SUE FORD AND FEMINISM

Sue Ford (1943—2009) was a leading feminist and one of Australia’s most important photographers and filmmakers. This exhibition reflects Ford’s interest in the camera’s ability to record the effects of time and documents the development of her ideas on the social role of photography, as a tool to help women tell stories and take action in the 1960’s and 70’s.

Changes for Women in Australia

Women’s Voices
When were women given the right to vote?
- Australia 1903 (were also able to stand for election for government in 1926)
- New Zealand 1893
- United Kingdom 1918
- Aboriginals were only given the right to vote in Australia in 1962.

QUESTION: How would you feel if you did not have a say in how your country was run?

Families
Sue Ford was a single mother and had to work very hard to support her family.
- Single parent pension was introduced in Australia in 1973 for “single mothers not entitled to a widow’s pension”. There was a 6 month waiting period involved with receiving the pension. In 1977 this pension included single fathers and was renamed the Supporting Parents Pension.
- The contraceptive pill was introduced in the 1960’s.
- In 1861 abortion was illegal. The laws in Australia changed in the late 1960’s and 70’s to decriminalise abortion.

QUESTION: How may these changes affected women?

QUESTION: How does the size of families affect women?
Marriage

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<th>Number of divorces</th>
<th>Crude divorce rate</th>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
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Sources: ABS (various years). Marriages and divorces Australia (catalogue no. 3310.0); ABS (various years). Divorces Australia (catalogue no. 3307.0.55.001).

Crude divorce rate is the number of decrees granted per 1000 of the resident population.

**FACTS**

- The changes in the Family Law Act 1975 made grounds for divorce the “irretrievable breakdown of a marriage”.
- In the mid 60’s 10% of marriages ended in divorce compared to 43% today.
- 1980’s the decision to divorce is made by the wife 57%, husband 26%, mutual 17%.
- The average age for women to marry is 21 years in 1966 and 28 years in 2008. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

**QUESTION:** What might be reasons for a low divorce rate before the 1970’s?
**Women and work**

Work is defined broadly as productive activity that requires time, energy and skill. It includes paid employment as well as unpaid care and domestic work. Across cultures and throughout history most women have worked. However, their options were extremely limited, usually restricted to care and domestic work. Today Australian women have far better opportunities for paid employment than were available 60 years ago.

48% of working women in Australia were domestic servants in 1901. Domestic servants received little formal training. It was presumed to have been learnt at home and been an inherent part of womanhood.

Married women may have contributed to the household economy by turning their house into a small business, taking in laundry, making clothes, teaching music or taking in lodgers. Women helped on family farms. Largely married women were seen as homemakers and mothers— their role was in the home and they were not encouraged to go to university or enter the paid workforce. Men were the breadwinners. For many women, pursuing a professional career meant not marrying. For others, widowhood or divorce made paid work a necessity.

In 1882 the first woman was admitted as a student at the University of Sydney.

Traditional professional employment for women was in teaching and nursing, retail, factory work, and clerical administration. When men went to war, women’s involvement in the paid workforce increased to fill the gaps in the labour market.

In 1919 the rate of pay for women was approximately half the rate set for men. It was not until the 1960’s that the federal government took legislative steps to uphold the principals of equal pay after 40 years of active campaigning by women and Unions.

*Source: Dr Maria Nugent, Women’s Employment and Professionalism in Australia, Australia Heritage Commission 2002.*

**Life in the home**

Sue Ford often depicts the domestic life of women in the 1960’s and 70’s.

Changes in technology which helped with housework gave women more time to do paid work. Housework became less physically demanding and took less time. What would we have done without vacuum cleaners, fridges, electric ovens, electricity, washing machines etc?

**QUESTION:** What are some of the challenges women still face in the workforce today?
What are the women doing in the photographs *Sandra, Bundoora, Sue Pike* and *Untitled (South Melbourne Markets)*?

How do the women appear in the photograph *Trish and Carmel*?

What do the photographs by Sue Ford tell us about the roles of women in the 1960’s and 70’s?
TIMES HAVE CHANGED. OR HAVE THEY???

Advertising and the media remain full of images of conventionally beautiful women offering themselves up to male viewers in a passive role. These contemporary images are influential as role models for women.

“We have to find our own role models.... who do more than drape themselves over a palm tree in a $200 bikini”


QUESTION: The article and photo shoot featuring the Julia Gillard knitting a gift for the royal baby featured in the July issue of The Australian Women's Weekly has gained global attention and mixed reactions. What do you think this photograph says about women today?
TASK: Select one of the representations of women in contemporary advertising and the media below and discuss how it represents women.