

Submission:

Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave

Productivity Commission

Supporting Families to Care and Work:

Findings from the Families, Fertility and the Future Study

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1. Background

The Productivity Commission has been invited to review paid parental leave and report to the Federal Government. The Commission has indicated that it is to:

- Explore the extent of paid parental leave provided by employers in Australia;
- Identify the models of paid parental leave that could be used in Australia.

This submission is provided by the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research at Monash University in Melbourne. Based in the School of Political and Social Inquiry in the Faculty of Arts on the Clayton campus of the University, the Centre was established in 1987 and for 21 years has provided undergraduate and graduate teaching in feminist and gender issues, served as a focal point for research into a wide range of gender issues and provided an important point of contact between the University and the broader community on matters pertaining to women and gender.

In 2002-2003, the Centre led a large team in a research project: ***Families, Fertility and the Future: Understanding the Current Downturn in Australia's Birthrate***; focused on the factors that drive fertility decisions. The research sample of one hundred women (approximately half with children) and fourteen men were drawn from five different areas across Victoria, including metropolitan, outer urban and rural. The areas included were: the City of Port Phillip, Casey, the North West, focused particularly on Brimbank and Maribyrnong, Gippsland and Bendigo. The women came from diverse family backgrounds, represented a broad range of ethnicities, and differed in education levels and socio-economic location. Study participants were asked about their decisions to have children, their workplace needs and the impact of government policy on family formation.

Qualitative interviews were used to probe how people assess social, economic and policy factors in their choices about having children. This type of data is a necessary addition to survey and demographic data for effective policy setting, since that data can illuminate patterns, but can only speculate at the underlying reasons for such trends. In depth qualitative data is necessary to understand how family choices about work and care are negotiated in relation to social, economic and institutional factors. The final project report:

What Women (and Men) Want: Births, Policies and Choices was released in September 2004.

The findings of this research focused on paid parental leave, specifically maternity leave, are pertinent to this Inquiry.

2. Key Policy Implications from Research

2.1. The role of paid parental leave in continuing workplace attachment should be a specific focus of policy development.

In the study population, there was limited knowledge about existing paid and unpaid parental leave. This can be shown most directly in responses of the young women less than 25 years old who participated in the study. This group overwhelmingly expected that they would combine future motherhood with paid employment and that they would be entitled to some form of paid maternity leave when they chose to do so. The expectations of these young women had not been challenged by consistent press attention during 2002 and 2003 to the lack of a nationally funded maternity leave scheme or extensive reporting of how few Australian female employees were actually entitled to any form of paid maternity leave.

For many of the older women having children, they were grateful if they received any form of paid leave and did not see parental leave as a mechanism that benefitted employers or assisted to maintain connection to the workforce. For the women in this study, career change or review was a necessary aspect of having a family and they tended to view unpaid maternity leave as an individual benefit, and therefore a burden for employers. The role of maternity leave in ensuring women's access to the labour market and ensuring continuity of experienced labour supply to employers was not prevalent in their understanding.

Others had experiences of pregnancy discrimination or maternity discrimination that diminished their expectations of continuing employment. Isabella explained the following situation in her workplace which was the reason she gave for leaving that workplace rather than negotiating maternity leave. These instances were mostly accepted with resignation as part of trying to combine motherhood and paid employment. Other women reported that they had not argued for any more than the minimum maternity leave available because they saw long term negative employment consequences for them in that course of action.

These views indicate **women generally did not perceive maternity leave as a viable and valid part of a career progression or working life**. Rather they saw maternity leave as instituting a break in their working life that it was their responsibility to manage. For some, this extended to a view that employers had no responsibility for assisting with this key aspect of work-family reconciliation. It seems likely that this reluctance and/or low expectations will need to be addressed as part of a strategy to institute an effective paid parental leave system.

RECOMMENDATION:

Paid parental leave works to maintain labour market attachment while supporting social needs for care for children. This link is not necessarily well understood and needs to be part of the development of a comprehensive policy framework.

2.2. Women and men identify single policy measures as important but do not see these single initiatives as removing barriers to labour force attachment.

In our research, **single policy initiatives and entitlements were not identified as changing decisions about the raising of children and paid work**, but these policy initiatives were definitely taken into account in how women made decisions about care and paid employment. While policies and entitlements such as paid parental leave were not generally identified as the factors which directly influenced first birth timing or decisions about having children, **they were significant in choices about employment afterwards and were particularly important to women considering further children after a first birth.**

Women with one child or two children cited a sense of shock often about the effect of children on their lives: at the cost and availability of child care; and at the near impossibility of effectively managing work expectations and parenting. A number of women without children did view parental leave provisions as likely to feature in their future decisions, but these women also focused on long-term career effects of balancing work and children as crucially important to their choices about whether or not to have children. For women with and without children, **issues of work/life balance presented a challenging and often difficult balancing act.**

In this context, current **limited access to paid maternity leave and other forms of parental leave is a crucial one.** Only a quarter of the women in the study had access to paid maternity leave, very few men had access to paid paternal leave; and while the limited availability of paid leave was not identified as a 'make-or-break' factor in family decision-making, one third of the women saw parental leave as a very important way of providing additional financial support to their reproductive decisions and **these women did identify it as a crucial way to maintain a connection with the labour market.** Given that our research indicated that people felt that their family choices had not been supported by governments (due to lack of adequately funded childcare, diminished maternal and child health services, issues with the provision of health care and education), government action to provide universal access to paid parental leave would provide direct support to women's and men's choices in the first instance and would re-establish government as committed to the effective balancing of work and family life. It needs to be supported by attention to the other existing barriers to work/family integration.

RECOMMENDATION:

An effective work and family policy framework with paid parental leave as a centrepiece is vital to support working families, and ensure paid labour and care can co-exist for women and men.

3. Other Findings of the Study Relevant to Terms of Reference

3.1 Overall, many women indicated they had ended up lowering their expectations about what both governments and employers would provide in supporting their fertility decisions.

The women and men in this study generally accepted what Kerreen Reiger has identified as a new phase in Australian social history where “the production of children is now viewed more and more as a private choice rather than a social contribution” (2001: 4). They recognised the low level of government support as part of what they had to negotiate when thinking about children.

3.2 Common stereotypes about how differently situated women consider motherhood and its relationship to paid work, government benefits and policy were challenged.

For example: women choosing not to have children did not reflect the common image of them as career-driven high achievers or women who can’t find partners; and women with multiple children featured strongly among those exhibiting significant and on-going attachments to the labour market.

4. Concluding Comments

The community view of family policies and work/family balance that emerged in our research was a complex one. A policy framework that makes explicit the intersection of social and employment policies is crucial to the effective introduction of paid parental policies to support family care and workforce participation. The one hundred and fourteen women and men in this study, whether they were childless or not, in full-time or part-time employment or out of the workforce, identified the importance of flexible work, supportive workplaces, community services and cultural attitudes in how they chose to negotiate challenge of work and care. While women with children did focus more specifically on maternity leave, all the women interviewed talked of issues of work/life balance as important for them. It was clear that single policy initiatives such as paid parental leave need to be provided in the context of broader social, community and workplace supports for women and men.

Our research also found a distinct ***lack of resentment about and expectation of governmental support and initiatives***. While there were a number of women that particularly identified changes that had impacted negatively on their work/family choices, overall the people in this study were resigned to limited structural assistance in how they negotiated the challenges of work and family.

This indicates that people's work/family decisions, whilst influenced by perceptions of limited government or publicly supported services, difficult and/or expensive access to childcare, and concerns about workplace flexibility or inflexibility, may be accepted as private decisions from which government and public policy are distant. Key workplace indicators such as the number of hours Australians work, and the concentration of women in part-time work suggest that work/family balance is becoming increasingly challenging for women and men. Public policy influence and leadership on issues of work/life balance, workforce participation by women and men with child care responsibilities, and family formation decision-making by men and women, will remain marginal at best, and negative at worst, unless a comprehensive policy framework is developed that:

- recognises the significance and centrality of paid parental leave as demonstrating a public policy commitment to child care and parental workplace attachment;
- locates and integrates workplace and employment policies with social and family support policies.

5. Study Publications Relevant to Terms of Reference

FULL REPORT

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