

Government should lead maternity leave debate



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With release of federal sex discrimination commissioner Prue Goward's paper *Valuing parenthood*, paid maternity leave is set to become the next burning issue for Australia's labour market. It is a matter of great interest for library and information workers, eighty-six per cent of whom are women.

Blatant employment discrimination has certainly been reduced in recent years and the first signs are appearing that librarians are making progress on the equal pay front. This is obviously welcome. But women still have far to go. On average, they receive lower pay. They are under-represented in managerial jobs and over-represented in casual jobs. Full-timers earn an average eighty-four cents to the full-time man's dollar. When all workers are compared, the ratio is sixty-six cents to the male dollar.

Much has been written in recent years about the obvious need for men to become more involved in the care of their children. To some extent this is now happening. But we fool ourselves if we think that more sensitive men are the sole answer to the workplace problems experienced by mothers. In the nature of things, women are always going to be the bearers, and primary carers, of children. If labour market policy fails to recognise — and compensate for — that fact women will continue to suffer disadvantage at work simply because they are mothers.

Some women do have access to paid maternity leave, but this is entirely a matter of where they work. Larger organisations are more likely to be supportive. Permanent staff are more likely to gain access. And the public sector is generally more helpful than the private sector. These differences in themselves raise further equity questions. Why should the effects of childbirth on women's careers be so varied just because they are employed in different organisations or in different forms of work? As the sex discrimination commissioner's paper suggests, the only answer to this is a national scheme that acknowledges the disadvantage suffered by all women when they take time off to have a child.

Australia currently has something of a fertility crisis. The birth rate is now 1.75 children per woman compared to 3.5 in the 1960s, 2.9 in the 1970s and 1.9 in the 1980s. The so-called replacement rate (for maintenance of the same population) is 2.1 children per woman. Presently more than seventy per cent of women in their prime child-bearing years [25–34] are in paid employment. It follows, says the paper, that many of these working women delay having children because they do not wish to damage their careers. And those most committed to their jobs are the

most likely to delay. This view is supported by the fact that tertiary-educated, high-income women record the lowest fertility levels.

So it seems quite foolish for Australia to continue with a labour market policy which makes this fertility problem even worse. Common logic suggests positive steps to make life easier for working mothers would better serve the national interest. Certainly some of our more enlightened larger companies see the sense of a more helpful stance. And so do competitor countries. Australia is hugely out of step with the rest of the developed world in this area. Among our top twenty trading partners, all but two have well-established paid maternity leave programs. These vary considerably. Duration of paid leave, for example, is eight weeks in Switzerland and 450 days in Sweden. Payment is fifty-five per cent of average weekly earnings in Canada and 100 per cent in several European countries. Funding arrangements also vary greatly and it is worth noting that the International Labour Organisation opposes any model that imposes liability on individual employers, unless it has been negotiated at a national level.

The big exception in all this is the United States of America, which has not adopted any policy for paid maternity leave. Only Australia and New Zealand have joined them in opposing the concept to date. Now, with the New Zealand government's decision to bring in a new scheme providing twelve weeks entitlement from July this year, Australia stands alone with the USA on maternity leave. This is one partnership we should not be proud of.

The sex discrimination commissioner offers a number of options for an Australian paid maternity leave scheme. These canvass universal government funding via social security payments, flat payments through the tax system, superannuation-type schemes with payments made from a fund paid into by employers, employees and governments, employer levies or top-up payments to individuals. There are valid arguments for each of these. What is most evident in industry, however, is the strong opposition to any scheme funded entirely and directly by employers.

There are very clear national interest reasons why Australia should be moving to help women cope with the difficulty of balancing their family and working responsibilities. Recently, with more demanding workplace conditions, this task has become harder, despite all the rhetorical commitment to making it easier. Many librarians know this only too well. This is clearly a national interest matter requiring a national approach. ALIA strongly supports the sex discrimination commissioner's call for the federal government to take the lead in ensuring a national debate on this critical issue. ■

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