

Women on the Goldfields

Lesson Focus: You will learn about the role of women on the goldfields and explore family life.

Keywords: majority, dominated, established, contribution, non-existent

Most reports on the Australian goldrushes focus on the roles of men. Indeed, males did form the majority of the population on most goldfields; however, women played an important part in many ways. One reason for the lack of information in this area is that society in those times was largely male-dominated and women were thought 'to have their place'—which was to support their husband and raise a family.

Despite this attitude, many women played important roles on the goldfields. After the men had established claims, many women travelled to the fields to join them. They would work a claim alongside their husbands and there are also records showing women who worked their own claims. Even though women worked the claims, they did not have the right to vote as the men did.

Conditions were extremely harsh, with cramped living quarters and a lack of food and drinking water. Due to the lack of medical assistance, many women died in childbirth and from other diseases such as measles and scarlet fever. In the early days of the Victorian

gold rushes, over one-quarter of deaths were children under 12 months of age.

Due to a lack of supplies, a woman was required to make things such as candles, butter, jam, bread and soap, as well as to repair clothes and tents regularly. These tasks were in addition to normal washing, ironing, cooking and cleaning tasks—as well as helping out on the claim!

Other women came to work at the goldfields in businesses and hotels. This group included 'fallen angels' (prostitutes). Despite all the hardship, women made major contributions to life on the goldfields. It was their influence and hard work that saw improvements in housing, health, education, law and order and life in general. This is largely an unrecorded contribution in history but a major one in the development of communities on the goldfields.



Use the information about women on the goldfields to complete the following.

1. Compare women in today's society with women on the goldfields.

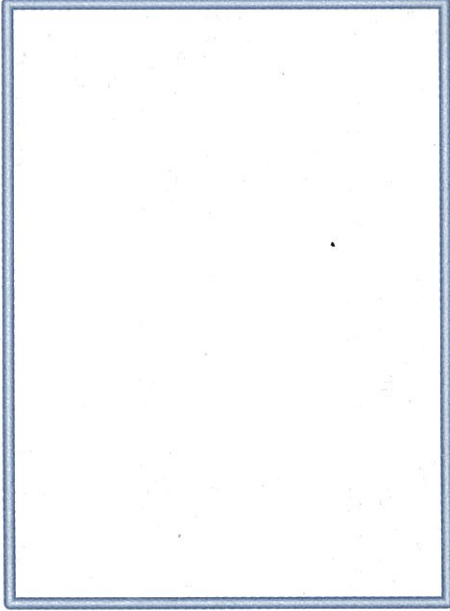
	Today	Goldfields
Role		
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2. Do you think women have a 'better' life today than they did on the goldfields? Explain.

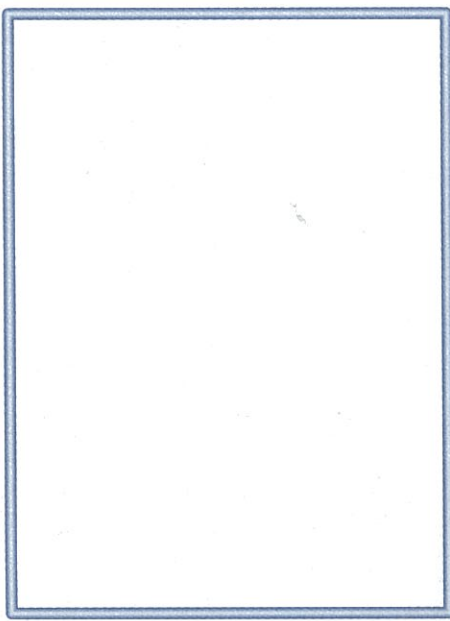
3. Why do you think women wanted to join their husbands on the goldfields and live in such harsh conditions?

4. Draw a woman completing a typical task for her day.

Woman from the goldfields



Woman from today



Family Life on the Goldfields

Families were not common on the goldfields as early prospectors left them behind to search for gold. They always promised to send for their families once they had achieved success. As the work on the goldfield became more long term, the women would bring their children and join their husbands.

The tent would be made to look more like a home and the wife would spend her day doing household duties, teaching their children to read and write and helping her husband on their plot.

Education in schools was nonexistent on the goldfields and the child's day was spent being

educated by his or her mother and helping on the plot. The days were long and family time was short. The men, after a long day in the field, would often go to the 'sly-grog' tents to be with their mates, dance, drink and be merry. They would generally only go home to sleep.

Sunday was observed as a day of rest and most people spent the day catching up on chores and other duties. Families didn't really spend time together as we might expect them to do today.

5. Do you think the men sent for their families if they were not successful on the fields? Explain.

6. Would you like to have been a child on the goldfields? Why/Why not?

Topics for Discussion/Debate

Discuss how the roles of women, children and the family in general have changed since times on the goldfields.

Additional Activities

1. Draw up a timetable of what you and your family might do on a typical weekend. Create a timetable of what a family on the goldfields might do on their weekend. Compare the two.
2. Make a list of all the things you like to do with your family.

Search Engine Keywords

Women on the goldfields; life on the goldfields