

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

29/7/2015

Dear Community Affairs Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry in to the Fairer paid Leave Amendment Bill 2015.

Unfortunately, the name of this Bill is misleading, given that for thousands of lower and middle income women – women like me - it will mean less money and therefore less time to spend with the new born child. It will not be “Fairer”; it will be extremely unfair!

My name is Anita Stirling and I am a mother of 3 children, Isabel aged 4, Matilda aged 2 and Angus is 11 weeks. I am a Critical Care Registered Nurse at a large regional trauma hospital emergency department in Shepparton, where I work 5 days a fortnight, and I am currently on maternity leave. I am also an Advanced Life Support Paramedic and I work casually for Ambulance Victoria.

I have serious and grave concerns about the Abbott government plans to wind back the current paid parental leave scheme for those with employer funded parental leave under enterprise agreements. This will leave a very large portion of parents far worse off than they currently are, instead of improving conditions for parents, especially those mothers who juggle work/children like I do.

I am very blessed to have my children. All of my children have been born prematurely, and have had to have various lengths of stay in hospital following their birth, and in the months following. I started my paid parental leave from the government on the 20th July, when Angus was 10 weeks old. I had saved up my annual leave prior to falling pregnant again, knowing that there was a chance that we could again have a premature child. As with so many other nurses, I have utilized all of my leave entitlements to be able to spend longer at home with our new child. Due to the nature of my work in emergency, I commenced my annual leave at 31 weeks pregnant, in order to be able to rest at home. Due to this, my annual leave was gone by the time Angus was born, at 36 weeks. I am lucky enough to have 10 weeks of paid maternity leave, as part of my enterprise agreement, which cover all public sector nurses.

Angus is now 11 weeks old. He weighs 3.155kilo (6lb 15oz) and is still fed via a nasogastric tube, as well as breast feeding. He gets weighed twice a week due to failure to thrive. Once a week we meet with a pediatrician and a pediatric dietitian to decide what we will do from week to week to try and get him to gain weight. It takes me 40 minutes to travel from my home in country Victoria to the hospital where I work- and where Angus is currently receiving his treatment.

If the Abbott Government's plans are to go ahead, then I would be considerably worse off financially. I currently earn \$7259.60 while on my 10 weeks of paid maternity leave plus I receive the \$11,826 from the Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave Scheme – a total of \$19,085.60. If this legislation is adopted I understand that the most I can receive is the \$11,826 from any source – so I assume that

I'd only receive around \$4566.40.40 from the Commonwealth in addition to my employer funded leave. That loss of over \$7,200 would be the difference between me staying off work for another 2-3 months to bond with my baby or being forced to return to work early to help make ends meet for my family.

I have the following concerns

- Who would care for my child when I am forced back into the workforce earlier? He is unsuitable for child care due to his size and being fed via a tube, and we do not have family in the area that we are able to rely on for this.
- How am I going to continue to breastfeed, then express to make milk for his nasogastric feeds (this can take up to an hour 7 times a day) when I am forced to return to work early due to the financial strain placed on our family?
- How am I expected to be able to continue to meet all the appointments needed for Angus, as well as work shift work and juggle a 4 year old at kinder 3 days a week and a busy and active 2 year old? These things are difficult enough to do with the increased needs of a premature and small child without adding in the stress of working in charge of a busy emergency department, and my decisions can ultimately lead to the healthy outcomes of the patients that present.
- What work is being done to combat the inevitable rise in post natal depression in mothers who are forced to give up breastfeeding in order to return to work?
- Statistics show that Australia is falling well below the World Health Organisation and the National Health and Medical Research Council recommendations of exclusive breastfeeding of infants until 6 months of age, and then continuing to breast feed until the age of 2 with other complementary food. Currently in Australia 96% of mothers initiate breastfeeding but by 3 months of age this figure is at 39% and by 5 months of age it is sadly at a low of only 15% of babies being exclusively breast fed. What is the Abbott government planning on doing to rectify these numbers? As currently it appears that they see doing everything they can to work against these recommendations, rather than supporting mothers to help achieve their goals of being able to breastfeed. Surely if 96% of mothers are initiating breastfeeding then there is the want there to be able to do it? Shouldn't we be giving mothers the support that they need to provide this vital nutrients and bonding experience with their children, instead of forcing them to either express or give up feeding all together so that they can return to the workforce?
- What work is being done in order to help mothers- and families- through the stress of leaving a very small child with (as such) a 'stranger' while they return to work, as they are no longer financially able to stay at home and bond with their child in the critical and early months of their development?
- Once Angus has grown and is suitable for child care- how are we to find a place? Places for child care in the country are extremely hard to find, add to that the issue with juggling child care and shift work, and it is a near on impossible task. If all parents who are currently using the paid parental leave scheme are forced to return to the workforce to make ends meet, then there is going to be a sudden extra need for child care places. These places are already hard enough to obtain, how are parents like myself expected to find places months earlier than planned?

- Why does the Abbott government believe that they are more knowledgeable than the World Health Organization (WHO), who believe and promote for mothers to have 6 months of paid parental leave, in order to allow them to bond with their child and to increase the ability for mothers to be able to breastfeed their children? Indeed, Mr Abbott's 2013 election promise was for a rolled gold maternity leave scheme of six months, paid at the mother's usual rate of pay rather than the minimum wage of around \$650. When that option was blocked last year, he now seems to have decided to punish mothers by making things worse than they are currently – to actually reduce the minimal standard we have now.

I know that my case of having a premature child (or children) is not an uncommon one. Having spent months in total between my 3 children in special care nursery, meeting other parents, I know firsthand that having a premature child is actually quite common. As a highly qualified and educated nurse and paramedic I also know that having a child with extra needs is also not uncommon. We need to support parents that are struggling to provide the extra care that these children need, instead of cutting off any support that they are given and forcing them to return to the workforce in order to help support their family.

Overall, I find that the plan to make such drastic and radical changes are, sadly, at the detriment of the Australian community and families. I know that I, for one, would seriously reconsider having another child (as we had planned) as we would be financially unable to, and I do not want to be forced back into the workforce and unable to fully bond with my child, due to the government's blatant disregard for supporting women, families and the working population in Australia.

I ask you. I urge you. I'm begging of you.

Please reconsider this plan to radically reduce the funding for paid parental leave to parents who already receive some form of maternity leave from their employers. This is in no way 'double dipping'. It is just mothers trying very hard to do the very best for their child, as well as being given the vital support needed to be able to breastfeed and bond with their child.

Yours Sincerely

Anita Stirling