

When I had my only child in 1989, I was lucky to be a lecturer, employed by James Cook University in Townsville. Because I thought my job required it, and because I had the support of my mother in caring for my new-born son, I took only six weeks' leave and returned to work. I was able to do this too because as a lecturer my working times were flexible: it was up to me when I was in the office, although actual teaching times (about eight hours a week) were fixed. Still, the first year after my son's birth were very demanding, and the whole family—my husband, mother and myself were under a lot of stress. I hated having to leave my son to go to work, even though I was lucky in being able to spend quite a lot of time at home with him, while I prepared my classes and generally kept up with the demands of the job at home. I don't think we could have survived without the advantages of my kind of work and much help from my husband and mother.

I was surprised and dismayed to learn that, unlike the women in most other OECD countries, many Australian women don't have paid maternity leave as a legal right—I always understood that the university made such leave available because it was legally obliged to. I now realise that other employers are not legally obliged to give paid maternity leave to their staff.

I don't see therefore how women in the retail and hospitality industries can retain their jobs during the first years after they become mothers. This must place them at a great disadvantage in their ongoing careers, and also at a financial disadvantage. Earning your own money, rather than being kept by a partner is basic to adult self respect.

I therefore urge that a statutory paid maternity leave scheme be put in place, to cover casual women employees, and the two-thirds of Australian women who have no paid maternity leave.