



National Council of Women of New Zealand

Te Kaunihera
Wahine O Aotearoa

Oral Submission to the Government Administration Committee on the NCWNZ submission on the Parental Leave and Employment Protection (Six months Paid Leave and Work Contact Hours) Amendment Bill, 51-1

by Dr Judy Whitcombe and Margaret Ledgerton on 9 December 2015

Government Administration Select Committee

Chairperson: **Ruth Dyson**, Labour Port Hills; Deputy Chair: **Sarah Dowie**, National List; **Brett Hudson**, National List; **Mojo Mathers**, Green List; **Todd Barclay**, National Clutha-Southland; **Kris Faafoi**, Labour Mana.

Good morning, my name is Judy Whitcombe and my colleague is Margaret Ledgerton. We are members of the Parliamentary Watch Committee and the Employment Committee, of the National Council of Women. Our submission has been from a background of policy decisions and consultation with the members of our organisation.

NCWNZ has had long involvement in promoting Paid Parental Leave. Back in 1994 the National Conference passed a resolution calling for 12 weeks Paid Parental Leave. Since then our organisation has made a further 8 submissions seeking to increase the leave provision towards our goal of 12 months Paid Parental Leave. In August 2014 NCWNZ made a submission to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment on their Discussion Document – Modernising Parental Leave. This submission emphasised both the importance of paid parental leave (PPL) and options for extending the entitlement. The proposal to enable employees to work limited days during the paid parental leave period without losing their PPL entitlement was supported and it was noted that a similar policy operates in the United Kingdom.

Support for this current Bill is thus based on NCWNZ policy. Our written submission makes the key points that our members wished to convey to the Select Committee.

- The importance of the first six months in a baby's life has been well documented in international research. A report from the Prime Minister's Chief Science Adviser (May 2011) noted the critical nature of the bonds formed during infancy.
- Breast feeding for 6 months is consistent with the World Health Organisation's recommendation (The WHO changed the recommendation for exclusive breast feeding from 4 to 6 months in 2001.)

- Extending paid parental leave will result in better physical and psychological health for baby, mother and family
- Parenting research shows that a strong emotional attachment between mother and baby can help prevent diseases and boost immunity.
- Comparable countries to New Zealand have significantly better paid parental leave provisions. We quoted the United Kingdom (12 months) and Canada (50 weeks)
- Better paid parental leave is consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which New Zealand is a signatory.

Part 1 of the Bill covers the Amendments which are to come into force on 1 April 2016

Clauses 4-13 cover the phasing in of the leave period. By taking 22 weeks in 2016 to extend the current provision, followed by another 4 week extension in 2018, enables the costs to be absorbed over a longer term.

- Many mothers need the income from paid employment and the move to increase the amount of time that the mother can spend with their babies in the early months is likely to have a better outcome for their babies.
- Research shows that that if the needs of healthy development of children were met less money would be needed in adolescence and later to address social and other problems that arise from deprived childhoods.
- One branch commented that in their area some employers are generous in the length of time that parental leave is allowed.
- Our submission took the position that paid parental leave can be regarded as an investment in the future.

Clause 14 addresses the opportunity for some work contact hours during the PPL period. The Bill states that an employer whose employee works any contact hours must, by fair agreement with the employee, pay the employee for the hours worked

Our submission noted that there are advantages for both the employer and employee in the proposals around work contact hours.

- It helps some parents to maintain contact with their professions and work situations.
- It will help address gender related career disadvantages related to gaps in employment.

- It provides the opportunity for women to return to work if required (at peak times for example) without endangering their parental leave income.
- It contributes to the skills and knowledge for both employer and employee.

Some members noted that there could be some difficulties where the employer made increasing demands on the mother. The submission also stated the need for comprehensive communication so that employment rights were discussed and clearly understood, and that this would need to be included in the implementation strategy for the new law.

Also relevant are the changing patterns of family size (fewer children) and later age of mother at first birth (average age now 28) which are now emerging. These provide a different social environment for this Bill to be considered.

Part 2 of the Bill Amendments to come into force on 1 April 2018

As stated, the staged extension to 26 weeks in 2018 is supported.

Conclusion

It is noted that the Committee Report Back on the earlier Bill (which is dated 28 February 2014) commented extensively on the cost implications of the proposed Bill. This was based on the cost to the government of paid parental leave for 26 weeks offset by some short term savings such as the Early Childhood Education subsidy and additional tax income from the recipients of PPL.

Our 2015 submission has addressed the cost as a “public investment in the future”. By investing in mother and baby for six months and supporting the family at that time, evidence has demonstrated that there are long term gains to be achieved through reducing social and health costs and producing more stable families.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this oral submission

Dr Judy Whitcombe and Margaret Ledgerton

9 December 2015

Questions

Sarah Dowie asked how the return to paid work during the period of paid parental leave could be managed.

Margaret responded that keeping a career on track during the period of PPL would be a good step for both employer and employee.

Ruth Dyson was concerned about the possibility of those on PPL being pressured to return to work during the leave period and how the complaints process could be managed.

Margaret said that one NCW branch had expressed concern in that regard. **Ruth Dyson** noted that the Committee had no data on that process and would be seeking it out.

Margaret noted that monitoring the procedure and publicising the policy would be essential.

Ruth Dyson asked further questions about the length of time that women would be away from their job, how this affected other countries where there was a longer period of PPL, and what about retraining for industrial change?

Margaret quoted NCW policy and gave examples from other countries. She noted that work places were changing and that retraining could be required even for those who were not on long leave.

Kris Fafoi asked about the evidence from those countries with longer periods of PPL – the UK and Canada?

Margaret replied research indicated that those on PPL were likely to return to work with the same employer and that wellbeing and family data should be monitored and this would impact on future development. She emphasised the importance of a public investment in the future approach.