

Paid Maternity Leave: Shaping the Future

On December 11 2002, Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward released her proposal for an Australian paid maternity leave scheme (Goward 2002b). At the time of going to press, speculation continues about the content of the expected Federal Government 'families package' (Atkins 2003a, 2003b; MacDonald 2003; Shanahan 2003). This is clearly a very sensitive issue politically, as demonstrated by Prime Minister John Howard's quick denial of a media report that he had vetoed paid maternity leave (Shanahan 2003; MacDonald 2003; Metherell 2003; Morris & Madden 2003)

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Over the middle months of 2002, Australians participated in a lively public discussion of the possibility of legislated paid maternity leave. This followed Goward's (2002a) options paper on paid maternity leave, released in April 2002. Response moved rapidly from whether Australia should have a scheme, to what type of scheme we should have. Goward travelled the country addressing groups, and the issues received almost daily media attention. Although some public discussion has indicated there is concern that business, particularly small businesses, could not afford the costs of paid maternity leave, Goward's paper stated clearly that making businesses directly liable for costs was not an option. Other issues raised include funding arrangements, the appropriate length of paid leave, eligibility of women not in paid employment at the time of a birth, and whether paid maternity leave would have any impact on Australia's low birth rate, or on breast cancer rates.

Support for a scheme has come

from commentators as diverse as ACTU president Sharan Burrow and Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, George Pell. Their underlying philosophies and their reasons for supporting a scheme are clearly very different from each other. Prime Minister John Howard initially reacted dismissively, but quickly softened his stance once the extent of public reaction became obvious.

Goward (2002a, 2002b) suggests that there is a need for broad-ranging change in the conditions for parenting in Australia, and that the introduction of 14 weeks' paid maternity leave is one strategy that can contribute towards that change. She points to Australia's low birth rate as evidence that the disadvantages faced by mothers are forcing them to decide to have fewer children. This is consistent with Peter McDonald's analysis of worldwide trends in birth rates. He identifies the broader problem as lack of gender equity. His research indicates that countries with good opportunities for women in education and

employment, but low gender equity in families, are at risk of very low birth rates (McDonald 2000a, 2000b). Other literature identifies a situation of impasse in relation to women and employment, stalled progress towards gender equality, and high levels of dissatisfaction with the conditions of their lives among mothers of young children (LeBlanc 1999; Maushart 1997; Probert 2001).

One of the dangers with a strategy such as paid maternity leave is that it could be used to reinforce traditional family forms and gender roles within families, rather than to increase gender equity in families, as evidenced by the support of conservatives such as George Pell and the Women's Action Alliance. For this reason it is important to examine possible components of a paid maternity leave scheme, considering whether proposed aspects of a scheme are likely to have emancipatory or oppressive impacts. This article discusses the need for broad change in Australian social conditions for care of young children, articulates principles for long-term change, and explores the type of paid maternity leave scheme that would contribute towards making Australia a more egalitarian and equitable society. It does this within a framework of ideas about transformational change drawn from contemporary critical social theory.

Transformational change

Emancipatory or transformational change challenges oppression (Galper 1975). It aims at institutions, ideologies and culture, and is different from social reform. 'The superstructure, or the fundamental nature of what exists, is not challenged by reformism. Reformism seeks change and improvement within the

boundaries of what is' (Galper 1975, p. 76).

Mullaly (2002), like Galper (1975) argues that small changes and challenges to social arrangements are worthwhile if they contribute towards overall transformational change. Both argue that change usually comes about a little at a time. Nickie Charles (2000) emphasises the need for a long-term agenda for change as well as a short-term agenda. Achieving long-term transformational change that is cultural and structural involves understanding how short-term changes fit into the longer-term agenda. My concept of a 'coherent agenda for change' involves developing a long-term agenda for transformational change that challenges oppression (Mullaly 2002), and situating smaller, short-term changes within that agenda, with a view to ensuring that the gains of the 'short agenda' contribute to the aims of the 'long agenda' (Charles 2000).

Within this framework, an emancipatory paid maternity leave scheme must be based on an analysis that identifies the sources of domination and oppression within current arrangements. It must include in its intention and design significant challenges to those oppressions. Without this coherent agenda, people are likely to expend energy on strategies that have little or counter-productive long-term impact.

Need for broad change in Australian social conditions for care of young children

Caring for young children is skilled, demanding work that consumes the time and energy of those who carry it out. I have argued elsewhere that motherhood could be seen as

economic exploitation disguised as choice (Grace 2001). Many people contribute in a voluntary way to the community, but the work of caring for young children consumes so many hours of a mother's time that it compromises her ability to earn and benefit from labour market income. As Brown et al. (1994, p. 202) comment:

'A woman's work is never done' is a phrase embedded in our language and our cultural consciousness. In spite of this, motherhood is rarely seen in terms of the work involved. Becoming a mother is so often represented as a 'taken for granted' part of being a woman that the work women do in the name of motherhood, their 'labours of love' – child rearing and domestic work – remain invisible.

The value of this work could be seen in a range of ways. Marilyn Waring (1988), Duncan Ironmonger (2001, 2000, 1996) and Nancy Folbre (1994) have argued persuasively that unpaid work has economic value, even when it is not officially recognized and counted as economic activity. Caring for young children clearly contributes to the collective good. It is not only humane but pragmatic to ensure that the next generation survives and is well cared for. Without the next generation, the society would soon die out. Adequate care of young children is necessary to ensure functioning adults to carry on all the activities that are generally taken for granted, and is necessary to support both the older generation and the next generation of children. Mothers who care for young children make a very significant contribution of their own labour to the welfare of the whole community in the future, yet this work does not even earn them superannuation benefits.

Bittman and Pixley (2000, 1997) have similarly argued that the rest of the community could be seen as free-

riders on the labour of mothers. They see caring for young children as socially useful and necessary work that produces a 'public good' but is resourced by the unpaid labour of women at the expense of their own economic well-being. They state that within orthodox economic theory, 'public goods' are provisions like lighthouses and street lighting that cannot be supplied to one person without automatically becoming available to all, and their individual users cannot be made to pay for them. The birth and raising of children produces a public good by ensuring the future of the society. Employers rely on being able to employ functioning adults. All of the elderly rely on other people's children to keep the society functioning. Bittman and Pixley (1997, pp. 197-8) state:

Parents pay directly for the costs of children, and mothers pay in foregone earnings and in effort (however enjoyable). Mothers in particular have received virtually no economic benefits from this heavy investment. More precisely many women have been doomed to poverty for making this provision in modern societies.

Because women take (or are left with) the main responsibility for the unpaid work of caring for young children (as well as people with disabilities, sick people and frail elderly people), men are free to pursue paid employment. Any sharing of status, power and assets accumulated via paid employment is largely at the discretion of individual men, placing women in a disadvantaged position, as demonstrated by the widespread poverty among single, separated and divorced mothers and their children (Shaver 1998; Travers 2001).

Australia's arrangements for the care of young children amount to exploitation, as defined by Mullaly (1997, p.146, following Young 1990):

Exploitation refers to those social processes whereby the dominant group is able to accumulate and maintain status, power, and assets from the energy and labour expended by subordinate groups.

Recent newspaper articles on the topics of motherhood, childcare and paid employment express dissatisfaction with present social arrangements, and diverse views regarding desirable change (for example Bone 2001; Cannold 2001a, 2001b; Manne 2001; Maushart 2001; Sherry 2001a, 2001b). There is some consensus about the need for change, but no consensus about an agenda for change, indicating a need for sustained work on agenda development.

Oppressions inherent in present social arrangements

As outlined above, transformational change challenges oppressions. The oppressions that paid maternity leave must challenge are embedded in the construction of market work and family work, the institution of 'the economy', and the gender culture or gender system.

Market work and family work

The exploitation of women's unpaid work is supported structurally and culturally by the way that market work and family work are treated as belonging to separate spheres, in spite of their interdependence (Bryson 1992). Market work is constructed on the basis of the availability of 'ideal workers' without significant domestic responsibilities (Williams 2000). Most women and men can participate on this basis until/unless they have children. Following the birth of children, most mothers need time away from employment for physical recovery and breastfeeding, and most

fathers need someone to care for their babies following their early return to paid employment.

The market lives as a parasite on the unpaid work carried out in homes, predominantly by women. Distortion in what is treated as economic activity results in distortion of distribution of economic resources (Bryson 1996; Grace 1998; Ironmonger 1996). This distortion in the relative value placed on market work and family work is a source of oppression for women. The undervaluing of work traditionally carried out by women, and ideas about what makes a good mother and a good father, force individuals' choices towards males specialising in market work and females specialising in caring work (Williams 2000). Because caring work is treated as 'doing nothing', women with male partners are expected to perform the man's share of housework, as well as their own.

The lack of economic resourcing for reproductive work is a source of domination/oppression, plunging most single women into either poverty or the excessive workload of early return to employment. Women with partners may avoid these outcomes, but the pressure on the partner to 'provide' for the family leads to a tendency for the mother to become economically dependent, to specialise in unpaid work and the male or female partner to specialise in paid work. Once established, this pattern proves resistant to change. In this situation, a dominant ideology of motherhood (Wearing 1984), like an opportunistic virus, suggests to women that it is good to be always available to their children, that mothercare is best for children and that sacrificing their own desires to the demands of motherhood is a good thing.

A number of feminist theorists

have criticised the way that market work and family work are often placed conceptually in separate spheres. They have rejected the public/private divide and the liberal ideal of citizenship, and have argued for recognition of the inter-dependence of the so-called 'spheres', and for a concept and practice of citizenship that includes women (Fraser 1989; Lister 1997; Pateman 1988; Reiger 2000; Sassoon 1987; Williams 2000). A significant stream of feminist thought values the experiences of motherhood and family life, but criticises the institutions of motherhood and the family for being oppressive to women (Gilligan 1982; Reiger 1991; Rich 1986; Ruddick 1990; Wearing 1984). This oppression is often expressed or played out as conflicts between work and family. For men, this work/family conflict may mean conflict between paid work and relationships, but for women it is much more likely to mean conflict between paid work and unpaid work. Until the gendered nature of this discourse is clarified, general discussions of work/family conflict will continue to be of limited usefulness.

'The economy'

One of the institutions that acts as both a source of domination/oppression and a barrier to change is 'the economy', usually meaning in both discourse and practice the market economy, with minor attention to the role of the state in maintaining the functionality of the market economy by intervening for example in interest rates. 'The economy' is an example of the intertwined functioning of states, markets and families (Bryson 2000). Within liberal democracies such as Australia, 'the economy' is treated as central. Families produce and support

workers for the market, and consume market goods. The state props up the market, intervening to counteract 'dangerous' trends in the economy, such as overheating. This discourse and practice ignores the household economy (Ironmonger 2000).

The subordination and disenfranchisement of women at the time of the institutionalisation of 'the economy' meant that the economic value of unpaid work could be disregarded. The development of the concept of the public/private divide further entrenched women's exclusion from 'the economy'. Despite women's voting rights and increasing participation in paid employment, politics and community life, the public/private divide has survived. Women's unpaid work is simultaneously exploited to support the market and ignored in terms of its economic significance.

Valuing parental care of young children as economic activity that produces a public benefit would mean treating it as real work with value for the whole community. Viewing care of young children as real work with economic value rather than as 'love' implies that it would be appropriate for this work to be covered by sick leave, Workcover and superannuation arrangements (Ironmonger 2001). Implementing these ideas would involve breaking down the public/private divide in people's minds, and in legislation, policies and practices.

I have encountered two objections to treating caring for young children as economic activity. One is that it is not desirable to turn child-raising into just another kind of work, and the other is that discussing caring for children in economic terms devalues it. These objections represent a potentially important barrier to

bringing about change. This barrier could be seen as a defence of the 'private sphere' and of the relative freedom that some mothers have experienced in terms of being able to raise their children as they see fit. These objections seem to draw on the idea that the family is a place for the expression of human values, and on a reluctance to expose care of young children to the values represented within economics. My answer to these criticisms would be that they are based on oppressive ideas about what constitutes 'the economy', and what is 'work'. We have come to see work as paid work and the economy as the market. This distorted view underpins the operation of markets and families on the basis of very different values from each other.

Challenging the public/private divide and giving recognition to caring for young children as real work and as economic activity does not mean imposing the ethics and values of markets on family work. People have understandable concerns about the operation of the market. However, a less distorted concept of the economy would include all activities necessary to feed, clothe, shelter and reproduce the population (Peterson & Brown 1994). This would allow the recognition of caring for young children as real work with economic value, without implying the imposition of market values on this activity.

The gender system

Australia's gender system interacts with structural conditions to ensure that mothers mostly bear the costs of caring for young children. For example, the ideology of domesticity assigns unpaid work to women, supporting the idea that women's work is of little economic value (Williams 2000). Public comment in newspapers indicates that

childcare is still perceived as a women's issue (Bone 2001).

Contemporary parents see themselves as choosing their arrangements for pragmatic and personal reasons, rather than conforming to sex-role stereotypes or expectations. However, institutional arrangements work against any challenge to gender roles, and the longer stereotypical arrangements are in place the more difficult it becomes to break out of them. Mothers become increasingly skilled at caring for children, but suffer depreciation of their ability to earn labour market income. Fathers, on the other hand, fall further and further behind mothers in their ability to care for and manage their children, but maintain or increase their ability to earn labour market income.

Aspects of motherhood ideology also work against fathers' participation. These aspects include the idea that a mother is the best person to care for a child, and the idea that a 'good' mother is always available for her children (Wearing 1984). Changing the ideology of motherhood involves challenging ideas about what is good for children and what it means to be a good mother (Cox, 2001). Many mothers speak of guilt in relation to their children. The idea of guilt reflects the moral imperatives that form part of the ideology of motherhood – what a mother 'should' and 'should not' do. It also reflects the selfless ideal of motherhood. The ideology of motherhood supports domesticity by suggesting it is morally good and provides good quality care for children.

Belinda Probert (2001) draws attention to the need for change in the ideologically-driven and damaging moral and judgmental divisions



among women. She sees women defending their own arrangements by attacking other possibilities, for example in relation to use of formal childcare, indicating that debate in the area is excessively moral rather than constructive. The ideology of domesticity locates caring for children in the private sphere and identifies it as love rather than labour. Treating caring for young children as a matter of love and relationship makes it seem like an arena of beliefs and morals. Treating it as work that has an economic value and produces a public benefit may contribute to a more (re)constructive approach.

A better future would include gender equity for women with family responsibilities. Mothers of young children would be identified and treated much less as gendered family members, and more as individuals. This suggests an overthrow of the 'compulsory altruism' of motherhood, whereby the mother becomes 'selfless' setting aside her selfhood or personhood in the interests of her children. This idea of gender equity is

consistent with the idea of a gendered citizenship that recognises both a woman's status as an individual and her life experience that may include childbearing (Gordon 1990; Okin 1997; Reiger 2000; Williams 2000). This change also opens up the possibility of reducing the gender-specificity of parenting by disconnecting the physical experience of childbearing from the ideological role expectations of mothers, encouraging men to exercise some of the devotion and nurturing at present expected of mothers.

Long-term change towards gender equity would require short-term strategies to educate and train fathers to care in a skilled way for their children, along with family allowances, paid leave arrangements and workplace expectations that eliminate or reduce the financial disincentives for fathers' participation in childcare.

Principles for change

The above analysis of the oppressions embedded in Australia's social arrangements for care of young

children suggests three principles for developing a coherent agenda for change. They are: challenging the public/private divide; treating women as individuals; and developing a gendered citizenship.

Principle 1: Challenging the public/private divide

The idea of separate public and private spheres is a patriarchal liberal fiction that oppresses women (Fraser 1989; Lister 1997; Pateman 1988; Sassoon 1987). The separation of the spheres hides the inter-dependence of state, market and domestic activities (Bryson 2000). Transformational change in the situation of mothers of young children must challenge the fiction of the public/private divide, by emphasising that caring for young children is work (however lovingly performed) with economic value, and that this work produces a public benefit at the expense of individual mothers. This analysis rejects any essentialising association of women with the domestic. It maintains an emphasis on both women and men as participants in domestic activities, paid employment, and community life. While rejecting the idea of separate public and private spheres, this analysis retains a commitment to a value of privacy in personal areas of life (Lister 1997; Young 1990).

Principle 2: Treating women as individuals

Peter McDonald states that to improve gender equity for women who become mothers, public policy must treat them as individuals rather than gendered family members. Bettina Cass (1995) draws attention to the Australian welfare state's treatment of heterosexual couples as the unit of income- and assets-testing for benefits.

Sole parent pensioners lose their pensions if they start (heterosexual) cohabiting. Women's eligibility for income support and Child Care Benefit is means-tested on the combined incomes of themselves and male partners. It is this treatment as gendered (patriarchal) family members that McDonald seeks to reverse, rather than promoting a competitive, acquisitive individualism. This treatment as autonomous or independent citizens can co-exist with the expectation that people will act in cooperative and collective ways. As Carole Pateman (1989, p. 203, cited in Cass 1995) states:

[F]ully democratic citizens would be both autonomous and *interdependent*, they are autonomous when each enjoys the means to be an active citizen, but they are interdependent when the welfare of each is the collective responsibility of all citizens.

This concept of fully democratic citizenship emphasises autonomous (individual) access to the means to be an active citizen – the economic resources to sustain life and participate in the community. Australia's present social arrangements deny this autonomous access to the vast majority of mothers of young children.

Principle 3: Developing gendered citizenship

Traditionally, women's advocacy for change has been based on either equality (sameness) with men or on difference from men, particularly in relation to childbearing and caring responsibilities. Some contemporary feminists argue for a gendered citizenship that emphasises women's equality with men AND acknowledges biological differences in relation to pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding (Gordon 1990; Okin

1997; Reiger 2000; Williams 2000). This perspective values women's reproductive experience without essentialising women, or subscribing to the dominant ideology of motherhood, or accepting that caregiving work is properly the responsibility of women.

Cass (1995) and other feminist authors criticise structures and institutions predicated on the ideal citizen of liberal theory – an able-bodied male, unencumbered by domestic responsibilities (Fraser 1989; Lister 1997; Pateman 1988; Reiger 2000; Sassoon 1987; Williams 2000). They argue for changes to institutions to make them more inclusive of women, but not at the cost of institutionalising women's responsibility for household and caring work, e.g. 'family friendly' provisions aimed at women. Cass (1995) argues that a reconceptualized citizenship for both women and men must include expectations of taking responsibility for dependant care.

The concept of gendered citizenship implies women's right to participate in society's institutions that have previously excluded them, but at the same time reserving the right to work for change in those institutions.

Implications for a paid maternity leave scheme

As discussed above, caring for young children is real work that produces a public benefit at the expense of individual mothers, and it would be reasonable for the rest of the community to contribute much more to the resourcing of this work. The vision for a better future is of a more egalitarian society, with less inequality between rich and poor, and between women and men. A paid maternity

leave scheme that contributes towards transformational change should challenge the public/private divide (while preserving a value of privacy), treat women more as individuals and less as gendered couple or family members, and contribute towards the development of a gendered citizenship that acknowledges both women's equality with men and their distinctive role in childbearing. In addition, any changes in the direction of a more equitable and egalitarian society must acknowledge diversity among women and challenge intersecting oppressions including those of class, gender, and race.

Addressing intersecting oppressions may sometimes throw up apparently competing agendas. For example, overcoming women's gender-based economic disadvantage would involve advocating full income replacement for as long as possible for well-paid women, but this would increase inequality between rich women and poor women. I would argue that in these circumstances we should advocate for gender equity in the short term, and work towards more egalitarian arrangements in the long term. Australian women want to participate in education, employment, politics and community life AND to change them (McDonald 2000a; Pocock 2000; Probert 2001; Weedon 1997). This idea of participating while bringing about change provides a basis for thinking about how to structure paid maternity leave for employed women. Some women may want to change employment in the long run to reduce or eliminate inequality, but in the meantime participating equally with men in the existing system is a worthy goal. This equal participation means increasing the rewards in financial, career and status terms for

women in employment. According to this principle, we should ensure that women in employment receive full replacement of wages while on paid maternity leave.

Another challenge in relation to intersecting oppressions arises in relation to whether paid maternity leave should be limited to women in paid employment at the time of a birth, an interpretation that seems intuitive to many people, but is open to challenge. On this question we can learn from the mistakes made by Labor women early last century when they tried to exclude Aboriginal and Islander women from the Maternity Allowance they were fighting for (Lake 1999). With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that while it is good to fight for improved conditions for employed women, it is also important to express solidarity with women, including Indigenous women, who are disadvantaged in relation to employment. According to this principle, we should ensure that all women are covered by Australia's paid maternity leave scheme.

A paid maternity leave scheme developed in accordance with the three principles above would involve supporting mothers and fathers to withdraw fully or partially from paid employment for up to two or three years following a birth, with equally strong support for them to return after this period to full or substantial labour market earning. Improved direct financial support for mothers and fathers of very young children, and much better access for mothers to labour market income is vital. This would involve increasing remuneration in women's typical areas of employment, supporting both ongoing attachment and return to employment following a birth, and

increasing support, education and training for women returning to employment after a period away undertaking dependant-care work.

Arguments put forward by Pru Goward (2000) in favour of 14 weeks' paid maternity leave include contributing to arresting Australia's dropping fertility by making it more economically feasible for 'couples' to have children, compensating women for their loss of income resulting from family responsibilities, an appeal to mothers' right to a period of rest following a birth, the deservingness of mothers and babies to have time for each other following birth, and an argument that it is in the interests of business and industry to retain skilled workers by offering paid maternity leave. She does not use the argument that caring for young children is work with economic value for the whole community. Goward's final proposal, presented in December 2002 following extensive community consultation, challenges the oppression embedded in the public/private divide by viewing mothers as workers on leave from paid employment. However, her arguments do not challenge the exploitation of mothers' labour, or the definition of caring for young children as non-work. Goward's paper both reinforces and challenges motherhood ideology. Her argument that paid maternity leave gives babies full-time access to their mothers for the first 14 weeks of life draws on the idea that mothers should be always available for their babies. Goward's paper acknowledges the need for changes to facilitate fathers' ability to care for their children, thus including a minor challenge to motherhood ideology. The challenge remains minor, with Goward citing pragmatic reasons for concentrating on

paid maternity leave while flagging the need for other provisions.

Ideas about good motherhood and good fatherhood get in the way of gender equity in parenting. Inequity in parenting gets in the way of equity in employment, politics and community life. A paid maternity leave scheme that contributes towards a future more egalitarian society must challenge the gendered roles that script our present arrangements.

Ideas that good mothers are self-sacrificing, are always available for their children, and arrange their lives around care-giving responsibilities lead women to take excessive responsibility for childcare and unpaid work. This tends to result in very good relationships with their children, but underdevelopment of women's potential in other areas, and poor access to economic resources. The idea that good fathers are principally breadwinners leads men to excessive commitment to paid work, to the detriment of their participation in childcare and relationships. There are signs that both women and men want greater equality in care-giving and income-earning. Women's bodies bear and breastfeed babies, and paid maternity leave gives recognition to this reality. However, a scheme must avoid any suggestion that babies and young children are the responsibility of individual mothers rather than of both parents, and of the community.

Belinda Probert (2001) suggests that in Australia progress towards gender equity has stalled. Peter McDonald states that if we want to maintain the birth rate in Australia we need to improve economic security for young people, and increase gender equity for women who bear children. What kind of paid maternity leave scheme would move us towards gender

equity as well as providing income for women at a time in their lives when they cannot be expected to earn income via paid employment?

Who should pay?

The whole of the community benefits from the work that parents, mostly mothers, carry out to care for babies and young children. It is reasonable that the community, via a government-funded scheme, should fund paid maternity leave. If businesses paid directly it could become very unfair for some businesses and lead to discrimination in employment against women of child-bearing age. However, businesses do benefit from the early return to employment of skilled workers, and the ACTU suggestion that an employer levy could be used to top-up the government-funded scheme to average weekly earnings is reasonable (ACTU 2002). As suggested by the Women's Electoral Lobby, it should be possible for employers to further top-up payments, for example to income-replacement level (WEL 2002). The publicly-funded paid leave should not be contingent upon return to a particular place of employment. However, it would be reasonable for employer-funded top-up payments to carry an obligation to return to that employer.

A universal scheme

There has been some discussion of whether paid maternity leave should be only for women in paid employment at the time of a birth, or for all women, regardless of employment status. Restricting a publicly-funded initiative to those already most advantaged in the community runs counter to the ideal of working towards a more egalitarian society. Women who are students,

pensioners, unemployed, living in remote communities, are supported by a partner or are not in paid employment for some other reason prior to a birth should not miss out. Most of these women have paid taxes in the past, and most will again in the future. The timing of a birth, or employment disadvantage including geographical location should not be used as an excuse to exclude women from paid maternity leave.

Level of payment

The ACTU (2002) web page suggests:

[U]nder the ACTU's maternity leave model, an estimated 87% of working mothers would be eligible for 14 weeks' leave on full pay, with others receiving at least average weekly earnings (currently \$981.10) ... Payments up to the minimum wage (currently \$431 per week) would be funded by the Commonwealth. Top-up payments up to the level of average weekly earnings would be funded by an employer levy costing less than \$1-a-week per employee, with possible exemptions for small businesses.

Some women already have an employer-funded entitlement of around 14 weeks on full pay, and it is important that this should not be reduced, in accordance with the principle of working towards greater gender equity within the existing system, while working for change towards a more egalitarian system. Any scheme must provide a universal government-funded minimum payment, and allow for additional employer-funded payments.

Gender equity

Fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave will not bring gender equity to this country. Even with paid maternity leave, it will still be unreasonable to expect one person to look after a baby,

wash, cook, clean and shop for a household, seven days a week without breaks. We will still have all the problems of finding high quality affordable childcare and of women's double shift of paid work and unpaid work when they return to employment.

Fathers' long hours of work are damaging to mothers. Mothers suffer physically from overwork and lack of sleep. They suffer mentally and emotionally from lack of rest and lack of breaks from their work, from isolation and shouldering excessive responsibility for children and housework. Relationships suffer because women feel abused by the working conditions imposed by their motherhood.

We need to enable both fathers and mothers to take time out from employment, and/or limit working hours without economic or career penalty. If we want men to participate equally in caring work, we need paternity leave, some to be taken simultaneously with maternity leave. It may be necessary to provide guidance to encourage fathers to perform and gain skills in household work and childcare, since this expectation runs counter to the practices of some sections of the community.

Paid maternity leave potentially recognises both the status of women as workers in the labour market, and the economic value of the work involved in caring for babies and young children. However it is important to see this small step for women as part of a larger undertaking — to overcome the distortions embedded in our way of life.

We need to find ways to allocate a fair share of economic resources to

people undertaking caring work. This could include a range of strategies, including paying decent wages for childcare and personal care workers; drawing more caring work into the market as paid work; providing more services to people undertaking caring work to provide breaks, education, training and respite; and providing generous family allowances, not means-tested on income. Many Australian women and men are ready to move towards more egalitarian participation in caring for young children, employment, politics and community life, but structures and practices based on old ideas are working against them.

Broader changes in social conditions for caring for young children

Discussions of paid maternity leave have generated a great deal of public interest, and a degree of mobilisation on the part of supporters of the idea. There are many other ideas for change to improve the situation of Australian mothers of young children. As suggested by both Peter McDonald (2001) and Carmen Lawrence (2001), it would be appropriate for Australia to have an inquiry into the conditions for caring for young children. In a rational process of change, a public inquiry would examine possibilities, consult widely with the community, and make recommendations to the government of the day. However, particularly with a neo-conservative Federal Government, it is much more likely that sections of the community will mobilise to demand change. That mobilisation could take the form of a strong third wave of feminism, or a more occasional mobilisation in relation to particular issues as with the

community response in 2002 to discussions of paid maternity leave.

Conclusion

Almost-daily articles in newspapers following the release of Pru Goward's options paper indicate a high level of public interest in contributing to the discussion of paid maternity leave, and, on the whole, a desire for change in the social conditions for care of young children in Australia. I have argued that it is important to have a coherent agenda for long-term transformational change to ensure that short-term changes have emancipatory rather than oppressive or neutral impacts. Developing that coherent agenda involves identifying the oppressive aspects of present arrangements, and I have drawn on the work of a range of authors to discuss those aspects. Three principles for change flow from that discussion. They are: challenging the public/private divide; treating women as individuals; and developing a gendered citizenship.

The type of paid maternity leave scheme that would be consistent with these principles would be publicly-funded, with employer-funded top-up payments to salary-replacement levels. It would be universal, challenging the public-private divide by including women not in paid employment at the time of a birth. It would focus on mothers as individuals undertaking real work of value to the whole community, rather than dealing with them as gendered family members. It would be accompanied by paid paternity leave, and by strategies to redress the employment disadvantage suffered by mothers.

This type of paid maternity leave scheme would challenge the

oppressions embedded in present social arrangements for care of young children. It would challenge definitions of work, oppressive ideologies of motherhood and domesticity. It would support changes taking place at personal and cultural levels as Australian women and men redefine the meanings of motherhood, fatherhood, work and family in their own lives.

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