

**March 3, 2009**

**Media Statement**

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## **Paid maternity leave scheme will help both women and the economy**

Equal Opportunity Commissioner Yvonne Henderson today urged the Federal Government to include paid maternity leave in this year's Budget saying women should be able to access it without fear of losing their jobs and that the scheme would help the economy during the economic downturn.

"Paid maternity leave will stimulate the economy by ensuring that women are confident enough of the future to take leave to look after their newborn children whilst at the same time creating short term positions for others in the workforce," Ms Henderson said.

Commissioner Henderson supported comments by Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick last week that the global financial crisis cannot be used as an excuse to delay.

"Having the scheme will ensure mothers can keep spending and contributing to the economy while they are on leave - secure in the knowledge that they will have a job and income to return to."

Ms Henderson reiterated her support for the Productivity Commission's recommendation of 18 weeks' paid parental leave saying it would provide women with real choices as to when they returned to work after the birth of a child.

Commissioner Henderson's submission to the Productivity Commission last year called for:

- 26 weeks' paid maternity leave;
- Paid maternity leave be available to part-time and casual workers;
- Paid parental leave of at least two weeks be available to the partner of the mother at the time of birth;
- The Federal Government to provide a long term funding scheme for a universal period of paid parental leave at no less than the minimum wage; and
- No existing paid maternity leave entitlements be reduced with the introduction of a new scheme;
- A universal scheme that provides a sufficient length of time to promote breastfeeding and give women a real choice in relation to retaining their employment.

Ms Henderson said Australia has also moved last year to become party to the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

"This was an important step by the Australian Government in acknowledging that discrimination against women in any form is unacceptable and in this light, a paid maternity leave must be implemented," she said.

Under the Optional Protocol, women in Australia will be able to make a complaint to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women about alleged violation of Australia's obligations under CEDAW. This can only occur after domestic legal options have been exhausted. The protocol also permits a UN investigation process.

“It is time that paid maternity leave was no longer an ‘optional extra’ dependent on the goodwill and good sense of employers,” the Commissioner said.

“Paid maternity leave is a necessary investment in the health and wellbeing of mother and child as well as the father and it can actually also provide a substantial boost to the economy rather than be misinterpreted as a financial burden for employers and government.”

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