

Inquiry into the Exposure Draft of legislation implementing the Government's announced Paid Parental Leave Scheme



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Introduction

Women's Health Victoria is a statewide women's health promotion, information and advocacy service. We are a non government organisation with most of our funding coming from various parts of the Victorian Department of Human Services. We work with health professionals and policy makers to influence and inform health policy and service delivery for women.

Our work at Women's Health Victoria is underpinned by a social model of health. We are committed to reducing inequities in health which arise from the social, economic and environmental determinants of health. These determinants are experienced differently by women and men. By incorporating a gendered approach to health promotion work that focuses on women, interventions to reduce inequality and improve health outcomes will be more effective and equitable.

Women's Health Victoria's vision is for a society that takes a proactive approach to health and wellbeing, is empowering and respectful of women and girls and takes into account the diversity of their life circumstances.

Women's Health Victoria's ways of working are guided by four principles:

- We work from a feminist framework that incorporates a rights based approach.
- We acknowledge the critical importance of an understanding of all of the determinants of health and of illness to achieving better health outcomes.
- We understand that the complexities involved in achieving better health outcomes for women require well-considered, forward thinking, multi-faceted and sustainable solutions.
- We commit to 'doing our work well'; we understand that trust and credibility result from transparent and accountable behaviours.

Comments on the Exposure Draft

Women's Health Victoria would like to congratulate the Rudd Government for its leadership in introducing a paid maternity leave scheme. Australia has already waited far too long for this development. Women's workforce participation and financial security has historically been hampered by existing structural discrimination in which a lack of paid maternity leave means that women have to take unpaid leave after giving birth.

Australia will now proudly join all other OECD nations, apart from the USA, which have paid maternity schemes. This will ensure that paid maternity leave is a condition of employment and available not just to a privileged few. This represents an important step in eliminating discrimination against women and supporting Australian families.

We commend the Government for adhering so closely to the Productivity Commission's recommendations in the policy and draft legislation, and we fully support implementation of the Paid Parental Leave Scheme commencing 1 January 2011.

We expect that the scheme will provide benefits to the Australian economy, including the improved retention of women's skills and productivity in the workforce; a reduction in wage pressures due to the increased participation of women in the workforce; and increased productivity. Furthermore, overseas studies have shown that it is lower income families who report the greatest impact from paid parental leave schemes.

It is also important to remember that international conventions recognise Paid Maternity Leave as a fundamental human right, important for the health and well being of women, children and the sustainability of national economies. The Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women has repeatedly urged Australia to introduce Paid Maternity Leave. Australia can now honour our international obligations in relation to these conventions.

Women's Health Victoria would like to see that paid maternity leave is provided in addition to other measures that attempt to redress the systemic discrimination that women face in employment. Women's working lives are marked by gender inequality which undervalues their role in both paid and unpaid work. Throughout their lives, not only are women more likely to earn less than men and in part-time or casual work, they also move in and out of the workforce in response to caring responsibilities as they have children or care for their own ageing parents. Introducing a paid maternity scheme goes some way to addressing these issues and should be considered as part of a wider commitment to promoting gender equality in the workplace.

We look forward to full implementation of the Exposure Draft, and commend the Government on behalf of the Australian women and families that stand to benefit from this legislation.