

**Submission to the Productivity Commission on  
Paid Maternity Leave by AFUW-SA  
Wednesday May 28<sup>th</sup> 2008**

AFUW-SA wishes to add to the submission already presented to the Commission by Dr Jennifer Strauss, President of the Australian Federation of University Women Inc.

**We wish to emphasise the need to invest in the health of mother and child.**

**1. Problem of attaching Paid Maternity Leave to a welfare payment through means-testing.**

The attitude of Australian governments to welfare recipients has often been punitive.

Some of the evidence is in the quarantining of welfare payments to ensure the provision of food for children while failing to address the underlying reasons for the difficulties faced by women in these situations.

It is evident in the often punitive approach in CentreLink and the refusal to recognise, for example, that a woman undertaking a university course to improve her economic and social position, is actually studying to enable her to enter permanent paid work. AFUW-SA in 2006 received evidence from a young woman denied financial support for post-graduate course-based study in audiology. She was told by a CentreLink clerk to 'get a real job'. Mothers, undertaking graduate study in education to be registered as teachers, have received similar responses. There appeared, in these instances, to be no understanding that improving skills through education was not only helping women to be pro-active regarding the economic and social future for themselves and their children, but investing in Australia's future as well by raising the skill level of its citizens.

As a result, women receiving welfare payments for any reason, are made to appear a burden on society, on the 'taxpayers' – the mantra used by politicians, commercial media and others eager to justify inaction or denigrate the less fortunate.

As a result, women feel anxious, uncertain of how they will be treated, either depressed or angry about their treatment. Their level of stress rises. And in both cases the state of mind not only affects the well-being of the mother, it has its effect on the well-being of the baby.

Therefore, any suggestion that Paid Maternity Leave should be means-tested would add to the levels of resentment and increase the bureaucratic costs of ensuring that no woman above the designated means-test level receives what is, in fact, her right as an earned entitlement, just as superannuation, usually higher for men, is seen as an earned entitlement with tax benefits.

AFUW-SA has received information that there appears to be some suggestion being put forward that, like the Baby Bonus, Paid Maternity Leave should be means tested. This would mean nothing for the women who, through their diligence and their success in higher education, earn higher incomes. [The problem for women giving birth while undertaking post-doctoral study has been dealt with in an Addendum to the AFUW submission.]

**2. Health of mother and child**

To continue to deny mothers, who are already in the workforce, paid maternity leave is to perpetuate levels of anxiety about their future options in their careers, whether they will be penalised and forced to return to work at a lower level, whether their position will be there, and at what rate of pay or salary. For those in lower paid jobs, on shifts, the situation is even worse.

This uncertainty, in a world where uncertainty predominates, must adversely affect the health of mother and child.

To ensure that, in those early weeks, the mother is free from levels of financial and its corresponding psychological anxiety, income support is essential. And it needs to be at a level which enables the mother to feel that she can take the time to bond with her baby. It must also not penalise those women who have temporarily given up their work/career to have a child.

While breast-feeding has been referred to in the AFUW submission as important in these early weeks, breast-feeding may not be an option for all women and bottle-fed babies need to have the same time to bond with their mothers and the mothers with their babies.

There is increasing knowledge and recognition of the significance of the earliest weeks in a child's cognitive development. Its quality is influenced by the emotional context in which it is being developed. For example, in South Australia, \$39 million is being put into child-oriented centres from babyhood to kindergarten/registration to help mothers and fathers have support in the process of parenting and help them to understand how the effective, comforting well-being begins for their baby.

These are not-for-profit centres connecting health and education in ways that are appropriate for new mothers. They decrease feelings of isolation. They are investments by the State in the wellbeing of mother and child and in the future health and education of the community. What if mothers are unable to take advantage of the support that is there if they are forced to return to work for fear of losing the job they have, or because they do not have the money to help pay the mortgage or rent or food, energy costs and emergencies.

When we generalise we forget the needs of significant groups in our society. Maternity Leave must be paid to all women regardless of race/culture. It must go to all women that are on-going employees, full time/ or part-time. Paid Maternity Leave must be paid to Aboriginal women who receive Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) or Step-up/Steppers.

Women who have been doing contract work,, whether full or part time for longer than twelve months, must also have access to paid maternity leave. And, in terms of who is caring for the new born child - if, for whatever reason, the new born child is taken away from the mother and the grandparents, for example, become the primary carers, and if they are workers, part or full time, they too need to have access to paid maternity leave?

The AFUW submission Points 3 and 4 deal with the necessity for the appropriate level of income support, Point 5 the desirable period of income support, and Point 8 deals with how it should be funded.

By its emphasis on the positive effects for the health of mother and newborn child, AFUW-SA seeks to reinforce the AFUW case put by Dr Jennifer Strauss and join the National Council in recommending that 'the initial period of paid leave should be set at 18 weeks, but that it should be understood that this is subject to revision in order to continue to meet ILO recommendations for best practice.'

It should be noted that the Australian government, on an international level, has begun to support the end of discrimination against women by acceding to the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The absence of Paid Maternity Leave is a form of discrimination against women within our nation.

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