

# ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

## WOMEN AS CONSUMERS, WOMEN CONSUMED

Economic participation isn't just about earning money. As the stimulus package shows, how you spend money has a big impact on the economy. Women make many spending decisions for their household, and they're also used to sell products.

### Consumers

- A study by an Australian home loan company found that '94 per cent of women manage and make decisions regarding household budgeting and expenditure'.

### Debt

- There are hundreds of Pay Day lenders who provide loans until the next 'pay day' in exchange for a fee between 500% and 700% per annum in interest.
- Debt can impact on food security, housing, ability to access health care services, and on participating in the life of the community.

### Gambling

- For women, increases in gambling rates have had significant impacts on their levels of debt, and on their health and wellbeing.

### Advertising

- Women's bodies are used to sell everything from cars and beer to cleaning products.
- Women's magazines have ten times more ads and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines.

- Over three-quarters of the covers of women's magazines include at least one message about how women can change the way they look through diet, exercise or cosmetic surgery.
- The barrage of messages about thinness, dieting and beauty tells 'ordinary' women that the female body is an object to be perfected.
- The advertising industry contributes to a culture that tolerates discrimination and sexual harassment against women by encouraging us to see women's bodies as commodities.

### Prostitution

- Victoria's legal sex industry is one of the busiest in the world. In 2005, there were 60,000 visits to legal brothels a week adding up to 3.1 million a year.
- One support agency for women in the sex industry found that 35% of the women they worked with reported problematic gambling and 52% lived in a violent relationship. 44% were single mothers, 80% had body image and self-esteem issues, 25% were supporting a partner, 60% had problems with housing. 80% reported insomnia, 60% painful intercourse, 55% recurring urinary tract infection.

*“Slavery is what slavery’s always been: about one person controlling another person using violence and then exploiting them economically, paying them nothing. That’s what slavery’s about” (Kevin Bales).*

## WHAT IS WOMEN’S HEALTH IN THE NORTH DOING?

Indebtedness, gambling, prostitution and sexual slavery are economic activities that impact on women.

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](http://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.

### Gambling

Gambling is an economic issue that hits some women very hard, but the costs are often hidden.

In *The Machine and Me* documentary, women gamblers show the real costs of gambling, and the strength it takes to resist the lure of the pokies. It also asks if the government is addicted to gambling. This documentary captures the journey of four women from the North, Margaret, Vanna, Maureen and Amber.

Initially alone and isolated in their experiences of gambling addiction, these women found the courage to break through their isolation to participate in a community theatre storytelling project. Throughout the film we witness the women unpack their relationships with the machine as they come to realise that playing the pokies is not about winning at all.

For the women involved, the experience of participating in *The Machine and Me* helped to breakdown feelings of isolation that they experienced in relation to gambling. As one woman said:

*“In such a short time it has moved me and shifted me rather than anything else in the past. It has helped me to open up and work on things. Counselling has not worked for me. This workshop has made me feel normal in this world. I can see my demons. I have enthusiasm to improve things. The workshop has given me face and has helped me to trust in life. I feel stronger about liking myself. I was afraid about not being liked.”*

*The Machine and Me* is a film for those who are affected by problem gambling, those who are close to them, those who work with them or for anyone interested in the personal and social impact of problem gambling.

*The Machine and Me* was developed in partnership with Women’s Health In the North, Brunswick Women’s Theatre and Gambler’s Help Northern. Contact WHIN on 03 9484 1666 or [info@whin.org.au](mailto:info@whin.org.au) if you’d like a copy.

### Sexual Slavery

In sexual slavery, women are literally turned into objects that are bought and sold.

A 2008 High Court case found that the owner of a legal brothel in Brunswick St, Fitzroy had used and possessed slaves. Despite the fact that this is a crime against humanity, and help is available, getting the message to enslaved women is difficult.

Women’s Health In the North decided to ask local governments to help, as they can pass local laws on a wide range of subjects. Before the November 2008 local government elections, Women’s Health In the North wrote to all councillor candidates asking them to pass a local law making it compulsory for signs to be posted in legal brothels saying that sexual slavery is a crime and explaining where to get help. Many candidates agreed, and 22 of them were elected to councils in the North.