



# Submission to Parliament of Australia, Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

Paid Parental Leave Amendment (Flexibility Measures) Bill 2020

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submission

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## **Introduction**

The Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union (QNMU) thanks the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs (the Committee) for the opportunity to provide feedback on the inquiry into the Paid Parental Leave Amendment (Flexibility Measures) Bill 2020 (the bill).

Nursing and midwifery is the largest occupational group in Queensland Health (QH) and one of the largest across the Queensland government. The QNMU is the principal health union in Queensland covering all classifications of workers that make up the nursing and midwifery workforce including registered nurses (RN), midwives (RM), nurse practitioners (NP), enrolled nurses (EN) and assistants in nursing (AIN) who are employed in the public, private and not-for-profit health sectors including aged care.

Our more than 61,000 members work across a variety of settings from single person operations to large health and non-health institutions, and in a full range of classifications from entry level trainees to senior management. The vast majority of nurses and midwives in Queensland are members of the QNMU.

This year, 2020 will be dedicated to celebrating the International year of the Nurse and Midwife, in celebration of the 200th year anniversary of the birth of the founder of contemporary nursing, Florence Nightingale. The World Health Organisation (WHO) nominated Nurses and Midwives for their invaluable contribution to health care and to highlight the need for a strengthened Nursing and Midwifery workforce to achieve sustainable development goals (SDG) and universal health coverage. The QNMU is proud to embrace this opportunity to invest in the Nursing and Midwifery professions, particularly the investment into minimum safe staffing ratios and skill mix across all health sectors.

The QNMU welcomes the Committee's efforts to review the paid parental leave scheme to support flexible access to parental leave payments. As our membership is overwhelmingly female, paid parental leave is an important workplace right that we will continue to invest in. Our submission addresses the bill as it relates to our nursing and midwifery members.

## Recommendations

The QNMU recommends:

- Improving return to work outcomes for women requires commitment and cooperation from employers to provide support and flexible arrangements for employees, beyond the entitlements provided by the 30 days of flexible PPL scheme;
- Extending the period of leave to provide a statutory period of at least 26 weeks leave in line with the World Health Organisation recommendations;
- Superannuation contributions to be paid by the government at the prevailing Superannuation Guarantee (SG) rate, as part of the Paid Parental Leave (PPL) Scheme.

We note the Committee proposes to consider changes to the Paid Parental Leave (PPL) scheme that better supports working mothers and families to flexibly access the scheme. Increasing flexible access to Paid Parental Leave (PPL) provides benefits for employers, employees and the greater community. For employers, the scheme enables continuity in employment, staff retention, enhanced workforce participation for women, reduced training costs and acknowledges the value that females provide to the workforce. For employees, PPL provides parents and families with the opportunity to spend critical time bonding with their infant and adjusting to the lifestyle and routine changes involved with having a newborn (WHO, 2010).

On principle the QNMU supports the proposed changes to improve flexible access to the PPL scheme. We acknowledge that the intention of the 30 flexible PPL days is to provide parents with flexibility in how they transition back to work. The QNMU encourages the use of flexibility measures to provide parents with greater opportunities to create flexible arrangements with employers, that works towards their collective interests.

The QNMU commends the Committee's proposed amendments to expand the scope of access to primary carers who are self-employed or small business owners. These changes

provide a more inclusive scheme for women and partners who are managing their own business. We also support the proposed changes to make entitlement transfers to eligible partners easier. Transferring flexible leave to partners promotes shared care between partners and a greater flexibility for primary care parents who are returning to work.

We express concern for the implementation of the split leave scheme, whereby the provisions might obfuscate employers' obligations to provide flexible arrangements for parents returning to work, beyond that of the flexible PPL days. The success of the proposed scheme lies with employers cooperating with employees to provide flexible return to work strategies. It should be emphasised that it is in employers' best interest to offer flexible return to work arrangements, in order to attract and retain skilled staff who feel valued and recognised for their contributions to the workforce.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that a minimum of 26 weeks post-partum is provided to women to establish breastfeeding and bonding. The current continuous 18-week scheme provides less opportunity to establish a healthy family routine, than the minimum period recommended by the WHO for infant and maternal wellbeing (WHO, 2008). The QNMU have long advocated for the period of leave be extended to provide a statutory period of at least 26 weeks leave. We continue to advocate for superannuation contributions to be paid by the government at the prevailing superannuation Guarantee (SG) rate, as part of the PPL scheme.

The proposed amendments also raise some concern that if employers are not required to cooperate with parent's flexible return to work arrangements, that employees could end up reducing or forfeiting their flexible entitlements in order to adapt to workplace demands and potential pressure from their employer. To that end, employers have the ability to negate providing flexible working arrangements to employees returning to work, beyond that of the 30 days flexible PPL days. In this instance, not only does the scheme fall short of providing flexibility, improving the transition back to work but also provides the employee with less overall leave than the current scheme. We recommend that provisions are implemented to require employers to comply with employee's entitlements to use their flexible PPL days to facilitate a healthy transition to work arrangement. Employers and workers should be

entitled to negotiate additional paid parental leave above the government provided minimum standards.

## References

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