Women in Aboriginal society

Women's role in Aboriginal society used to be quite different to that of the men—not less important or prestigious, but certainly different. The most important differences lay in their economic, domestic and religious responsibilities.

Women's ceremonies are believed to be closely linked to the productivity of the land.
Food technology

In the past, an Aboriginal woman’s main economic task was to gather food. Women foraged for fruit, roots, small animals, lizards, grubs, shellfish, seeds which were ground into flour, and any other foods which could be easily tracked down and caught. There is no doubt that women provided the major proportion of the daily food supply for their families. Men fished and hunted for meat, which was important for the family’s diet. However, they were not always successful in the hunt and they often came home empty handed.

These women are foraging for wild honey with digging sticks.
"Sugar bag" or wild honey is considered a delicacy.
Carrying dishes and digging sticks were important tools used in food gathering.

The women relied on three tools to help them forage for food: their digging sticks, baskets and carrying dishes. Digging sticks were simply pointed hardwood sticks, a metre or more in length. They were used to loosen soil around roots and to dig out animals from their burrows. Roots and branches were split open with digging sticks in order to extract grubs and insect nests. They were also used to knock ripe fruit from overhead branches and to stun small animals and reptiles. The dishes and baskets held the food which had been gathered.
Women's foraging excursions were not focused solely on food. They also gathered bark and leaves from which they extracted fibre for weaving; for example, pandanus leaves were collected for making baskets or mats. Other plants and roots were made into dyes for colouring weaving materials. They also gathered medicinal herbs, plants and roots which they used to treat various illnesses, injuries, and skin infections, as well as insect and snake bites. Another useful plant contained a drug which when added to a waterhole could intoxicate fish and cause them to float on the surface. The same drug was used to stupefy emus and wallabies so that they became easier to catch.

This woman is weaving a basket made from string. She is using her legs as a support for her weaving.

These women are gathering bark in order to make string.
Women from north-central Arnhem Land still gather shellfish as they have done for hundreds of years. They collect a species of bivalve, which they call diyama, from some well-known shellfish beds. They used to use digging sticks, knives and dillybags to gather the diyama. Nowadays many women have replaced their digging sticks with long metal bars, and they usually carry the diyama in plastic buckets, sugar bags or billy cans.