

ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

WOMEN & CLIMATE CHANGE

The role of the environment has many parallels to the work of women: it is life giving, and all too often undervalued, unseen and unmeasured.

It is only now, with climate change, that the real role of the environment on the economy is beginning to be considered.

Impact on women

- Climate Change will have a particular impact on women, including in Australia. The Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) says:

'The world's poor suffer most from erratic weather and its disruptions because they live in substandard housing in marginal land subject to drought or flood, or in crowded urban areas lacking essential services – and women are the majority of the world's poor.'

'In Bangladesh in 1991, 71 out of every 1,000 women were killed in a cyclone and flood; 15 out of every 1,000 men were killed.'

'Of those killed in the 2004 Asian tsunami, up to 70 per cent were women.'

'In the Darfur region of Sudan' WEDO says, 'where desertification (which means the land is damaged and becomes less productive, mainly due to human causes) has plagued the land in recent decades, homes are often destroyed, campaigns of intimidation, rape or abduction are waged, and thousands of women and children are caught in the crossfire. The vast majority of the world's refugees are women and children.'

- In case we think that this is a third world phenomenon, WEDO tells us that '70 per cent of deaths during the 2003 European heat wave were women.'

'In New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina drove poor women further into poverty and illness: they were forced into overcrowded living conditions, which raised the incidence of domestic abuse. Loss of child care facilities has cost many their jobs and health benefits.'

Climate change in Australia

- Australia has the fourth highest level of Greenhouse Gas emissions per capita in the world. We emit more than twice the European Union (EU) average, and four times the world average.

Food, transport, energy

- The greatest impacts of climate change on women's (as well as men's) health and wellbeing are to food, transport costs and increases in the cost of energy and water.
- The increased cost of food will mean that women, as primary managers of the household budget, are financially restricted with the food choices they can make – unhealthy food is often cheaper and therefore a more viable option.
- Petrol price rises mean that for many women, particularly in rural areas with longer distances to travel, participation in paid and unpaid work will be more difficult especially where the public transport system is irregular, considered unsafe, and expensive.
- Projected increases in energy for heating and cooling (particularly in response to heatwaves which are predicted to increase in severity and frequency) are expected to have harmful impacts on health and wellbeing for all women on limited incomes and on older women who are particularly heat sensitive.

“Economists have traditionally viewed the environment in a similar way to the way women, and women’s unpaid work, is viewed: an inexhaustible resource ready, at all times, for consumption.”

WHAT IS WOMEN’S HEALTH IN THE NORTH DOING?

While it will take serious government attention to tackle climate change, individuals and organisations can make a difference.



At Women’s Health In the North (WHIN), we’ve started looking at how to bring down our own energy use. We know that it will be good for the planet, which in turn will prevent hardship that will hit women heavily, and, happily, will save us money.

We started with an environment audit by our local Environment Shop, and are switching over the energy-greedy bulbs we current have to compact fluorescent lamps. We’ll pay it back in less than two years and then we’ll start saving money.

We’ve also taken some other small steps. Many of the car trips WHIN staff currently make are short distances that we could easily cover by bike. Not all staff have bikes, however, and bringing bikes to work isn’t always easy, especially for staff who live a long way away. To get around this problem, WHIN has bought a fleet bike, that all staff will be able to use to get to meetings. The seat height is adjustable, and so is the helmet, so anyone can use it.

We’re also introducing a worm farm, to help deal with the food scraps that currently get put in our rubbish bins. We often don’t think of food scraps as a form of pollution, because we know that once they go to the tip they decompose, but there’s a problem with this. As food breaks down, it produces methane, one of the greenhouse gases that is contributing to global warming, and one of the worst. Keeping food out of landfill, by composting or feeding it to worms makes a big difference.

More and more organisations are taking these small steps – it would be great to see all business, councils and government offices in the North doing the same thing.

This is one of four fact sheets, covering paid work, unpaid work, women as consumers and being consumed, and climate change. This information is drawn from Women’s Health In the North’s *Economic Participation: The Labour Market and Beyond* report – for more detail, including references, read the report at www.whin.org.au.

Why is a women’s health service talking about economics?

Because whether you can afford to meet your basic needs, what you earn, and how you earn it, could matter as much to your health as the genes you were born with and what you eat.