

Women's Health Goulburn North East

Paid Parental Leave (Flexibility Measures) Bill Recommendations

What does it mean to be a family?

If we're lucky enough to grow up in a safe home, it means being seen and heard. It means being held when we're hurt, having the freedom to play, explore, and make mistakes, and learning how to move through the world with a deep respect for ourselves and for others. Most importantly, it means we belong.

To be a family does not require us to be perfect; it simply asks us to be engaged, involved, vulnerable, courageous, and connected. Choosing to start or grow a family can be one of the most meaningful experiences life has to offer, provided we feel supported to navigate its inevitable challenges. The Paid Parental Leave Bill provides tangible structural support for new parents, enabling them to fully engage with the joys and complexities of family life, while supporting the move toward a more gender equal Australia.

In considering the amendments to the Paid Parental Leave (Flexibility Measures) Bill 2020, Women's Health Goulburn Northeast make the following recommendations:

Use gender-neutral language

- The language of 'primary' and 'secondary' caregivers reinforces patriarchal gender norms that value women for their reproductive capacity and men for their capacity to earn. This traps families in a dichotomous breadwinner-homemaker relationship that prevents them from participating equally in the joys and responsibilities of family life.
- For heterosexual two-parent families, supporting both parents to take leave encourages fathers to play a more active role in understanding how to care for and soothe their children, which has positive impacts on children's long-term bonding and development outcomes. With only two-weeks of leave, fathers are less inclined to learn how to manage the daily needs of their child, which further burdens women with an imbalance in caring responsibilities.
- The right to participate fully and equally in the joys of family life should be afforded to all parents, regardless of gender or familial structure. Removing gendered language also removes the inherent roles and expectations assigned to men as fathers and women as mothers, meaning parents are free to define these roles for themselves, based on the

needs of their families.

- Australia's current parental leave provisions disadvantage men as carers, which further embeds gender inequality and limits women's career advancement.
- Same-sex and gender diverse families are valid families, and they should not be excluded by way of legislative language.

Embed genuine flexibility within the policy

- [Better Life Lab](#) recommends one year of paid parental leave, shared between parents. For the best maternal health and wellbeing outcomes, this should be split equally as six months per individual.
- Same-sex, single-parent, and gender diverse families should receive the same leave provisions as heterosexual two-parent families.
- A truly progressive policy would consider the value of non-traditional familial support to single-parent families (e.g. from grandparents or other family sources), with those carers also receiving legislated leave entitlements.

Include flexible return to work provisions

- Women make up 70% of the part-time and casual labour market, which can create additional challenges when navigating parental leave and the return to work. Having partners who are able to access flexible leave entitlements supports women to remain in the workforce
- A graduated return to flexible work encourages parents to pursue their careers with intention and purpose. Supportive work environments that allow for staged and flexible return mean that parents can enjoy the benefits of family life without being financially disadvantaged.
- Research suggests that young dads do in fact want to take time off and be more active participants in caregiving. But when they don't, either because of lack of opportunity or lack of desire, those tasks continue to fall to women, whose careers suffer as a result. Enabling both parents to access flexible return-to-work provisions enables heterosexual couples to reimagine their home and work lives to be more gender equal.

- Returning to the workforce can be a protective factor for postnatal depression, if women want to return, and are able to return to supportive environments.

Continue to make contributions to superannuation

- If the Gender Equality Bill is to have a real impact, we need to maintain focus on closing the gender pay gap, as well as the significant gap in retirement savings that disadvantages women later in life. Embedding superannuation payments into the Bill would make a strong statement on the Government's commitment to gender equality.
- Median superannuation balances for women at retirement (aged 60-64) are 20.5% lower than those for men (ATO, 2020, Taxation Statistics 2016-17).

Incentivise companies to adopt flexible leave policies by demonstrating their social and economic impact

- While federal policy change is important, it's also worth noting the role of workplace culture on employee willingness to take parental leave
- Broader work to shift gender norms within the workplace - as is the intention of the Gender Equality Bill - will encourage parents to access leave entitlements without fear of discrimination or dismissal
- When women take leave from the workforce, the gender pay gap increases. There's also a persistent bias that once women have had a child, they are less productive and committed to their career. Further work is needed to shift the cultural narrative around motherhood and productive employment.
- Parental leave is a win-win scenario, giving new parents the opportunity to participate in family life and remain in the workforce, which in turn enables employers to retain valuable, productive and, most importantly, happy team members.

Intersections with the Gender Equality Bill

- Amendments to the Bill reflect a broader social desire for greater equality. Combined with the GE Bill, this sends a strong message to workplaces about the social and economic benefits of a gender equal society.

- Parental leave policies need to reflect the changing nature of Australian families, as many households strive to divide responsibilities more equally but are hampered by workplace responsibilities.
- Cultural change doesn't happen overnight, but the GE Bill sets the stage for deeper conversations within the workplace. Amendments to the Bill are a valuable tool for shaping the discussion.

A Final Thought

Father's and partner's who access parental leave make a profound contribution to gender equality overall. At home, equal access to parental leave is linked to a more equal distribution of unpaid domestic labour, which helps to shift traditional gender norms more broadly. In the workplace, equal uptake of parental leave between women and their partners helps to reduce discriminatory hiring processes that see women of reproductive age as risky employees that may be unreliable (by leaving to have children) or unproductive (upon return to the workforce). It helps to shift this view by incentivising companies to see mothers and fathers as equally valuable employees, which would lead to the retention and promotion of women at the same rates as men, aiding in closing the gender pay gap and securing women's long-term financial security through improved superannuation. Lastly, families who model gender equal practices at home are able to normalise the experience for their children who, in turn, carry it with them into future generations.



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