

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Community Affairs Committee Members,

Thank you for your time and this opportunity to participate in this very important inquiry into the Fairer Paid Leave Amendment Bill 2015.

I would like introduce myself and my family to you and create a picture on how the developments of Paid Maternity Leave have affected me and my family in the course of three pregnancies, spanning 8 years.

I have been working as a registered nurse for 16 years in the Public Health Sector. The last 9 years I have nursed in a major metropolitan hospital in their Neonatal Intensive and Special Care Unit. I have been with my partner for 17 years and have been married for now 9 of those years. We have four beautiful children, an 8 year old daughter, a six year old son and now 6 month old twin girls.

The Employer and Government provided paid parental Leave Scheme have supported my ability to balance the responsibilities of raising a family and staying connected in my industry.

If I reflect back on when my husband and I had our first daughter, we were 27, it was 2007. We had a short engagement before being married as we had already been together for 6 years, purchased our first home, fell pregnant and had our daughter all in the space of a year. It was all perfect. Little did we appreciate the magnitude and responsibilities of raising a little child. Well there is love and nurturing and plenty of it but there are also bills, fees and unseen expenses that come with raising a family. There was stress and plenty of that as we found our way to our new roles in this new family.

We were lucky. We had a healthy pregnancy, a healthy baby, a healthy relationship and were both in employment. I know from my work that unfortunately these things are never guaranteed when you have a child. My husband and I have very supportive extended families but as we were both originally country kids neither of our parents live in Melbourne.

In 2007 when I went on leave to have my first child we were encouraged to take all annual leave accrued we then could start our 8 week paid Maternity Leave from my employer which through enterprise bargaining, employees had sacrificed for decades a lower wage increases for this entitlement. The government provided a Baby Bonus of approximately \$5000 paid as a lump sum to assist with the costs of raising a child. I

took all my leave at half pay to extend my time with our daughter and when that ended I returned to work part time.

Together my husband and I budgeted to assist with this reduced income. It was stressful in many ways. I was tired physically and mentally.

As recommended by Maternity health professionals I demand breastfed our daughter. She was still waking frequently at night. She had just begun taking solids and had started drinking from a cup. She was thriving but the early transition of returning to work impacted on all of us. I went from not spending more than 2 hours away from her to being separated from her for an entire day, three times a week. There was no gently gently approach as we had no extended family support and the idea of placing our 5 month old in child care was not an option for us.

My husband and I tried to work my shifts to fit around his office hours. As a nurse I was also required to return to rotating night shifts immediately on my return. We all adjusted but it did take its toll.

I felt I wasn't ready to return to work, I had a baby at home that needed my care, house duties had doubled and needed attending. My role in my community had also widened and included a new circle of other new parents. My sleep was constantly broken and to make matters worse I was experiencing persistent horrendous night sweats from the lactating hormones which lasted a year and a half, the time I continued breastfeeding. Our relationship as a couple needed refiguring and realigning. My husband was stressed about the mortgage repayments and other monthly expenses and fulfilling his daily work commitments while juggling his work around family. I remember days at work myself where due to the critical ill nature of my patients, it was difficult to not get affected by what was required of me at times.

We had unintentionally placed unrealistic expectations on each other and ourselves to make this adjustment to balancing the work family life. And these expectations strained our relationship. It was with a lot of patience and our history as a couple, from friends and family and professional counselling that we found a new us.

With my Second child it was a very similar experience to my first but I new that unlike my first child I needed a little longer with my newborn. Again as before I stretched my Maternity Leave Entitlements out, now negotiated to 10 weeks and this time the Government Funded Baby Bonus was paid over 12 fortnights. I was financially able to stay at home for his first 8 months. We all experienced less pressure as I returned to work this time as his reliance on me for breastfeeds had lessened as he was more independent. He had reached many significant developmental milestones and had transitioned more fully to solid food.

It is now with my most recent pregnancy and birth of our twin girls that I reflect a little differently on Paid Maternity Leave. With the twin pregnancy I was forced to start my leave early by 15 weeks. I was only 25 weeks pregnant. The impact this had on our financial situation has been significant but luckily with experience in getting by, we so far are weathering this family change in circumstances reasonably well. The

newly introduced Government Funded Paid Parental Scheme assisted significantly allowing me more time with our daughters. I am currently still on paid leave but will return to work once my full leave entitlements finish. I again took all my leave, including annual leave at half pay to increase the length of time I could spend with our newborn girls. This time, despite being required to leave early I will still have been able to have 10 months with our twin girls and the chance to get them to a point of being more independent and not solely reliant on me for all their nutritional needs.

Had it not been for this newly introduced scheme and my employer funded benefit being increased to 10 weeks I may have exhausted all my Maternity Leave Entitlements before the twins had even arrived. I would have had to take leave without pay. This situation would have been financially and emotionally crippling. As it was, I was already privately keeping at bay the scary realization that this pregnancy could in fact however well planned and healthy as it was, be the one that pulls my family apart. I had immense irrational internal guilt carrying the twins as I was fully aware of the strain this may put on our family. I can therefore honestly say had it not been for the ongoing support of my industry in supporting women having children and improving their leave entitlements and the government recognising the importance of the first 6 months and introducing the minimum wage payments for 18 weeks to complement employer funded leave, I don't know how my life and that of my children may have turned out. A well deserved recognition to this support provided to me from both my employer and the government is that at 6 months our twin girls are still being breastfed and have benefited greatly by being nurtured in a familiar and stable home, and are thriving.

I believe I now have a fairly thorough understanding of the role families play in society, particularly women. The role women take on when they are taking time out from their careers to raise a child, to raise a valuable future member of our society is significant. Bonding with their child is their priority but I believe it is the contribution that these women give to our communities at this same time that can not be underestimated and deserves respect and therefore should be encouraged and supported.

So again thinking about when I had my first daughter I not only bonded her to myself and to my husband to create our little family I bonded her with her entire community. I assisted all of us to connect with others in our community. Women on leave take on many roles other than just being the "stay at home mum" they are in fact the invisible pillars in our community. We connect and support those struggling in our mothers groups, we nurture our frail and elderly neighbours, we develop strong relationships with those that will play significant roles in our child's lives, we volunteer our skills to the local community groups, we sit on committees, organise countless fundraising events, food drop and rally support for those with ill family members, our schools would not be the places they are today if they did not get the assistance from women on leave. We nurture not just our own families when we are on leave but we nurture all of those around us and during that time we are demonstrating valuable attributes to our children that make us human that make us a community, that make us loved.

These connections are so significant and I believe are the basis for probably all government funded community initiatives to assist communities and individuals to be

stronger and healthier. When we support women in those early months of having children the benefits will be far more reaching than we can imagine.

I therefore find it heartbreaking on reflection that a Scheme which aims to understand this importance placed on a women's life during this influential time in raising their newborns life be now seen as "double dipping". The erosion of respect that I believe should be due to women for taking on this role is now significantly undermined by this term "double dipping". The lack of insight by our government in an effort to save money does in fact I believe waste money. That if we just put the time and resources in at the beginning and respected the role women play in having children and the role they play once they return to the workforce that many social dilemmas could naturally be reduced. The feeling of real connectedness is so important and forging these networks early I believe will far outweigh the financial costs incurred in the long run to everyone not just the women.

It is for all these reasons that I call on you to reject a watered down Maternity Leave Scheme and the accusation that some are "double dipping" and stand by women and families and instead respect the significant work and sacrifice they make for our communities and give them the recognition they deserve. I ask you to, at the least maintain the current Paid Maternity Leave Scheme, the benefits are worth it.

I thank you for your time and consideration when making your decision in this very important community matter.

Sincerely

Phoebe Brick