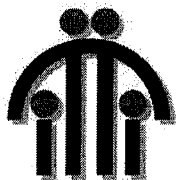


# The Australian Family Association (NSW)

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

Dear Committee,

## PREFACE

We would like to preface this submission by firstly exploding the myth that parents can be all things to all people at all times. In everything we do we have to set priorities, and there are times when, if we are faced with competing interests and obligations, we have to make a choice, and that choice should always be skewed towards the care of our families.

Secondly, although the title of this inquiry is "Balancing Work and Family", as though "work" and "family" are flip sides of a coin, we suggest that these two elements can never be considered of equal value. We insist that in every discussion, the family needs to be the starting **and** finishing point. Work should be built around the family, not the family around work.

Thirdly, we must always remember that "work" should not be limited to paid work. Many people are engaged in unpaid work, and it is denigrating to infer that those people don't work. "Work" is how we engage in, and help build up society, and although much of it is hidden, it none-the-less has tremendous worth.

## DISINCENTIVES TO STARTING FAMILIES

### Financial:

Most responsible people would not wish to start a family without a certain sense of financial security. Continuity of employment and the ability to save for the future are critical to creating this security.

It is apparent that the new generation of prospective parents come through their early working life with few if any savings, and more often than not, carrying a HECS debt.

There may be a number of factors contributing to this:

Poor savings habits from childhood. The “instant gratification mentality” promoted by advertising, which targets the youth, results in high consumption of what are really passing fads and fancies. Children should be encouraged to wait for the things that they want, and in cases of luxury items, parents should realize that it may be beneficial in the long run if not all these wants are met. It is good for character-building to learn to go without, and it is a good habit to carry into adult life.

A HECS debt coupled with the high cost of housing probably means that many young people will delay marriage, the purchase of their first home, and consequently will more likely delay having children.

In order to service a home loan it is now seen as essential to have two incomes. This is a major disincentive to starting a family, as most women would prefer to leave full-time work when they have children.

#### **Career:**

There appear to be two extremes affecting employment and family. On the one hand, there is a growing class of single low-income males (SLIMS) who, without full-time employment, are losing out badly in the marriage market. On the other hand, there are those who are in full-time work, working very long hours, or long rosters, leaving them little time for family life.

We would like to refer the Committee to the report, *Men and Women Apart* by Dr. Bob Birrell et al., which was commissioned by the AFA and released early in 2004. Based on 1986 and 2001 Census figures, the report identifies a growing proportion of men aged 25-39 years not in full-time work, with sharply declining marriage rates and much higher than average divorce rates. By 2001, 29% of men in this age group were not in full-time work. The decline in marriage in this group was found to be the major reason for the decline in fertility between 1980 and 2001. Those males with post-school education and full-time employment experienced much higher marriage rates and much lower divorce rates. This indicates that higher levels of education and full-time employment correspond with higher rates of partnering and family formation.

It can therefore be extrapolated that Industry Policies and Labor Market Reforms should provide higher employment levels, increased job security, and adequate income levels in order to foster the formation of families, particularly among the low-skilled workers.

We would like to offer, as an example, two labor market trends which we believe have a negative impact not just on the formation of families, but on family stability.

First is the trend towards placing employees on short-term contracts. This pattern discourages couples from making the most important financial commitment – that of purchasing a home.

Two reasons may be offered for this. Firstly, the insecurity of not being guaranteed continuity of work means that couples would hesitate to commit to home repayments. Secondly, the concern that future work may require one to move from place to place means

people may be more inclined to rent rather than buy. Renting does not provide the same sense of stability, conducive to family formation, as home ownership does.

The second labor market trend which we believe may have a negative impact on family formation and family stability is the trend towards 14 – 28 day rosters for shift workers. Under this system, there is no longer a guarantee of having at least one day off in seven, and Sunday which was once considered a day of worship and a day of rest and recreation for the family, is treated just like any other day with no special penalties awarded which were once there, to in some way, recognize the sacrifice of those having to work on a Sunday. Also, there is no regular weekly pattern to the rostered days on and off work.

This pattern makes it very difficult for employees to commit to things such as sport, being on committees, and engaging in scheduled social activities. This impacts badly on one's ability to date and engage fully in family and community life.

### **Social:**

Career advancement has more kudos than being a mother, and so many young women, even though they may yearn to have children, don't see becoming a mother as being fulfilling, even though it is clear that being a good mother provides society with the greatest social good. Motherhood should be a highly esteemed role, and elevated above all other occupations.

The failure to have a parent at home caring for children and teenagers is a recipe for troubled youth. Troubled and delinquent youth are costly to the community in terms of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and promiscuity. They are costly to the government in terms of policing, prisons, drug rehabilitation, and welfare payments, eg, unemployment benefits.

Consumerism, exacerbated by sharp marketing strategies, has led to young couples not wanting to make the necessary sacrifices, nor forgo any comfort, in order to have a family. Many people think that they must 'have everything' before launching into child-rearing.

This is clearly a fallacy, as borne out by former generations, however many young people have no idea how to live frugally.

## **MAKING IT EASIER TO RETURN TO PAID WORK**

This term of reference appears to infer that it is a positive good for mothers of young children to return to paid work.

Such policy fails to take into account the very real needs of children and teenagers to be mothered and loved deeply in order to grow into trusting, loyal, self-reliant adults.

For thirty years, women have been sold the line that careers are all important and that institutional mothering is as good as, if not better than, real mothering.

We are now living with the social upheaval that has resulted – restless children, drug abuse, depression, suicide, promiscuity, vandalism, crime and homelessness.

The focus of policy should put in place the tax and family incentives to give mothers the choice of being full-time homemakers.

**Women who want to be full-time mothers should be the ones to now take centre-stage.**

## **IMPACT OF TAXATION ETC**

Currently, taxation and policies regarding child-care benefits, favor mothers who return to paid work and relinquish the care of their young children into the hands of institutional care.

### **Child Care Policies:**

When child care centres were first being promoted some 25 years ago, they were used by women who were full-time mothers who saw the benefits in having a little time out to do shopping, attend appointments and so on, but who had no family living close by to provide this relief. Child-care policies are now skewed to almost totally disregard the needs of these women.

The clear message sent in this type of policy is that the Government does not value mothers who are full-time, unpaid homemakers, who forgo a second income, as much as women in paid work.

There needs to be a dramatic shift in this attitude if the Government wants to be called a “family friendly” government.

Childcare payments should become a family payment to all families, giving mothers the choice of whether to be in the paid workforce or full-time homemakers.

### **Income Splitting – Taxation Relief:**

In order to truly recognize the great contribution made by single income families, full income splitting should be introduced without further hesitation.

Income splitting which is available in Australia to family businesses, the self-employed and so on should be made available to PAYG taxpayers.

Full income splitting recognizes the number of dependents supported by the income – the family unit and not the individual is the centre-piece of this taxation model.

## **CONCLUSION**

In a climate of a falling birth-rate and a shrinking work-force it is clear that the government is rightly concerned for the future prosperity of our nation. It would however be short-sighted to “patch” this problem with an effort to get more women, especially those with young children, into the paid work force.

A woman who is pushed back to paid work because the family cannot survive on one income, cannot be expected to also provide the emotional and physical support needed by the family, and nor can she be expected to contribute in hundreds of little ways to her neighbour, the school, and community, and so the nation is the poorer.

It must also be recognized that a woman who is fatigued and emotionally stretched will be less likely to have the inclination, nor the physical capacity to conceive and bear children.

A healthy nation will be one where families thrive, and contentment is restored.

What is needed is a vision – a long-sighted vision.

We commend this submission to you, and eagerly await your response.

Mary-Louise Fowler

President  
Australian Family Association (NSW)