



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF NEW ZEALAND

TE KAUNIHERA WAHINE O AOTEAROA

17 August 2012

S12.14

Submission to the Government Administration Select Committee on the Parental Leave and Employment Protection (Six Months Paid Leave) Amendment Bill 13.1

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (**NCWNZ**) is an umbrella organisation representing 47 nationally organised societies and national members. It has 22 branches throughout the country attended by representatives of those societies and some 150 other societies as well as individual members. NCWNZ's function is to represent and promote the interests of New Zealand women through research, discussion and action.

This submission has been prepared by the NCWNZ Employment Standing Committee and the Parliamentary Watch Committee after consultation with the membership of NCWNZ.

Introduction

NCWNZ has been active for 20 years in promoting Paid Parental Leave - most recently in 2007 when the organisation passed a resolution calling for 12 months Paid Parental Leave.

The National Conference in 1994 passed a resolution seeking the introduction of 12 weeks Paid Parental Leave, and since then a further eight submissions seeking increased provisions have been made by our organisation.

While welcoming this Bill our members see it as one step towards our goal of 12 months Paid Parental Leave. Our members believe that as well as being a further step in the struggle for recognition of the value of the working mother, six months leave will give the mother and baby time to bond, and help knit together the family unit in an atmosphere that includes financial security.

Clause 5 section 71J amended (Duration of parental leave payment)

The National Council of Women considers that this freedom from time and financial pressure would allow the mother and baby to establish all-important routines. It means the mother can be at home to attend to medical care issues such as supervising immunisation and teething problems and most importantly provides the opportunity for mothers to breastfeed for longer, so giving baby the best start in life.

Our members recognise that this will make a further call on Government expenditure but note that the Bill calls for a gradual introduction which will ease the burden. We would also point out that by making it possible for either parent to be at home during the early months of a child's life society will make considerable savings in many areas.

1. Paid Parental Leave and Attachment

All evidence points to the importance of infant attachment with at least one significant adult in the first two years of life to ensure mental wellbeing later in life. Paid Parental Leave will help support this, especially for first-time mothers balancing family care and employment.

Research¹ shows that when children and families are supported during the first 2.5 years of baby's life the mother and child form a lasting bond which allows for a great relationship right through and including the adolescent years. This research also states that children who are securely attached are less likely to be aggressive, have addiction problems or have mental illness in adulthood.

Clearly this will be a financial advantage to services working in this area if there are fewer problems.

2. Family Dynamics

By extending Paid Parental Leave both parents can share family duties and it provides more time for the mother to recover full strength, especially if there are already other children to care for.

Extending Paid Parental Leave will help those women who are under pressure from their partners to return to work early or who have difficulty accessing a fair share of the partner's income in families where the nurturing value of full-time parenting may not be highly regarded.

¹ Research work by Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989; George, 1996; Bowlby, 1987; Sanders, 2004.

3. **Health**

The National Council of Women considers that the following points illustrate the value both socially and financially of allowing a longer period for Paid Parental Leave.

- It avoids or postpones the exposure to infection which is inevitable when babies are cared for communally;
- It reduces the occasions when a parent may feel pressured or ambivalent about leaving a mildly- ill child and the illness quickly escalates;
- The full-time carer is in a better position to monitor the course of infections or developmental delays and to respond more comprehensively to baby's needs.

All these reasons point to the cost-effective result of extending the leave provisions.

4. **Mothers and Careers**

Another positive which our members saw from extending Paid Parental Leave is a better work/life balance as women could take a long-term view of their working careers. Rather than delaying motherhood they might be encouraged to have their children at an earlier age thereby supporting a more equitable age distribution in the work force.

This would mean less reliance on an aging workforce and the associated financial burden for younger generations.

5. **Investment in Paid Parental Leave**

Our members considered that extending Paid Parental Leave is a good scheme that places no undue costs on employers while supporting women workers. In two parent families one parent would still be working and contributing by paying taxes to support Paid Parental Leave.

We see the wisdom in the present economic situation of staggering the extension of PPL over three years.

The National Council of Women regards the staggered introduction as a wise use of taxpayer resources. We note that the majority of parents who return to work after 14 weeks need to use child care services and also qualify for Early Childhood Education substantial subsidies. Money used in this way could be spent on supporting a parent to care for the baby at home.

6. **Contract Workers**

Members have suggested that extending Paid Parental Leave will allow an employer to offer a more useful contract to the person who takes a temporary position. Anyone undertaking a parental leave contract job will have a greater opportunity for work experience and the opportunity to show their usefulness to the employer.

7. **Returning to Work**

The Families Commission research in the report “It’s about Time” showed that most women who returned to full-time work 14 weeks after giving birth cited financial imperatives. The need to make this decision to fulfil the employment contract provisions very soon after giving birth added to the pressure.

Although the Employment Relations (Rest Breaks, Infant Feeding and Other Matters) Amendment Act was passed by Parliament in September 2008 there are often logistical difficulties with arrangements and if the mother is required to express milk this can be a difficult regime to maintain.

However, some also felt that, although their position was protected for 12 months, a delay of a year in returning to work meant loss of skills, loss of previously negotiated beneficial working conditions, and the risk that employers’ perception of their increased domestic demands may jeopardise career advancement. We would suggest that part of the return to the paid work force should involve a training period so women can up-skill on new technologies and programmes that may have been introduced during their absence. It was noted that professional development and up-skilling is now a constant activity in most work places and a good employer would provide this for any valued employee returning after a planned break.

We would like to remind the committee that CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), which the NZ Government has signed, calls for paid parental leave as part of the rights of women to equality in the workplace.

Also the World Health Organisation recommends that breastfeeding continue until baby is six months old because of the research showing it is better for the long-term health of both mother and child.

Summary

NCWNZ believes that extended paid parental leave is important to enable parents to choose those arrangements for care which are in the best interest of the child.

These comments sum up our members’ views on extended Paid Parental Leave: “Surely as a country we can make this investment in our children to allow babies to grow up to be happy

and healthy adults. A healthy and happy society is much less of a financial burden on public money.”

“Surely we value women enough to let them *choose* to spend time with their babies. As a country which talks about supporting family life we need to actually show our support for parents and their babies.”

The National Council of Women believes that families deserve this opportunity to both contribute to the social and financial well-being of New Zealand by providing for at least six months Paid Parental Leave.

NCWNZ thanks the committee for the opportunity to make a submission on this important bill. We will watch its progress with great interest.

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Employment Standing Committee Convener