

As a parent, I submit my views on the importance of paid maternity leave for all Australian women. If this country was Bulgaria, women would receive over 60 weeks of paid maternity leave. Canada provides about 50 weeks to women. In Australia the majority of women receive no paid maternity leave. Currently the small group of women fortunate enough to receive some paid leave are mainly employed as white collar workers or professionals in government positions.

When my son was born over thirty years ago, as a state school teacher, I had access to six months unpaid maternity leave. I was obliged to go on leave three months before his birth and was required to return three months after. I could not access long service leave or use sick leave to augment my leave. As my husband was on the minimum wage, the loss of my income made for a very stressful time in the midst of the joy I experienced at the birth of my son. If I had had paid maternity leave, even fourteen weeks would have made the financial burden a little lighter.

While I was on leave I was able to breastfeed but on my return to work my son was bottle fed. The benefits of breastfeeding for the child's health and well-being are well documented. Once he was in childcare, he experienced ear infections and other illnesses which he would have been shielded from had I been at home with him.

Even though my maternity leave was unpaid, I was fortunate that I had the first three months with my son. Women in low-paid jobs rarely have that benefit. Without paid maternity leave many women may be forced to resign from their jobs. Given that so many young couples have huge mortgages, that often means they defer having a family or may only have one child because that's all they can afford to support.

Australia and the United States are the only two countries in the OECD who don't provide paid maternity leave. Research shows that women who receive paid maternity leave are more likely to return to work. Doesn't that help the economy? Given the skill shortage, Australia needs all the help it can get.