

Dear Standing Committee on Procedure,

I applaud your initiative to review the practices and procedures of the House to better support nursing mothers in Parliament.

In Australia, women have the right to breastfeed almost anywhere they have the legal right to be. This right is well established and protected by federal law.

However, the obligations on employers to facilitate breastfeeding are still unclear and many women are reluctant to make a fuss to exercise their rights.

Some mothers find themselves expressing in their cars for want of an appropriate and private space, while others find it difficult to juggle scheduled breaks.

Employers need to do better and, in my view, the House should be setting the standard.

Currently the Federal Senate, ACT Legislative Assembly and NSW Legislative Council are the only chambers of Parliament in Australia to specifically exempt nursing infants from standing orders regulating strangers/visitors (see attached research).

It is true that the Federal House of Representatives makes special allowances for breastfeeding members to vote by proxy in divisions if they cannot be present in the Chamber, but it does not specifically exempt nursing infants from stranger/visitor regulations.

In all other parliaments, the admission of strangers/visitors is at the discretion of the Speaker or President.

Measures such as blanket maternity leave allowances, scheduled nursing breaks and the provision of adequate child care in the House would go some way towards lifting the standard, but I implore the Committee to also devote attention to reducing the stigma.

Simply outlining the options available to breastfeeding mothers can help to remove uncertainty and a relatively easy first step in this endeavour would be to ensure all standing orders in Australian chambers of Parliament specifically acknowledge and exempt nursing infants from rules regarding strangers.

I understand there is concern that a “dangerous precedent” could be set by introducing proxy voting for nursing mothers in Parliament. I struggle to understand how anything that reduces the stigma around breastfeeding could be described as dangerous.

Gender equality is not dangerous, but discrimination against nursing mothers is. I urge the House to lead by example and set a precedent within Parliament, and for the entire country, by publicly acknowledging and supporting breastfeeding women in Parliament.

Regards,

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