



## Submission to the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee – Fairer Paid Parental Leave (PPL) Bill 2016

24 November 2016

Dear Senators

The Council of Single Mothers and their Children Victoria (CSMC) has worked for 47 years to improve the lives of single mother families in this State and across Australia. We believe it is critically important to Australia's future economy to ensure that every child, regardless of birth circumstances, has a fair start in life. The conditions under which women are able to give birth and raise their children in the early stages of development are, both in evidence and lived experience, critical to the outcomes for every child and thus, to social and economic outcomes for the country.

Women become single mothers for many reasons including domestic violence, marital breakdown, the death of a husband or partner, an unexpected or a planned pregnancy. Whatever their circumstances, many single mothers will be affected by the proposed paid parental leave amendments.

CSMC members are powerfully motivated to do the best for their children, and all parents know that starting very young children in childcare arrangements so mothers can return to work sooner than they judge wise, is not the best thing for the children. There is evidence that exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months of age is the best for babies and this is the recommendation of both the World Health Organisation and the Commonwealth Department of Health<sup>i</sup>. This exclusive feeding is most easily achieved on leave. Those who suggest women can readily express milk and have others bottle feed it to the babies have little experience of the difficulties and stress inherent in the time consuming activity of regular expressing and foregoing a crucial bonding time to a stranger.

In addition to evidence of the benefits of breastfeeding, there are also measurable and negative impacts of not breastfeeding, particularly where this is combined with less maternal attention or greater maternal stress. These include slower brain<sup>ii</sup> and cognitive development<sup>iii</sup>, measurable impact on [school performance](#)<sup>iv</sup> and [later](#) life<sup>v</sup> and increased risk of obesity<sup>vi</sup>. Other evidence points to the first six months as a time of building a strong attachment between mother and child that facilitates language development and the general well-being of both. CSMC contends that time invested in our babies and small children will pay dividends in better adjusted teenagers and adults and thus, in overall social dividends.

Australia's *current* PPL scheme is one of the least generous in the world. Of the 34 OECD countries, 33 offer paid parental leave schemes. The OECD's most recent report on PPL<sup>vii</sup> ranks Australia's current PPL scheme as the third lowest in the OECD, with only Portugal and the USA having lesser entitlements. Reducing the existing scheme still further will be detrimental to many women and their babies as most babies are:

- still feeding at least 1-2 times per night between 3 and 6 months,
- not yet sitting independently, and
- increasing their engagement and responding to language cues.

CSMC is concerned that current moves to limit the scheme do not take into account either the evidence or the stories of things that go awry in the first six months of a baby's life. These stories move from the common to the exceptional and include:

- the combination of interrupted sleep at night and pressure on mothers to perform at work often results in fatigue that compromises safety and productivity at best and has evidence based links to post-natal depression at worst;
- the many women and babies whose birthing experience is not trouble free and requires considerable recovery time;
- the great difficulty many new parents experience getting babies into regular sleeping patterns and the toll on family relations when both parents are working and sleep deprived;
- time needed to integrate the new baby where there are older siblings;
- difficulties getting affordable and quality infant child care in their area;
- the loss of connection to their employer for women who can't return to work within 18 weeks due to struggles with their own or their baby's health, adjusting older children to the new addition or dealing with feeding problems.

It is significant that under the current scheme which allows more than 18 weeks of leave, 85% of mothers do not return to work within 18 weeks and 64% of mothers do not return to work before 26 weeks. This suggests Australian parents know what our government appears to not know: that babies are not ready to be left and if we care about the citizenry of the future, we must take the time and care for the babies now.

The recent 2016 Boyer lectures have highlighted the work of Sir Michael Marmot and the relationship of social health determinants to the continuing well-being of the country. While Australia still rates well in global scales, Marmot points to growing inequalities that will impact upon the health of citizens and thereby, our economy. Remedies include "greater equity of power, money and resources".<sup>viii</sup> Recent research from the OECD supports an emerging consensus that "addressing high and growing inequality is critical to promote strong and sustained growth".<sup>ix</sup>

Australia already has a significant gendered wealth gap that impacts on women from the time of birth to retirement and superannuation. Financially disadvantaging women who take time off work to be with their babies will likely widen this gap, as families with a baby will have to decide whether the new mothers will either forego the lost income and the family will attempt to survive without it, or be forced back to work before they are ready, losing valuable bonding time and incurring additional childcare costs. This disadvantage will be even more keenly felt by those women who, for whatever reason, are parenting alone.

The current PPL scheme, whilst lower by comparison with OECD countries, was designed to operate as a public/private partnership, encouraging businesses to transition to more active roles in ensuring women can both parent effectively and return to the workplace with minimal losses to productivity.

We see any diminution of this approach as detrimental to the well-being of mothers and babies now, and to the social and economic well-being of Australia's future.

We trust you will consider our submission.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JD' or similar initials, written in a cursive style.

**Jenny Davidson**

Chief Executive Officer

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## References

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