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VIEW Clubs of Australia is a nationwide self-governed women's organisation, formed in 1960 by The Smith Family to promote the Voice, Interests and Education of Women. Through strong VIEW networks, women are empowered to achieve new skills and confidence and give voice to issues of national concern. Communities benefit through the commitment of more than 21,000 women of VIEW to the provision of educational outcomes for Australia's disadvantaged children and families.

While many women have the skills to negotiate Paid Maternity Leave and a plan to return to work part-time, the majority of women do not have the capacity to advocate on their own behalf. Many low paid and casual workers lack the skills to negotiate regarding their working arrangements. This is an inequitable situation which needs to be viewed as a critical first step in creating genuinely family friendly workplaces for women, regardless of their socio-economic standing.

At the same time corporate peer pressure is forcing many companies to adopt Paid Maternity Leave as a recruitment strategy and a means of attracting and retaining skilled and valued employees. This strategy, however, does not flow through to those in lower incomes, in minimum-skilled roles or in casual employment and has enormous negative impact on the disadvantaged of Australia.

'Among the 51.1% of organisations that do not provide Paid Maternity Leave are sectors that have a high number of women workers, particularly the retail, accommodation and food services sectors'¹.

Importance of the early years in childhood development

Dr Don Edgar, founder of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and Dr Fiona Stanley, former Australian of the Year, both argue that the learning and development of our children begins at the beginning of life and that services and systems are needed to provide this support. Similarly, The Smith Family's research supports the premise that early intervention in the lives of disadvantaged children is the most powerful way to ensure a better start in life.

¹ Australian Government: Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency Media Release 26/05/08

The Smith Family is a Facilitating Partner in the Communities for Children initiative which aims to address the health and early development needs of young children aged 0-5 years.

Research shows that a supportive environment for children, especially in the earliest weeks and months after they are born, greatly increases their chances for better learning outcomes and more successful transitions from home to school and through other life transitions².

By employing a strategic and sustainable 'whole of community' approach, The Smith Family works with the Australian Government and local stakeholders to deliver a range of services and activities that provide early childhood opportunities for over 133,000 Australians to encourage the wellbeing of young children and their families³.

The evidence is profound and the economics are clear - early intervention in the lives of disadvantaged children is the most powerful way to ensure a better start in life⁴.

Context of our submission

This submission reflects the following context:

- ◆ Socio economic
- ◆ An ageing population
- ◆ Equity within the workplace
- ◆ The role of grandparents to provide replacement child care is mainly provided by grandmothers.
- ◆ Grandparents currently contribute significant savings to Government spending by providing unfunded care of children.

VIEW Clubs of Australia supports the concept of Paid Maternity Leave to enable all women, no matter their socio- economic conditions, access to equity within the workplace. As advocates for women, and disadvantaged children and families, VIEW

² National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Child Care Research Network (2004) cited in Smart, D., Sanson, A., Baxter, J. and Hayes, A (2008) Home to school transitions for financially disadvantaged children. The Smith Family / Australian Institute of Family Studies: Australia

³ The Smith Family (2008) Annual Report 2007/08. The Smith Family: Sydney.

⁴ Shonkoff, J>P> and Phillips, D.A. (eds) (2000), From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development, National Academy Press, Washington, DC. & Hertzman, C. (2002), *An early child development strategy for Australia? Lessons from Canada*, Commission for Children and Young People (Queensland).

women support lifelong learning for all Australians and the concept of equity for all. The introduction of Paid Maternity Leave across the entire employment sector will assist women to fully participate in society and reduce discrimination in the workplace.

Objectives

The objective of this submission is to promote the concept of a Paid Maternity Leave scheme. VIEW Clubs of Australia supports the proposition that six months Paid Maternity Leave is an appropriate level of support. Further, that there are three options for underwriting a scheme for Paid Maternity Leave:

- (a) Fully funded by the employer
- (b) Fully funded by the government
- (c) Funded by both employer and government.

VIEW supports option (b) as it builds on the significant number of private sector companies already providing this support while government support will enable smaller and less profitable companies to introduce Paid Maternity Leave.

VIEW women are of the belief that providing the best start in life for a child should be the focus and a Paid Maternity Leave scheme will enable this to take place. In this instance, Paid Maternity Leave is only one of a number of aspects to be considered if we are to ensure young children get the best start in life. Other perspectives include the cost benefit of improved services in the area of post natal depression, improved access to parenting classes, parenting help, and early interventions for children to prevent problems from developing later on in life.

Justification

Why should Government and/or employers fund a Paid Maternity Leave scheme?

- It encourages women to have children and especially at a younger age which has a national economic benefit. An increase in the birth-rate for Australia will alleviate the long term pressures of an ageing population and address the significant challenges posed by a declining fertility rate. Without this population growth the increase in social benefits to enable older Australians to maintain an adequate quality of lifestyle will inevitably lead to higher taxes.
- It promotes fairness for women who wish to have children and would otherwise be financially disadvantaged.

- It would provide income support for women with far reaching effects on women's retirement savings.
- It reduces the necessity in many cases of grandmothers becoming 'surrogate' mothers because the mother has to return to work to supplement the family income.
- It ensures economic security for families by providing a guaranteed source of funding from the birth of the child.
- It means that Australia complies with the CEDAW Optional Protocol on the provision of Paid Maternity Leave.

Conclusion

The benefits to the family of an equitable and universal scheme are in our opinion three fold:

- remove the disadvantage faced by many women in small and medium businesses and the private sector by allowing them access to similar advantages as women who work in larger, more profitable organisations and the public sector,
- benefit families by providing financial security at a time when the health and wellbeing of the mother and baby are of paramount importance,
- remove the necessity for grandparents to take on the role of carer.