

The Australian Family Association (VIC)

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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Family & Human Services
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee,

As a preface to our submission regarding 'Balancing Work and Family', we wish to firstly state the following:

We believe that in exploring the disincentives to starting families the government needs to reconstruct the present position, which sees family and work as equal contenders for time. As it is in the national interest for babies to be born, the family should be the starting point for any discussion on balancing family and work. Careers need to be built around the family. Work and family responsibilities should never be seen as competing priorities for mothers. Indeed our submission intends to outline that mothering and raising children should be seen as an esteemed activity undertaken for the well-being of society.

Whilst we agree that the workforce needs to be maintained for taxes, pensions and health-care etc, we believe that rather than pressuring mothers to return to the paid workforce, we need to be creating opportunities for procuring full-time work for men, particularly the underemployed and more lowly educated. Any policy changes in relation to maternity should place mothers who choose full-time mothering at the centre, rather than the focus being upon those who return to work.

Disincentives to starting families

The Australian Family Association (Victoria) submits the following in response to the terms of reference:

1. Industry Policies for Financial Stability and Income Equity

Financially, many people do not have the resources to contemplate marriage and beginning a family – this may be due to work instability (underemployment, contract work), low income, and not having post-school qualifications. The key finding in the report *Men and Women Apart: The Decline of Partnering in Australia* (2004) by Dr. Bob Birrell et al., (based upon 1986 and 2001 Census figures) shows that there is a growing underclass of single low income males (SLIMs), not in full-time work and lacking the economic resources to hold a family together. For example, 17.5% of men aged 25-39 years earned less than \$15,600 p.a, whilst 26% in the same age group earned between this figure and \$31,500 p.a. This is a total of 43% of all men in this age group!

Subsequently, the report finds this is the major reason for the decline in the marriage and fertility rates since the mid-1980s. The report found that with higher incomes and job stability, people are more able to hold a family together and have higher marriage rates. To reiterate, the growing underclass of men (SLIMs) who are losing out in the job market include those not in full-time work, having no post-school qualifications, and living on less than \$31,200 p.a. And what women want when considering a spouse, is a man who is able to support them and any future children, financially well.

It appears that the growth of casual work in Australia as reported in *Securing Quality Employment: Policy Options for Casual and Part-time Workers in Australia* (2004) by the Chifley Research Centre, is extreme in comparison to other countries, with one in four Australians employed on casual terms. The growth in casual jobs is a grave concern when considering the links between SLIMs and fertility. Casual jobs are unstable in terms of predictable earnings due to low pay and hours, and there is no paid sick leave or holiday pay, and limited opportunity for training. Put simply, casual employment, although minimising the unemployment statistics, leaves many people vulnerable to poverty, unable to attain loans for housing, which directly affects capacity to marry and begin a family.

We believe industry policies need to rectify this situation to provide security and greater income to people within this sector. Policies need to boost infrastructure and growth industries, thus providing full-time work for those without post-school qualifications.

2. Valuing Motherhood as an Esteemed Activity

Society currently devalues motherhood, with careers being seen as central to a woman's identity. Women are constantly bombarded with the message that it is only outside the family that they can find fulfilment. On the contrary, choosing to be a full-time stay-at-home mother must be viewed as a highly esteemed activity for the good of society. Societal views of motherhood need to reflect the commitment, skills and responsibility of mothers for children's physical, emotional and social development. If society recognises the central role of motherhood, full-time mothering will be the primary choice for a great many women who currently fear being labelled 'lazy', 'brainless', 'unempowered', or 'submissive' for having remained at home with their young children.

With regard to the physical health of children, the *Australian Breastfeeding Association* asserts that the longer a baby is breastfed, the greater is its

immunity and health protection. Indeed the *World Health Organisation (WHO)* and *UNICEF* advocate that babies should be breastfed for six months exclusively after birth, and continued along with solid food up to two years and beyond. This ensures babies and infants receive the nutrients, antibodies, hormones, immune factors and antioxidants that help them thrive. Research also points toward breast milk as influencing IQ.

With regard to the emotional and social development of children, child mental health professionals state that the benefits to children of principal care by their mothers during the first 27 months of life are reflected in increased trust, capacity for successful partnership in adulthood, leadership skills, morality, self-reliance, self-control and resiliency in each stage of development (Belsky, J, *Journal of Child Psychiatry* 2001, 42; Cook, P, *Early child Care – Infants and Nations at Risk*, 1997; Hojat, M, *Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Findings on the Role of the Biological Mother in Human Survival and Development*, 1999).

To really value our children as the future and for the good of society, mothers need to be supported and esteemed so they can give children the best start in life. All policies need to reflect this sound research evidence in support of full-time mothering, particularly during the early years of life. Child-care centres may be good, but they in no way replace the benefits of mother.

Policies regarding child-care benefits currently favour mothers who return to paid work and relinquish the care of their young children into the hands of institutional care. Maternity leave helps women in the workforce, but does nothing to help the women who stay at home full-time caring for one or more children. In this sense it is highly discriminatory. Favouring working mothers through economic benefits will continue to marginalise more women who choose to be a full-time mother.

We advocate for future support of the *Baby Bonus*, which is constructive in helping all mothers. We believe it could be restructured however to be paid in

crisis often leads to abortion, perhaps this strategy would be an incentive for women to continue with pregnancy rather than choosing to abort? The US Government has a policy similar to this for low-income families.

Volunteerism is regarded as good for society – for building social capital, trust, community and networks. In acknowledging this, the government needs to ensure economic policies support families by enabling mothers to stay at home, so they can contribute to society in the form of volunteerism. A woman cannot be expected to engage in volunteer work, raise a family and participate in the paid workforce – she cannot be all things to all people, it isn't achievable or good for her. We argue that children of mothers who stay at home and engage in volunteer work may develop civic mindedness, which is good for building the social capital of the nation.

3. Income Splitting – Taxation Relief

To further support families, we submit that income splitting should be part of tax reform for single income families. This would follow the ideas of countries such as France, Germany, Portugal, Ireland and the US. Income splitting highlights the unit of marriage, which is strongly associated with fertility - strong marriages mean strong families. Income splitting which is currently available in Australia to the business community, self-employed and family trust arrangements, should be made available to PAYG taxpayers.

The current cost of housing, interest rates and the general cost of living often necessitate mothers returning to paid work when their children are young. In recognising married couples as equal partners at tax time, couples will be enabled fully to share their income for purposes of taxation, so that mothers do not feel undue pressure to re-enter the paid workforce. Income splitting will enable them to stay home with their children as long as they desire, rather than until maternity leave expires. It will also help one-income families with: bidding in the house market, having more economic resources for child education, and reducing marital discord and weak parent-child relationships – all of which are predictors for children's emotional well-being in early adulthood

(Sobolewski, J.A. & Amato, P.R. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 2005, 67: 141-156.)

We submit that if both parents must engage in full-time paid employment, then flexible working hours need to be structured into all employment contracts. This would allow both men and women to be able to look after their children. The strategy employed in Sweden, which sees both parents caring for children gives priority to the child's emotional stability, and provides a sound parental role model.

Conclusion

In closing this submission, women's presence in the workforce is not as valuable as their presence in the early lives of the nation's children. We hope as it is in the national interest for babies to be born, that the needs of the Australian economy will be achieved without detrimental impacts upon the health and development of the children and families of Australia.

Labour market problems can be solved by employing those men (SLIMs) who are currently underemployed, thus enabling women to freely have babies, and for children to grow up psychologically, socially and physically sound and strong.

We commend this submission to the committee hoping that the commission will take an approach that is truly pro-woman and pro-family. The value of women to the nation as mothers can no longer be ignored or minimised – it must take priority.

Yours sincerely,

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Australian Family Association (Victoria)