**Introduction**

The evolution of the rights of women in Australia owes much to successive waves of feminism, or the women's movement. The first of these took place in the late 19th century and was concerned largely with gaining the right to vote and to stand for election into parliament. The second wave of feminism took place in the 1960s and 1970s and focused on gaining equality with men in other areas, such as work, the law and general social standing. The second wave targeted many different aspects of life and presented a broader challenge to traditional ideas of women's rights. It therefore led to more fundamental changes in the daily lives of mainstream Australian women.

**Women in Australia before World War II**

The changing role of women in Australia has come about largely through waves of feminism. The first wave brought women the vote in federal and State elections. The colonies began to grant manhood suffrage halfway through the nineteenth century, however, women were not originally included. When Australia reached Federation in 1901, it was agreed that all women should be given the vote at a federal level since women from South Australia and Western Australia already had a State vote. In 1902 all women were given the vote in federal elections except for those who were Indigenous Australians, or of Asian, African or Pacific Islander descent.

Despite the enfranchisement, no woman was elected to an Australian parliament until 1921. The first federal female parliamentarians were not elected until 1943. This is just one example of how enfranchisement fell short of truly improving the lives of Australian women or changing attitudes about them. Women were still seen as nurturers who had no other destiny than to marry and raise children. The few women who did work (excluding the wealth who were involved in voluntary work) not only had to find paid work, but also had to carry the burden of all housework and child-rearing. The notion of what jobs a woman could do expanded during World War I, but women's role in public life was still very limited.

**Factors which brought about the women's movement**

Contrary to popular belief, women's groups and activists remained active throughout the decades in the lead-up to World War II. They continued to campaign on issues that affected women, such as the right to equal pay and the right for women to enter the professions, own property and participate in public life. They had some success with these things, although their successes did not translate to real change in these areas.

The 1930s were a hard time for women, particularly poor women, who had multiple hardships to endure because of the Depression. They concentrated on survival for themselves and their families.

World War II saw many women join the workforce of necessity, taking up jobs that had previously been considered only for men. Whilst many were expected to give up their jobs to returned soldiers after the War, as they had done after World War I, social attitudes towards what women were capable of doing had been changed by the experience. Despite this fuelling women's attempts to achieve better conditions and pay for themselves in the workforce, the post-war era was very materialistic and entrenched the idea that women should only be wives and mothers. The conservatism of the post-war era had made it harder for women's movements to continue their momentum in the 1940s and 1950s.

Early feminists wrote books in the 1950s that questioned the roles of women. Women in Europe, the United States and Australia began to re-think long-held beliefs about femininity. Around the same time the contraceptive pill became available, allowing women greater control of their lives.

The Vietnam War sparked large protests in America and Australia which galvanised women. Realising that they were not treated as equals by their fellow male students and activists, women formed their own activist movement to seek liberation.

**The women's liberation movement: methods and aims**

The women's liberation movement grew very rapidly in Australia in a short space of time. Some women's groups sought to improve women's rights through existing power structures, including increasing women's representation in powerful institutions like parliament and unions. Other groups tried to find alternative forms of protest and expression. These women kept away from what they saw as a male-oriented power base and sought to change things through demonstrations aimed at raising the consciousness of all of society.

Three main areas of concern for the women's movement were culture and education, health, and sexuality. Women expressed their opposition to patriarchy through art and literature, including that written by author Germaine Greer. As well as university courses, women sought to improve education at school level. They sought to open up career paths for girls that had previously been seen as exclusively male areas, such as sport and science. Other women focused on meeting women's specific health and safety needs, including greater access to contraception, abortion and protection from violence by men. Women recognised the area of sexuality as one where there was much inequality between men and women. Feminists explored alternative ideas of sexuality such as same-sex relationships or the choice not to enter into relationships at all.

**Successes of the women's movement**

The women's movement made huge changes to Australian society. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and to a lesser extent the 1990s many initiatives were put in place in the areas of health, work, law, education and welfare that attempted to redress the imbalance between men's and women's power and opportunity. Women slowly began to infiltrate areas of power that had hitherto been closed to them and some attempted to use this power for the benefit of women in general.

Women's health clinics were set up around the country. Shelters and half-way houses were established for women escaping domestic violence. Women won official rights to equal pay and paid childcare. Some women were appointed to powerful positions in government, business and organisations. Laws encouraging equal opportunity were enacted around the country. Girls were encouraged to study subjects like science and sport that had always been male-dominated.

**Women in Australia today**

There are different views about how much impact the women's liberation movement has had on Australia. There is more recognition about violence against women but the violence has not necessarily decreased. Women have more choice over reproduction than they did until the 1960s. Women have been able to reach high positions in politics, the professions and business. It is, however, far more difficult for women to attain these positions than it is for men. Laws attempting to create equal pay and equal opportunity for women do not automatically ensure these things for women. Women's and men's roles in the home have changed little despite the women's movement. Education has improved in terms of female/male equality. Overall there are greater possibilities for women now but there are still proportionately fewer women in key positions in the Australian workforce.