

12th May 2008

I would like to thank you for allowing me to respond to the inquiry into paid maternity, paternity and parental leave. I particularly appreciate that the people who it most effects and who have the most experience in the matter have a chance to be heard. Unfortunately, those most effected, working mums (and dads), are usually struggling to find time to even read the headlines of a newspaper, let alone make a submission!

My employment brings up two issues – I'm a shift worker who has to spend time away from my family, and I work in a traditionally very male dominated workforce. The generation of women employed before me were the ones who had to break down the barriers to employment and then promotion. Our generation are now fighting to improve conditions in regard to balancing a career and family. Although I received paid maternity leave, other employees in the same company doing a similar job but under a different award, currently do not receive any paid maternity leave. This is under negotiation in the current EBA so hopefully will change in the future.

18 months ago I had my first child. I received 10 weeks paid maternity leave. I also took all my accrued annual leave (another 6 weeks). I then took additional unpaid leave until my baby was 6 months old when I returned to work full time.

I appreciated the baby bonus I received as it helped fund my unpaid time at home. I believe paid maternity leave is essential to enable women to have a family and establish themselves as mothers, to bond with their baby, to breastfeed. I cannot tell you how important those 6 months at home with my baby were. I was able to follow the World Health Organisation's recommendation of exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months, and then continued to partially breastfeed through to 12 months even after I'd returned to work full time.

I found returning to work the most negative time of my whole pregnancy, birth and motherhood experience. I really struggled with it, and I consider myself an intelligent, professional, "together" kind of person. I received support from my family and friends which helped, but it still hurt. I felt horrible leaving my daughter, even though my husband, her father, is her primary care giver and we don't have to use childcare.

I'm now pregnant with my second child and would like to stretch our finances out so I can stay at home until the baby is 8 months old as I hope this additional time will result in me being emotionally in a better place to return to work. However, this is looking increasingly less likely.

From my "professional and academic research", ie discussions with my mothers group (most of whom are working professionals), most women found that at about 8 – 10 months after giving birth they were starting to think about returning to work, and by 12 months most wanted to spend some time doing something outside the home, having some "adult" time. Almost all have returned to full time or part time work in their previous jobs after receiving an average of 12 weeks paid mat leave.

But I'm one of the lucky ones who can afford to take so much time off, I really feel for the mothers who have to return to work after only 8 or 12 weeks at home. That is I why I feel paid maternity leave is so important, and I believe that 14 weeks is insufficient to allow new mothers to bond, breastfeed, deal with the emotions of motherhood, the stress, the chronic fatigue. I don't know how the Inquiry is going to quantify the emotions that occur when you become a mum as I cant even explain them, but that's why we need time to stay at home with our new baby.

I would suggest maternity leave be paid at a base wage level funded by the government. I believe this would be a big gain to lower income earners who need it the most, yet still assist middle income earners. I agree with means testing paid maternity leave recipients, but only to cut out payments at high income levels (\$200,000+) considering the combined income of both parents.

I believe paid maternity leave should then be topped up to the employee's usual salary by the employer (possibly with assistance given to small companies). This is important to allow women to have successful careers. Paid maternity leave at a level consistent with their usual earnings enables women to rise through the ranks and reach a relatively well paying position, to make financial commitments such as a mortgage to buy a home and then have a family. Without paid maternity leave, women are forced to return to work immediately, sell the home or not take on a mortgage, (or marry a rich man and not be self sufficient!)

And to answer those who feel that their taxes shouldn't fund the future generation of babies, maybe they should consider that it is this future generation of babies who will grow up to be the doctors who take care of them in their approaching old age, and will be the tax payers who'll fund the hospitals they'll need. My decision to only have two children is sadly partly based on financial considerations.

In response to other points raised in the Submission Paper: my husband is the primary care giver. He is self employed and works on a casual basis when he can to fit around my work roster. While I was on unpaid leave after having our first child he took on extra work to help with the finances. So as far as gender equity goes, he's very much a hands on dad and we share the care of our child, and I am the primary income earner.

Another point raised in the Submission Paper was in regard to mothers choosing an employer because of the maternity leave provisions. I didn't choose my employer for this reason, however I have chosen my specific job role because I believe it is a much better work / life compromise. I also have a younger female friend who would like to obtain employment with my company as she considers the conditions are more beneficial in regard to family life than some other employers in the same industry.

Please contact me if I can provide any further information or assistance.

Thank you for your consideration,

Regards,
Lauren Calder