

## **Submission by Radical Women to Productivity Commission Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity & Parental Leave**

Radical Women (RW) is an international feminist organisation, long active in the movements for social change. RW's members cover the age spectrum, working in diverse occupations, educating themselves for the workforce, or retired. Many are, or have been, working mothers – single or partnered. RW strongly believes in the necessity of paid leave for all working parents. However, this society makes children the *private* responsibility of women. As the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper states, about 70% of women of childbearing age are in the workforce, and most of the leave taken around the birth of a child is taken by the mother. The Issues Paper well amplifies on the consequences for working mothers. One example, cited in the paper, is a 2002 study from the United Kingdom: of the 40% of mothers who did not have access to maternity leave, the majority did not return to work until their child was three years old. This submission will therefore focus on paid maternity leave.

RW believes that paid maternity/parental leave and childcare are inseparable issues. We note the limitation of the Productivity Commission's enquiry, which puts childcare outside its ambit. Yet in May this year, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that in March 2008, more mothers with children under 15 years old were employed than at any other time in the past decade. Between 33% and 37% of children under 12 are cared for informally — mostly by grandparents (60%). More than 160,000 working mothers who want to return to work cannot, because the cost of childcare and the scarcity of places make this impossible.

### ***Radical Women recommends:***

- Employer-paid maternity leave, up to 12 months and on full pay. Eligibility to be regardless of length of service or terms of employment (full-time, part-time, casual or fixed term). Paid leave to apply to adoptive as well as birth-mothers, and regardless of relationship (same-sex, opposite-sex or single). The right of return to the same job to be guaranteed and retraining provided as needed. The leave to be counted as service. The scheme is to be paid and sustained by a national fund, paid into in proportion to an employer's capacity (that is, size of profits): large corporate employers will therefore pay the bulk, while the smallest businesses and poorest not-for-profits would pay nominally or nothing and still be able to provide these leave entitlements to their employees.
- Free, 24-hour, industry- and government-funded, community-controlled childcare centres on or near the job, with educational, recreational and medical facilities for children.
- Equal pay for equal or comparable work, as a right for all working women
- Raise welfare to liveable wage levels: all women should be economically independent and not coerced, as they are under current welfare rules, to take unsuitable, insecure, low-paid jobs

The enquiry, in its Terms of Reference, puts “the need to ensure strong and sustainable economic growth” – namely, guarantee profit — as paramount. Historically, this profit

growth has generated significantly from women's unpaid and underpaid work. By bearing the next generation of workers and looking after their physical, emotional and psychological needs from cradle to grave – at no cost to the employer or shareholder — women, through their unpaid labour, have been a mainstay of this economic system. This exploitation of women's childbearing and rearing role crosses over into the labour market, where they work primarily in part-time or casual, dead-end jobs. Overall, they earn 83% of men's earnings. According to the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), their pay drops even more, by an average of 28%, when they have one child or more.

A survey by the federal government's Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EWOA) in 2003 reinforces this bleak picture. It found that those industries that rely most on low-paid women workers show the lowest levels of paid maternity leave: hospitality (accommodation, cafés and restaurants) at six percent and retail at 17 percent. Similarly, EWOA's 2000 survey revealed that clerical, sales and services were the occupations with the lowest incidence of paid maternity leave (18 percent). These appalling statistics can be largely explained by the fact that 24% of women of childbearing age are excluded from eligibility for the leave because, as casual workers, they have less than 12 months' service.

The Productivity Commission's Issues Paper quotes federal Treasurer Wayne Swan, Julia Gillard (Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Education and Minister for Social Inclusion) and Jenny Macklin (Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs): "We want to explore ways to make it as easy as possible for working mums to balance their employment with the important job of raising a new generation of Australians." RW stresses that this double burden for working women also must end.

RW believes that the recommendations we propose are fair, reasonable and overdue. Paid maternity leave, free childcare and equal pay, as proposed above, should be industrial ***rights and entitlements*** for all working women; economic independence must be a social right and entitlement for ***all*** women. The wealth exists to provide this.

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