**SUBMISSION TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION ON MATERNITY LEAVE IN AUSTRALIA**

**Introduction:**

The main arguments for Australia to develop a publicly funded scheme to support women in taking time out from the labour market to have their children have been well-rehearsed in submissions to and reports by HREOC in recent years (HREOC 2002) and are covered in the Productivity Commission's recent Issues Paper. My response will be primarily in general terms, supporting the question of women's health care needs and core principles of entitlement rather than actual leave mechanisms. It is extraordinary that a country with a strong tradition of public support for its citizens and regulation of the labour market to ensure a measure of equity for families, has continued to rely on an *ad hoc* and patchwork system of family leave provisions. I write therefore to express strong support for a properly funded and national scheme of paid maternity leave for women as part of a system of parental or family leave which should include both paternity leave and support for other care responsibilities such as of sick family members. I reiterate only a few salient points here:

**Concerning the importance of both maternity and parental leave to protect family well-being:**

**1.The contemporary 'care crunch'**: Women's labour is now essential to economic production across most of the economy yet they still carry a disproportionate share of household work and caring responsibility as well as the bodily demands of reproduction. On the basis of international literature and legislative example, and recent research by colleagues such as Dr Barbara Pocock in SA (2005; 2007), it is clear that a 'care crunch' (Hancock 2003) is emerging which will have significant social consequences for the well-being of women themselves, for families and for society more generally. Contemporary working hours and intensified demands arising in the changing social conditions of '24/7' modern life are straining families considerably. A significant clash has developed between changing behaviour and yet unchanging values and institutions. The 'fallout', as Pocock argues, includes declining quality of life, through loss of community, rising feelings of guilt as parents struggle to manage time and money, housing payments and children,

the quality of intimate adult and parent-child relationships declines, and caregiving responsibilities loom large. It is largely women as mothers who are caught in the double bind of trying to maintain living conditions through labour market participation yet also meet increasing expectations of intensive childrearing through supervision of activities, monitoring nutrition and supporting 'health in the home' even across generations, yet also have children. While additional leave for fathers is also highly desirable, it should not detract from women's specific maternity leave. For low-income families especially, lack of access to paid leave means women are unable to take the appropriate time needed when they have a baby.

2. **Women's health in childbearing:** Although the Issues paper raises questions relating to establishing breastfeeding, it pays insufficient attention to the physical demands of childbirth and early motherhood. This reflects a common misapprehension in recent policy discourse that leads to downplaying gender-based analysis. The opening of labour market opportunities to a wider range of women in recent decades has been essential to their economic security and social wellbeing, and to national economic productivity. However this has been accompanied by an unfortunate tendency to use a 'sameness' model of gender which neglects the physiological demands of childbearing. Gender *equity* does not require treating women the same as men. Pregnancy, childbirth and lactation all make considerable demands on women's bodies and require both emotional and intensely embodied *work*. This is not only a matter of personal choice and contribution to an immediate family but is essential to producing future generations.

Both bodily labour and social responsibilities are entailed in actually giving birth to as well as in rearing children. Pregnancy and childbirth, while optimally a normal healthy life process rather than medical events, demand enormous exertion and make demands on women's bodies and emotions, efforts deserving social support. Women need financial support for the considerable period of time it takes to prepare and rest in late pregnancy, to recover from birth, to establish the dynamic and complex process of breastfeeding, and to adjust to the demands of a child. This requires at least 2-3 months usually. It is no accident that traditional societies 'mothered' a mother by allowing time

out from work and family responsibilities for a period usually of 40 days. The ample evidence of the economic and health value of breastfeeding (Waring 1988; Smith 2005) means that it is not merely a matter of personal 'choice' or individual health benefit to mother and baby but an activity needing national recognition through publicly supported maternity leave of at least 3-6 months duration. Comments from Maternal and Child Health nurses have indicated their concern at the problems of adjustment faced by women who are in the paid workforce one day and struggling at home with a new baby a few days later (Reiger and Keleher 2002). Rising rates of postnatal depression involve several factors including birth trauma, but also lack of social support for motherhood which has become downgraded in social value yet under enormous strain in the 'new economy' (Manne 2005).

**In conclusion,** strong arguments can be made therefore that women's needs as mothers should be recognised by universal access to adequate paid maternity leave and that economy and society derive direct benefit form the reproductive labour of female citizens. Most importantly though, the debate should not only be in terms of needs and productivity but also be reframed in terms of social justice and women's human rights. This is already enshrined in ILO provisions on maternity and those of Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (1984), to which Australia is already a signatory. Maternity leave clearly remains a gender equity issue as it ensures women are less likely to be financially disadvantaged compared with male colleagues when they take time out from paid work to bear children.

**References**

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