Senator Margaret Reid becomes the first woman elected as President of the Senate.

1997  Senator Suzanne West elected as Deputy President of the Senate.

1997  NSW Inquiry into Pay Equity held.

2000  On 30 June 2000, the NSW Industrial Relations Commission makes a new Equal Remuneration and other Conditions principle.

2001  Carol Martin was the first Aboriginal woman elected to an Australian Parliament – WA.

2002  The first decision by the New South Wales Industrial Relations Commission under the State’s Equal Remuneration Principle hands library workers a sweeping victory, granting substantial pay rises of up to 26 per cent; and ratifying a single award for all librarians, library technicians and archivists employed by NSW Government bodies. An average of 16% increases apply to librarian information workers across several public service agencies.

2003  Linda Burney, first indigenous woman in NSW parliamentary history.

2003  Marion Scrymgour, NT, became the first State Aboriginal female government minister.

Source: Womenspace March 2004