

Submission to Paid Parental Leave Amendment (Flexibility Measures) Bill 2020

Senate Community Affairs
Legislation Committee

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AASW

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Australian Association
of Social Workers

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The Australian Association of Social Workers

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 12,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, and advocate on matters of human rights, discrimination, and matters that influence people's quality of life.

The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary qualified profession recognised internationally that pursues social justice and human rights. Social workers aim to enhance the quality of life of every member of society and empower them to develop their full potential. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession, and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges. Professional social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors and how they influence a person's health, wellbeing and development.

Social workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities, across a wide range of settings including child and family services. Across every field, they maintain a dual focus on improving human wellbeing; and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Our submission

The AASW welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into Paid Parental Leave Amendment (Flexibility Measures) Bill 2020. While we support the amendment, we seek an overall review and extension of the scheme.

Our vision is for a cohesive, inclusive, and just society in which it is possible for everyone to thrive, flourish and develop their full potential. It is the AASW's position that the role of government to

create and maintain the environmental, social, and economic foundations which enable all of us to pursue those goals, paying attention to the most vulnerable members of society. The social support system is one of the government's key opportunities do this. As part of this system, paid parental leave is a key measure to assure children, women, parents, and families have the right start to life and the necessary foundations for long term development. Furthermore, paid parental leave is an important measure towards achieving gender equality and challenging poverty and inequality in Australia.

Our members see the great emotional and financial pressures, and joys, that come from having children. The AASW supports the measures set out in this Bill as it would allow for greater flexibility for new parents. The proposal to divide the 18-week period into two (an initial continuous period of 12 weeks, to be used within one year of a child being born or adopted, followed by the remaining 30 working days which need to be used before the child is two) recognises the fluctuating needs of new children and parents. No family experiences the first two years of a child's life in the same way, nor do they have the same needs so this measure recognises the need for a support and parental leave system that is less generalised and more reflective of individual needs and circumstances.

While the AASW supports this Bill, we see it as an interim measure given that Australia's paid parental leave scheme is deeply lacking if we compare it internationally to similar countries. According to OECD data, the average length of paid parental leave amongst member countries is 55 weeks. Australia's paid parental leave system offers 18 weeks at the minimum wage, equating to 7 weeks at the full-time weekly wage average.¹ Additionally, paid parental leave is only provided to one parent, the primary care-giver, and is a stand-alone payment in comparison to other OECD countries who in many cases share the leave amongst parents and in addition to paid maternity and paternity leave.²

Australia has a provision for secondary leave, generally taken by fathers, of two weeks but this is rarely used and well below the OECD average of 8 weeks. At the equivalent full time rate, these two weeks equate to less than one week.³ This means that fathers have little to no incentive to take up the leave. The Australian government needs to show leadership in challenging the cultural beliefs that see parenting as the primary responsibility of the mother and serve as barriers towards shared and equal parenting arrangements. Our members highlight workplace pressures and antiquated beliefs about gender roles as being reasons as to why father do not take extended leave.

Australia's current paid parental leave scheme leaves women needing to choose between taking time out of the workforce and having children, and it also disincentivizes men to take leave to care for their child. Eight OECD member countries offer economic incentives for men to take parental

¹ OECD, August 2019, 'PF2.1 Parental leave systems', https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf, p. 3, accessed 2 March 2020

² OECD, August 2019, 'PF2.1 Parental leave systems', https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf, p. 1, accessed 2 March 2020

³ OECD, August 2019, 'PF2.1 Parental leave systems', https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf, p. 7, accessed 2 March 2020

leave, with some offering more leave to both parents if the father takes his initial entitlements.⁴ These enticements pave the way for gender equality in parenting as well as in the workforce.

Conclusion

The AASW believes this Bill acknowledges and begins to address the significant limitations of Australia's Paid Parental Leave Scheme and while an important measure, much greater work needs to be done if we are to assure that every child and family has the supports they need, when they need them.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the points raised in this submission further with the Committee.

⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-17/fact-check-australia-paid-parental-leave/11270456>



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