The suffocating status quo of the 1950's and 1960's set a strict guideline of how women were to conduct themselves throughout their daily activity. It was a universal agreement that women were to be obedient, attractive and organised at all times in order to be seen as a respectable women. Work was extremely discouraged, and hence women were often seen working inside the house, cleaning, cooking and taking care of the children, but most importantly making sure the man of the house came home to an immaculate clean household, an attractive wife, cute children and the smell of homemade dinner. If a woman were to work, she would be in the retail industry, involved in clerical work or charity work- however under no circumstance was a woman to be working whilst she was married. In a time of what seemed like perfect order, the women of this generation grew up to believe that it was a man's job to work and own an income and a women's job to know her place in the kitchen. A woman always knew her place. It was the features of this extremism and in a sense, propaganda, that brainwashed the nation into actually believing that a women's obedience and dutiful nature was attractive and acceptable. The expectations of women of the 1950s and 1960s are evident in a ‘Pep’ vitamin advertisement, portraying a woman who is loved by her husband because she looks ‘cute’ when she works.

The advertisement for ‘Pep’ illustrates the expectation that women were to clean and cook for their husband, but still look immaculate doing so, and thus many women used to buy Pep to fulfil these expectations. However towards the end of the 1960’s a minority of Australia's female population started to challenge this set status quo of a perfect housewife as they realised it's restricting nature.
In a time of inequity and discrimination, it was obvious that this status quo had to be challenged. It was due to the realisation that the female race had been oppressed for many years that a powerful movement began. It became evident that some women weren't happy and fulfilled by mere kitchen work, and as a result became dissatisfied with life. Women were blamed for what was seen a personal weakness and an inability to cope with this ‘dissatisfaction’. It was such assumptions and boundaries that forced the idea that the time had come to be heard, to challenge the status quo. 2nd wave feminists emerged as part of a movement against the confines of being a women such as the issues with unequal pay, sexism and sexual harassment, the inability to get a home loan, the lack of property and finance rights, the need for maternity leave and lack of childcare. Often women were faced with the challenge that 'anatomy is density'- simply meaning that women are unable to do certain things, for example be a part of the workforce, because of their ability to bear children. It was due to this discrimination that the liberation movement sought to capture the attention of the government by advertising the power of their vote and impact on politics/elections. And thus, the movement flourished as the government adopted women’s issues in their policies. A crucial personality of the women’s liberation movement was Germaine Greer- an educated author who challenged the conventional beliefs about women’s role in society. Greer believed that throughout time women were not treated equally with the justification that literature, history and art promoted a society centred on men, and accordingly women were portrayed as subservient and incapable. Through her work ‘The Female Eunuch’, Germaine Greer spread the idea that it was both a woman’s right and responsibility to be treated equally to men. A key group in this movement was the Women’s Electoral Lobby, who ensured that promises made by politicians were kept.

This group was very involved in politics, surveying and interviewing Australian political parties on key issues such as women in the workforce, childcare and family planning, and encouraged women to enter the high ranks of parliament. Politics was very influential in the advancement of the women’s liberation movement, in particular, during the Whitlam Government. Gough Whitlam funded a range of health and welfare services for women, including health centres, crisis centres and refuges. In 1975, Gough Whitlam assigned Elizabeth Reid to the position of Women's Adviser to the Prime Minister in Australian parliament, marking the Whitlam government the first political group to appoint a woman in parliament. 1975 also marked the first ‘International Women’s Year’ initiated by the United Nations, which created a sense of hope and solidarity within the female population as it recognised their rights and freedoms. Helen Reddy’s song ‘I am a women’ is often labelled as the song of the women’s liberation and International Women’s year due to its inspirational and empowered message. This is evident in the verse:

“I am woman, hear me roar
In numbers too big to ignore
And I know too much to go back an’ pretend
’Cause I’ve heard it all before
And I’ve been down there on the floor
No one’s ever gonna keep me down again”

This verse emphasises women’s independence and free will, illustrating the new way of thinking and widespread popularity of the movement. It was through this song that women gained as sense of empowerment and started to realise their rightful place in society as a free independent women and thus were no longer bound to the shackles of the kitchen.
This extract highlights the beneficial effects of the Affirmative action policy as it states that previous stereotypes of women had to be overlooked due to the legislation, and consequently these assumptions were slowly overlooked as women’s capabilities became evident. It was due to these legal responses to the changing status of women that the movement achieved equal employment opportunity, maternity leave, the ability to have an abortion without prosecution, no-fault divorce, equal pay for equal work, property and finance rights, the wide-spread education of women, protection against violence and sexual harassment and simply equal opportunity by the 1980’s. However, it is arguable that the movement wasn’t completely successful in the sense that women still faced many challenges, especially in the workforce. Women were often confronted with old-fashioned stereotypes of being a housewife and living to please their husband. If a woman were to work, she would still be expected to complete housework duties as well. A sense of antagonism and bitterness was developed towards women, as it was seen that women were more favoured and given more chances than men, especially due to the affirmative action policy. It was the culmination of these factors that built a ‘glass ceiling’ for women in the workforce, meaning that there was an unseen yet unbreachable barrier that kept women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladders. Other aspects that developed this ‘glass ceiling’ include the fact that few women were in positions of authority, the inflexible working hours, male dominated selection panels and a lack of networks. Another major obstacle of the women’s liberation movement was the Global Financial crisis of 1987, which caused economic recession, and thus businesses were forced to close or release workers and inflation increased the cost of living. 1 in 10 could not find a job, thus women were forced out of employment due to the fact that they had to compete with unemployed men for jobs. It was easier to get employed in the 1960s due to full employment, forcing companies to hire women, but with no companies seeking employment, women found it increasingly harder to get a job. None-the-less these constraints on women were a mere speed bump in what is seen as a ground-breaking revolutionary movement that ultimately achieved women’s liberation, legislation and social change, and thus the Women’s movement was successful by the 1980’s.
References


