

Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave 2008

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Since 2006 I have been self-employed, working as a writer/consultant in the social policy field. My clients are predominantly community sector agencies dealing with issues of homelessness, affordable housing and support services for vulnerable people. Prior to this I worked for government and in both the private and community sectors for eighteen years.

In August 2008 I will be giving birth to my first child. As a self-employed woman, I am part of the 64% of Australian women not eligible for any form of Paid Maternity Leave, and therefore will have to fully self-fund any period of unpaid leave.

With the growing numbers of women turning to self-employment and working from home to help balance their work/family responsibilities, I believe this is an important part of the workforce that needs to be considered in the development of any PML scheme. Contrary to some common perceptions, very few self-employed women are running million dollar businesses – in fact many exist on very meagre salaries well below the minimum wage and have none of the employer-provided leave entitlements associated with salaried employment.

The need for universal paid maternity leave

I strongly support a national, government funded paid maternity leave scheme. At a minimum this should be **for a period of 6 months** from birth to allow for all new mothers to physically and emotionally recover from the stresses of labour and early motherhood, and allow adequate time for establishing breastfeeding routines and early bonding with the newborn child. While there has been much discussion about Australia adopting the minimum 14 weeks as proposed by the ILO, I believe that a developed and progressive nation such as ours should be aiming higher than this minimum.

I support the model proposed by other organisations that Paid Maternity Leave should be paid at the rate of the **minimum wage, along with a compulsory 9% superannuation contribution**. Employers can then choose to top of this amount with additional payments – or in the case of self-employed people like myself, they can attempt to self-fund the difference between the minimum wage and their usual income.

The major benefits of a Paid Maternity Leave scheme should be seen as:

- Giving Australian children the best possible start in life, through the development of strong and meaningful attachments with their primary carer in the first six months of life (predominantly women, particularly those who are breastfeeding);
- Valuing the productive contribution of women as mothers and carers;

- Promoting a scheme that maximises equity in the workplace, and minimises the possibility of discrimination against women (which would be the most likely scenario if employers were expected to fully or even partially fund the scheme);
- Encouraging greater participation, and retention, of women in the paid workforce during their peak child bearing years;
- Acknowledging the lower lifetime earnings (and retirement savings) of women due to their child bearing role within the family and the community, through a partial remuneration of those lost earnings.

Paid Paternity Leave

While I also strongly support the need for paid paternity leave and other parental leave schemes, I believe it is essential that providing paid maternity leave is given the highest priority due the central role that mothers, as primary carers, have in the birth and early life of their child. The longer term goal of changing attitudes and expectations around the benefits of sharing parenting responsibilities is important, but should not be used as another excuse to delay the introduction of PML for women.

Improving support of women in the paid workforce

Once there is a government funded paid maternity leave scheme in place in Australia, I believe it is important that the Federal Government focuses on complementary measures to better support the participation of women in the paid workforce. Such measures should promote greater support for flexible working arrangements for women returning the workforce, including promotion of the development of ‘quality’ part time work for women, and other flexible arrangements for working parents (both male and female). Until such measures are in place, women will always be forced to make greater sacrifices than their male colleagues in their careers and in balancing work/family life in order to accommodate the greater expectations placed on them around their role of mothers and that of income earners.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission – I look forward to hearing the results of the Inquiry’s deliberations, and hopefully seeing a Paid Maternity Leave scheme established before the birth of my second child!