

# ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

## WOMEN & UNPAID WORK

Women's work is often not seen as real work, despite the fact that without people having homes where they are fed and cared for, the rest of the economy would grind to a halt.

### Housework

- Women with children who work full-time spend an average of 15 hours a week cooking and cleaning. Men with children working full-time spend six.
- Research shows that women do more housework than men in every type of living situation: married, de facto, divorced, living with parents, and single.
- Women work fewer hours than men in order to care for children and aging parents as well as do the majority of unpaid domestic labour, plunging more and more women into debt as they age.

### Volunteering

- The total value for unpaid volunteer community work around Australia, based on comparative wage rates, was estimated to be around \$24 billion.
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics says that women volunteer 'more commonly than men (36% compared to 32%) and, with few exceptions, this was the case regardless of birthplace, family status, labour force status or the areas in which they lived'.

### Caring

- Unpaid activities, such as caring for children and the elderly, have considerable social and economic benefits for the community.
- In a 2006 study, 69% of Australian adults believed that women should provide the majority of care to children, older parents and dependents with a disability.
- For sole mothers, the rates of reported mental or psychological ill-health are higher than for partnered women.
- In 2007, a report found that more than a third of carers reported feeling severely depressed. The study concluded that 'carers have the lowest collective wellbeing of any group'.
- Significant numbers of women who have experienced intimate partner violence are primary carers for the perpetrators of that violence.
- The average income of carers' households is lower than that of the general population, with carers often worrying that their income will not cover the additional expenses their role as carers requires.

“The traditional economy counts oil spills and wars as contributors to economic growth, while child rearing and housekeeping are deemed valueless” (Marilyn Waring)

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

Recognising  
and valuing  
women's work  
is important.

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.

### Maternity leave

Australia has been one of only two developed countries in the world without paid maternity leave (the other is the United States). Last year, the Federal Government asked the Productivity Commission to look at whether paid maternity leave should be introduced in Australia.

WHIN was one of many organisations and individuals that wrote a submission. We argued that paid maternity leave is good for the health of babies, their mothers, and the community. In the report that followed, the Productivity Commission agreed.

The Productivity Commission said there was 'compelling' evidence that 'six months exclusive parental care fosters improved developed outcomes' for babies. They also found that an early return to work can increase anxiety and depression in new mothers, and that paternity leave has 'emotional benefits for fathers, affects children's emotional and educational achievement and provides support for the mother'.

This year, in a win for the many groups that have called for paid maternity leave, the federal government announced it would introduce a paid maternity leave scheme. Under this scheme, women who have done paid work for at least a day a week for ten months prior to their baby's birth will be paid \$543.78 (the current minimum wage), for up to 18 weeks, to allow them to stay home with their newborn baby. The scheme will be means tested and is expected to start from January 2011. While the scheme isn't perfect (for example, it does not provide the two weeks paternity leave recommended by the Productivity Commission), and will not start til 2011, it is a big step forward, and one won through the advocacy of women.

### Volunteering

Women do a huge amount of volunteering, both informally and in organisations, so when Volunteering Australia called for input on its National Volunteering Policy, we were keen to make sure women were taken into account. The draft policy they put together had little consideration of women's contribution as volunteers, so WHIN put in a submission raising issues for women. WHIN asked Volunteering Australia to consider issues for women volunteers, such as the need for childcare and transports costs, the specific needs of women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young women, older women and women with a disability.

Encouragingly, Volunteering Australia subsequently acknowledged the importance of looking at gender in policy around volunteering.