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[Home](#) > [Blogs](#) > [Kate Galloway's blog](#) > Paid parental leave and the possibility of structural change

# Paid parental leave and the possibility of structural change

[Gender Discrimination](#) <sup>[1]</sup> [Women in Business](#) <sup>[2]</sup> [Maternity leave](#) <sup>[3]</sup> [Parental leave](#) <sup>[4]</sup>

[Social issues](#) <sup>[5]</sup> [Society & family](#) <sup>[6]</sup> [Women's participation in the workforce](#) <sup>[7]</sup>

[Domestic policies](#) <sup>[8]</sup> [Federal election](#) <sup>[9]</sup> [Workplace Culture](#) <sup>[10]</sup> [EMPLOYMENT](#) <sup>[11]</sup>

[HUMAN CAPITAL](#) <sup>[12]</sup> [POLICY DEVELOPMENT](#) <sup>[13]</sup> [SOCIETY](#) <sup>[14]</sup> [WORK/LIFE](#)

[BALANCE](#) <sup>[15]</sup>

Mon, 26/08/2013 - [Kate Galloway](#) <sup>[16]</sup>



[16]

**Tony Abbott's proposed paid parental leave scheme has been widely debated. Kate Galloway analyses the arguments that are being made for and against it and argues that the scheme is only one part of a much bigger project.**

The announcement by the Leader of the Opposition of a 'generous' paid parental leave ('PPL') plan has reignited a heated debate around both the idea of PPL and the method of achieving it. It seems that almost no one can agree on how it should be paid or in fact whether we should have such a scheme at all.

The framing of this debate in terms of cost to business probably says more about attitudes to women than it does about economic policy because while the scheme is called 'parental' in fact it is mostly women who will benefit. So what are the arguments, and what do they say about attitudes to women?

With a lot of so-called 'family policy', women are in somewhat of a bind. On the one hand, women have traditionally been positioned, unpaid, in the home and excluded from the world of paid work and matters of state. To engage in this public sphere, women need support. They need education, laws that guarantee the franchise and the right to employment and they need support, both practical and financial, in carrying out their family and caring responsibilities. Because so many women continue to find themselves in these caring roles, it is important to continue to provide them with the support to engage in other spheres of life.

On the other hand, this scenario *assumes* that women will take the role of child rearing and of (unpaid) caring responsibilities. At this stage it is only women who are able to bear children and to breastfeed, but the assumption remains widespread that it is women who will also rear children. The gender-neutral 'parental leave' masks the reality that this discussion is about women. On this basis, any PPL proposal is likely to attract a lot of resistance by those who fail to see the gender inequality embedded within our society, in both the workplace and in the family.

There are those, for example, who object on economic grounds to any PPL at all because they claim that it is a significant financial burden on business. These arguments fail to recognise the unpaid work undertaken (mainly) by women that enables the paid workforce to work. Women's (and it is mainly women) unpaid work is de-valued and has never been taken into consideration in business's bottom line. Domestic life is invisible in characterising the worker – who is typically assumed to be male. Domestic obligations have consequently traditionally been irrelevant to the workplace and disregarded by the employer. Despite being unpaid, domestic (including reproductive) labour is a cost. And it is a cost borne largely by women.

PPL is therefore simply one part of the cost of having a workforce along with the other unpaid domestic and reproductive tasks that get us all to (productive) paid work each day. So if we are to have a PPL, the question becomes what is the conceptual foundation for paying it.

Parental leave payments can be determined in two ways. They can be treated as a work entitlement like sick leave or recreation leave (as with both the Coalition and Greens proposals) or alternatively as state support for parenting (as with the ALP policy): in other

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### Links:

- [1] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/356>
- [2] <http://www.openforum.com.au/category/topics/business/women-business>
- [3] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/116>
- [4] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/142>
- [5] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/132>
- [6] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/129>
- [7] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/160>
- [8] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/151>
- [9] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/42>
- [10] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/290>
- [11] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/267>
- [12] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/152>
- [13] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/85>
- [14] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/126>
- [15] <http://www.openforum.com.au/taxonomy/term/110>
- [16] <http://www.openforum.com.au/users/kate-galloway>
- [17] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/20/australia-gender-paid-parental-leave>
- [18] <http://katgallow.blogspot.com.au/>
- [19] <https://twitter.com/katgallow>
- [20] <http://twitter.com/share>