



**"A fist-bumping, fired-up feminist treat"** Time Out

# WOMEN OF STEEL



**They took on a giant...**

THE JOBS FOR WOMEN PRODUCERS GROUP PRESENTS WOMEN OF STEEL PRODUCED BY HEYDIE MURPHY PRODUCED BY MARILYN ANASTAS  
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BASED ON THE ACCOUNTS OF THE AUSTRALIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S STRUGGLES  
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# STUDY GUIDE





# SYNOPSIS

It's 1980 and employment for working-class women in Wollongong is scarce. There's work sewing for piecemeal rates in backyard sweatshops, but it's dangerous and not covered by the union. Some women trek to Sydney to work in factories, leaving before dawn and coming home after dark.

BHP is the city's largest employer. But they flat out refuse to hire women at their steelworks. Outraged, a group of women decide to take them on. Inspired by the fierce union and feminist movements of the time, they launch a political campaign calling for "Jobs for Women". Soon word gets out and they are joined by hundreds of migrant women, who face discrimination of their own. Their tactics include street protests, a tent embassy, and building alliances with friendly unions. New anti-discrimination laws seem

promising, but they have not yet been tested in court. So the women launch a legal battle and take BHP – Australia's richest and most powerful company – to the highest court in the country. But it isn't easy.

While the company has bottomless pockets for its legal defence, the women struggle to access the most basic legal aid. Yet the movement grows. The *'Women of Steel'* documentary film follows the activities of the campaigners from their direct action right through their landmark court cases. It shows how solidarity can not only overcome the biggest hurdles, but can affect real change in the world. The film is touching the hearts of women today, generating serious discussion on sexual harassment and anti-discrimination and contributing to the growing demand for culture change in the workplace.

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# CURRICULUM LINKS

'*Women of Steel*' can be linked to the following subject areas in the Australian Curriculum:

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| - Civics and Citizenship        | - The General Capabilities of 'Ethical Understanding' and 'Personal and Social Capability' |
| - English                       |  |
| - Health and Physical Education |  |
| - History                       |  |

'*Women of Steel*' is also recommended as a supplementary text for students studying the following Senior School and tertiary subjects:

- |                    |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| - Business Studies | - Legal Studies   |
| - Economics        | - Politics        |
| - Ethics           | - Women's Studies |
| - History          |                   |

## Specific Links to Level 7 - 10 Civics and Citizenship:

How values, including freedom, respect, inclusion, civility, responsibility, compassion, equality and a 'fair go', can promote cohesion within Australian society ([ACHCK052](#))

Appreciate multiple perspectives and use strategies to mediate differences ([ACHCS071](#))

How and why individuals and groups, including religious groups, participate in and contribute to civic life ([ACHCK079](#))

The influence of a range of media, including social media, in shaping identities and attitudes to diversity ([ACHCK080](#))

Recognise and consider multiple perspectives and ambiguities, and use strategies to negotiate and resolve contentious issues ([ACHCS086](#))

## Specific Links to Level 7 - 10 English:

Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts ([ACELT1619](#))

Use comprehension strategies to interpret, analyse and synthesise ideas and information, critiquing ideas and issues from a variety of textual sources ([ACELY1723](#))

Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, selecting aspects of subject matter and particular language, visual,

and audio features to convey information and ideas ([ACELY1725](#))

Explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups ([ACELT1626](#))

Recognise and explain differing viewpoints about the world, cultures, individual people and concerns represented in texts ([ACELT1807](#))

Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts ([ACELT1635](#))

Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts ([ACELT1639](#))

Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts ([ACELT1812](#))

## Specific Links to Levels - 10 Health and Physical Education:

Investigate the benefits of relationships and examine their impact on their own and others' health and wellbeing ([ACPPS074](#))

Analyse factors that influence emotions, and develop strategies to demonstrate empathy and sensitivity ([ACPPS075](#))

Investigate the benefits to individuals and communities of valuing diversity and promoting inclusivity ([ACPPS079](#))

Evaluate factors that shape identities and critically analyse how individuals impact the identities of others ([ACPPS089](#))

Critique behaviours and contextual factors that influence health and wellbeing of diverse communities ([ACPPS098](#))

## Specific Links to Level 10 History:

The Modern World and Australia: Depth Study 2  
Rights and Freedoms 1945 – Present

- The US civil rights movement and its influence on Australia ([ACDSEH105](#))
- The continuing nature of efforts to secure civil rights and freedoms in Australia and throughout the world, such as the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) ([ACDSEH143](#))



# VIEWING ACTIVITIES

- Early in the documentary we meet several women who lived in Wollongong in the 1970s. What reflections and observations do they provide about the city at that time?
- Working in pairs/small groups, students are to conduct research and prepare a digital annotated timeline of Wollongong, including its Indigenous history before white settlement through to the current day. Include relevant images and reference to the cultural, economic, social and industrial features and developments of the city.  
Suggested sites to begin research:  
<<https://www.visitwollongong.com.au/>>  
<<https://www.wollongong.nsw.gov.au/about/history-heritage>>
- BHP was founded in 1885 in the mining town of Silverton in NSW. Australian Iron and Steel was the biggest subsidiary of BHP, and we learn that the company recruited many male migrant workers following the end of WW2. Working in pairs/small groups, students are to conduct research and prepare a digital presentation (Slideshow or other) on BHP. Include its inception, development, peak periods, employees and challenges the company faced, as well as reference to their current status.  
Suggested site to begin research:  
<<https://www.bhp.com/>>
- **TIME CODE: 07:06:** We learn that the main source for women living in Wollongong at the time was clothing factories, with Bonds being considered 'the upper end.' Describe the conditions, lack of unionization and travel time in terms of the impact working in this industry had on women at the time.
- **TIME CODE: 09:00:** As a direct result of the challenges facing women in Wollongong, the Working Women's Charter was drawn up. What were the demands in this charter and how and why were the specific needs of migrant women included in these?
- Consider Robynne's quote: "It wasn't just a woman thing, it was a systemic thing." What does she mean by this? Discuss some of the restrictions and discrimination Robynne refers to facing as a woman at that time.
- We learn that the NSW Anti-Discrimination Legislation was enacted in 1977. What did this legislation involve and how was it directly relevant to the women we meet in the documentary?
- **TIME CODE: 10:45:** We hear about the 'chicken shop incident' that took place in Wollongong. What did this incident involve and how did women in the area respond to this?
- When was the first formal complaint against BHP's hiring policy lodged?
- How did the 'Tent Embassy' protests in Canberra serve as inspiration for the women's protest against BHP? What was the impact of the Jobs for Women Campaign's own 'Tent Embassy' at this local level?
- Upon gaining employment, what were some of the aspects of their working life that the women most enjoyed? As a class discuss the range of benefits (economic, mental, physical, social, emotional) that employment provides individuals with.
- **TIME CODE: 27:40:** What did BHP announce in 1982 and what was the impact of these cut backs on the women's jobs?
- Write an overview of the ensuing legal battles the women engaged in over the next 11 years and the overall outcome.





# POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

## Activity

### » FOCUS ON MARGINALISATION AND THE FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

When discussing issues surrounding gender equality, it is important to understand the concept of 'marginalisation'.

Breaking it down, the word 'margin' is prominent. Essentially, marginalisation involves treating a particular group or groups of people as though they belong to the margins of society. People who are marginalised are made to feel less important or unimportant to the society in which they live. Marginalised groups are disempowered, made to feel like 'the other' and they often experience discrimination, whether intended or not, at the hands of those with power and privilege.

- After viewing 'Women of Steel', discuss as a class the ways that women in Australia have been subject to marginalization over the years, and the ways this impacts their lives. Refer to specific



- examples/people we meet in the documentary.
- How did the protest and legal battle we see in 'Women of Steel' help to end the marginalization of women in this instance?

A useful reference is <https://womenofsteel.bigcartel.com/product/women-of-steel-book>

Look at **Table 1** on page 6 . Consider how the groups of people might continue to experience marginalisation in contemporary Australia and the ways we can help reduce this.

► Jump to Table

Throughout 'Women of Steel' we see the impact of the tireless work, passion and advocacy of many women to help secure greater gender equality and reduced discrimination. Working in pairs and in consultation with your teacher, select an Australian who has worked in the field of human rights activism across any area of civil rights. Prepare a digital profile of this person and share as a class. Areas to include:

- **Their background/education/early work in their area of civil rights advocacy.**
- **Their achievements within their field of civil rights advocacy and impact on Australian society.**







Groups	In what ways might the following groups of people experience marginalisation?	Ways that society can reduce their experience of marginalisation?
<b>Indigenous Australians</b>		
<b>LGBTQI+</b>		
<b>Migrants</b>		
<b>Refugees</b>		
<b>Disabled people</b>		
<b>Elderly people</b>		
<b>Others (specify)</b>		





## Activity

### » THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN 1940S, 50S AND 60S AUSTRALIA

During WW2, large numbers of women entered the workforce for the first time to make up for the shortfall caused by men fighting on the frontline.

After the war most women returned to the domestic sphere, got married and gave birth to the children who would become the 'baby boomer' generation. Domesticity and the image of the 'suburban housewife' became the idealised norm, yet for many women this restricted version of life proved stifling and unfulfilling.

Conduct research into the role of women in Australia in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. For each decade, ensure you include specific research into the experience of migrant women in Australia too. Consider the following: access to education and employment, gender roles and expectations. Include images (including advertisements from the time promoting idealized values and roles) and share and discuss findings as a class.

## Activity

### » THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

As we see in the documentary, many of the dominant ideas and values of the time were challenged during the 1960s onwards and many women began to demand a better deal, rejecting the conservative and restrictive values of the time.

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948. Working in pairs, read through the declaration and identify which specific Articles apply to the rights of women, and the ways these were not being protected in Australia in the 1960s: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) emerged on the political stage in 1969 and grew into a mass feminist movement challenging all aspects of social life. It set the agenda for reform for two decades, in women's health, education, employment and childcare. The first women's liberation groups met in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney in 1969, and they took many ideas and actions from the American women's liberation groups.

The WLM emerged as part of a larger political and social protests around conscription, opposition to the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. How did women's experiences within broader protest groups help foment the ideas and actions of the WLM?







- Several influential books marked the beginning of the WLM. Conduct research into 'Sexual Politics' by Kate Millett, 'The Female Eunuch' by Germaine Greer, 'Getting Equal: The History of Australian

Feminism' by Marilyn Lake, and 'Damned Whores and God's Police' by Anne Summers. What ideas and actions did they explore and what was their impact at the time?

**Women's Liberation groups formed in many parts of Australia and most issued statements about their aims and goals. Read the following extracts:**

## Women's Liberation Newsletter:

Women's Liberation believes that women in our society are oppressed. We are economically oppressed: in jobs we do full work for half pay, in the home we do unpaid work full time. We are commercially exploited by advertisements, television, and press: legally we often have only the status of children. We are brought up to feel inadequate: educated to narrower horizons than men. This is our specific oppression as women. It is as women that we are, therefore, organising. We demand:

**1. THAT WOMEN HAVE CONTROL OVER THEIR BODIES** – We believe that this is denied us until we can decide whether to have children or not and when we have them.

**2. THE REPEAL OF ABORTION LAWS: ABORTION ON REQUEST** – Abortion is an essential part of birth control. Contraception without the right to abortion means that the State, in effect, controls our bodies if we become pregnant unwillingly. Women should have the right to decide whether or not to have an abortion.

**3. FREELY AVAILABLE CONTRACEPTION** – More education on contraception is needed at an early age and, for this to be effective, contraceptives should be easily available and free on social security. Doctors should not have the right to refuse contraception on their own moral grounds.

**4. FREE 24-HOUR COMMUNITY CONTROLLED CHILD CARE** – The government should provide full child care facilities throughout Australia. These should be free and staffed by qualified people – men and women. The centres must be under the control of those who use them, to prevent bureaucratic 'baby dumps'. Women should not have to bear individual responsibility for the care of children.

**5. EQUAL JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND AN END TO LOW PAY** – Employers have no right to pay women less than men, or to keep women in menial jobs. The government must act to correct this injustice by making it illegal for employers to discriminate against women. Although, at first glance, the equal pay decision in 1972 seems favourable, the full effect of the decision will not become apparent until 1975. In other words, we have been 'bought off' until then.

**6. EQUAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES** – To enable women to have really equal opportunity, all schools must stop streaming women into 'service' jobs which reflect the wife/mother role – cleaners, teachers, nurses, secretaries, social workers – essentially supporting roles. Sexual bias in curricula should be eliminated. The education system must play a large part in undoing the conditioning of women to accept an inferior role, by encouraging women to assert themselves in all fields. We believe that by united action we can achieve our aims.

*(Extract from Women's Liberation Newsletter, Women's Liberation Movement, March 1973, pp. 5–6)*



- What is the context of these manifestos?
- What are the aims of these statements?
- Who is the audience?
- Why do you think Women's Liberation groups produced manifestos?
- Look at the language used – why are words such as 'manifesto', 'demand' and 'oppressed' used?
- Are there parts of the manifestos that are still relevant today?
- Conduct research into how many of the WLM's aims were achieved in the 1960s (and beyond) in **Table 2** on page 10.

► [Jump to table](#)

Consider the following rights that women lacked in Australia in the 1960s. Have these rights now been secured? Share and discuss answers as a class:

- **Married women had no right to credit.**
- **Women had no right to equal pay.**
- **Women had no right to continue to work in the Commonwealth public service or as teachers when they married.**



- **Abortion was illegal.**
- **Spousal rape was not a crime.**

Select one aspect of social, working or sporting life in Australia and examine the current role and rights of women. Has there traditionally been discrimination and unequal treatment of women in this area and if yes, has this been addressed (and how)?







WLM Aims	Level of Success/ What barriers existed then and may still exist today?	Evidence
<b>Women's right to control their own bodies through contraception</b>		
<b>Freely available contraception</b>		
<b>Legalised abortion</b>		
<b>Abortion on demand</b>		
<b>Free 24 hour childcare</b>		
<b>Equal job opportunities</b>		
<b>Equal access to education</b>		

## Equal Pay Timeline 1950 - 1985 (selected events)

### Activity

#### » FOCUS ON EQUAL PAY

In Australia in the 1950s the basic wage for a woman was set at 75 per cent of the basic wage of a man. Equal pay for equal work had been an issue for the women's movement since the beginning of the 20th century, and the battle still continues.

Consider the Timeline of Events (on the right) in the battle for Equal Pay in Australia. Select one key event and conduct research into this, outlining what was achieved and how. Working in pairs, continue the timeline to 2021. As a class, discuss whether you think the battle for equal pay has truly been secured in Australia?

Suggested resources to assist with research:

<<https://www.wgea.gov.au/topics/the-gender-pay-gap>>

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/15/australias-gender-pay-gap-still-14-with-men-earning-240-more-a-week-than-women>>

As a direct result of the tireless work of many women and supporters, federal and state governments in Australia introduced laws that addressed many of the enduring concerns of the WLM. Two of the most important Acts passed were the Sex Discrimination Act (1984) and the Affirmative Action Act (1986). Conduct research into each of these, focusing on their aims and impacts. Share and discuss as a class.

Australia does not have a Bill of Rights. What is a Bill of Rights and which countries do have one? Why does Australia not have a Bill of Rights, and how does the fact we don't have one impact the rights we see women fighting for in 'Women of Steel'? Share and discuss answers as a class.





## Activity

### » PROFILES OF KEY FIGURES IN THE AUSTRALIAN WLM

Working in pairs, students are to be allocated one of the following key figures or organisations in the Australian Women's Liberation Movement and prepare a digital or hard copy profile.

Include reference to the figure/organisation's history, aims, areas of focus, challenges, protest and impact. (Note that many of the organisations, especial in the 1970s had a collective leadership.)



## Activity

### » THE BATTLE CONTINUES

- In 2017, it was reported that fewer large Australian companies are run by women that are run by men named John. Are you surprised by this fact? Read the following article and discuss the structural and societal factors that lead to this, and the ways that it can be changed: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-08/fewer-women-ceos-than-men-named-john/8327938>
- As we see throughout 'Women of Steel', workers can achieve better outcomes for all when they unite in the struggle. Working in pairs, conduct research into the role of Trade Unions in Australia (both generally and then select 2 - 3 examples of specific unions). Consider the conditions they have challenged, the obstacles they have faced and the positive

impacts they have had on securing better working conditions. What are the current rates of union membership across Australia? As a class, discuss reasons why people may not join unions and ways that unions could encourage membership.

Consider the growing 'gig economy' in Australia (and globally), and the challenging conditions workers in this industry face. Are they protected by legislation and what is their status in relation to access to unions?

- Select a current protest movement (e.g. Me Too, Black Lives Matter, the 2021 March for Justice) and conduct research into their cause. Compare and contrast with the protest and battle we see in 'Women of Steel' and reflect on any similarities and differences you note.



## Activity

### » WRITING TASKS

Students are to select any of the following prompts as the basis for an expository piece of writing that reflects on the battle fought and won by the 'Women of Steel'.

Ensure you include direct reference to the people we meet and the events that are examined in the documentary

*'A critical society makes it hard for marginalised groups to find a way to belong.'*

*'Conflict occurs between the powerful and the powerless.'*

*'True social change can only occur when people work together and fight for their beliefs.'*

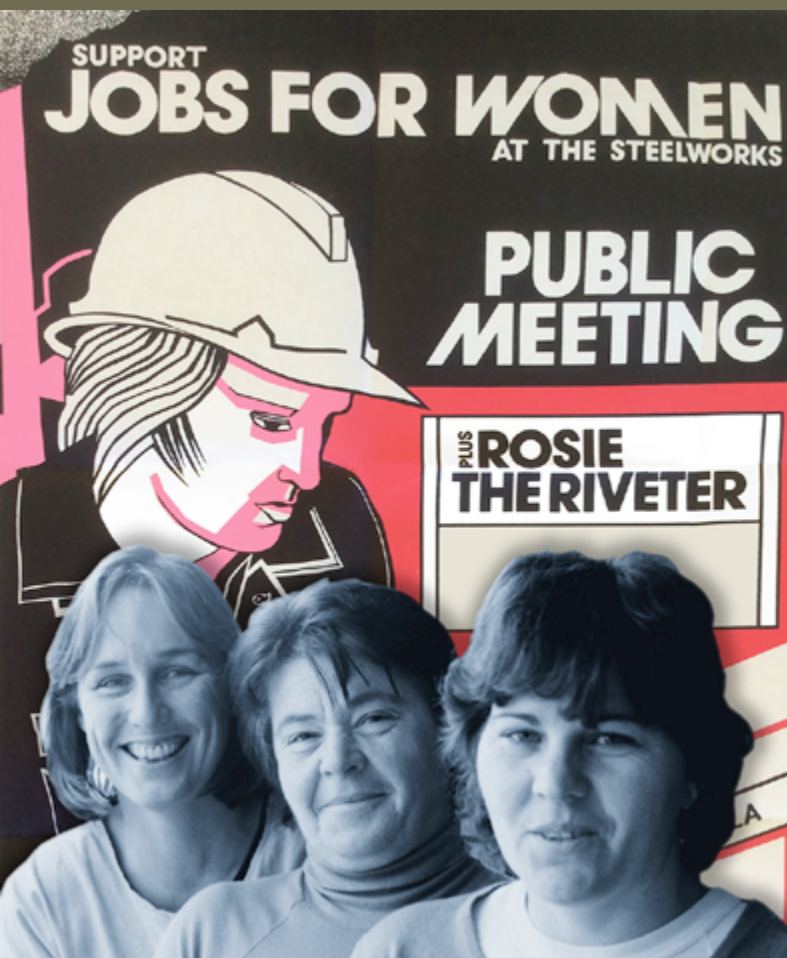


## Activity

### » A CAMPAIGN SUCCEEDS

The final victory of the Jobs for Women Campaign in 'Women of Steel' was the result of a series of actions and developments.

In small groups and with reference to your viewing notes and activities, identify and comment on the elements which contributed to the success of the campaign. Discuss the lessons for those wanting to make social and political changes today and share ideas as a class.





## » DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Consider the following statement by  
Robynne Murphy, director of *'Women of Steel'*:

"When I left the steelworks after thirty years as a steelworker, I picked up my home video camera and began recording the stories of the migrant/working-class women with whom I had campaigned and worked. At that time, I had little understanding of the potential impact of these informal conversations. I soon realised that the natural strength and humour of these women were made for a documentary and that such a film would be one of the best ways of bringing our little-known campaign alive and ensuring that it takes its place within Australian history.

Progressively, the more I worked on the film with our editor, the better I understood that bringing the collective



voices and experiences of those involved in the campaign to viewers in a direct way — without preaching — could also reveal the strategies which led to our victory. In this way, *'Women of Steel'* might inspire others who face some of the big problems which confront us today. The *'Women of Steel'* 'stars' are not politicians nor celebrities nor figureheads of any kind - but working-class women who, through tireless grassroots struggle and by gathering support and building alliances, stood up to a seemingly unbeatable foe, BHP.

- Robynne Murphy

- What motivated Robynne to make the film?
- What are her hopes in terms of the film serving as an inspiration for others?



### Activity

## » FILM REVIEW OF 'WOMEN OF STEEL'

Students are to write a 500-word review of *'Women of Steel'*.

Reviews should include:

- Title of the film and the key players
- Where and when the film was made
- A brief synopsis
- The key themes and messages contained in the documentary
- Most memorable lines of dialogue, as well as most memorable scenes/sequences
- Use of archival footage and interviews
- Describe the types of camera shots/music/editing. What sort of mood and atmosphere do these elements combine to create in terms of an overall feel?
- Particular audiences to whom you would recommend the film

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