2. Summary of Results of FSU Maternity Leave Survey- 2002

Introduction and Overview
As part of the FSU contribution to the paid maternity leave debate, the FSU conducted a survey of its members on maternity leave. Surveys were sent to 750 members and we received 182 completed returns, a response rate of 24%. A copy of the survey is attached at Appendix 2.

The survey sought the views of our members on the importance of paid maternity leave, the extent to which financial considerations were a part of choices about the timing and length of maternity leave, the types of financial support used during maternity leave, intentions about return to work and the importance of fathers having access to leave after babies are born.

The main findings were:

- There is very strong support for universal access to a period of paid maternity leave;
- Financial considerations were part of the choice about the timing of having a baby and the length of maternity leave for most women surveyed. However, the availability of paid maternity leave was not usually considered when deciding whether or not to have a baby.
- Over 80% of women said that they felt much less financially secure since commencing maternity leave.
- Three quarters indicated that they had to use their family or personal savings to supplement income during maternity leave. Most used combinations of savings, government payments, and annual leave for financial support.
- Nearly half felt that they might have to return to work earlier than they would like to because of their financial situation.
- Three quarters of the women intended to return to the same company after maternity leave, but whether or not paid maternity leave had been available was not a big factor in this for most women.
- Most fathers took time off after their babies were born with most seeming to take as much paid leave as was available. There was very strong support (over 90%) for finding ways to extend the period of leave both parents can take together.

Demographics of the sample
Over three quarters (76.9%) of the women were aged between 26 and 35, and 20.9% were aged between 36-45. Only 2.2% were 18-25.

Most had been full time before they went on maternity leave (70.3%) while 29.3% were part time prior to going on leave. A total of 48% had been customer service or sales or both prior to leave, 16.8% had been clerical, 14% team leader or supervisor. Those at management level accounted for 12.8% of the sample and 8.4% identified themselves as professionals or specialists. These proportions reflect the proportions of FSU members in
these categories and suggest that the survey is representative of FSU female members and the finance sector more broadly.

Most had been with their current employer for a long time prior to their maternity leave with 20.3% being there between 7-9 years and 51.1% for more than 10 years.

Three quarters (76.9%) of those surveyed said that their company did provide paid maternity leave and of these 94.6% were eligible for the leave in this period of leave. Six weeks of paid leave was the norm where the company provides paid leave.

The average amount of maternity leave that members intended to take was 11.7 months. Of the sample, 41.8% had been on maternity leave before and 58.2% were on maternity leave for the first time. The overwhelming majority of those who had been on leave had not changed companies between periods of maternity leave. 92.8% indicated that their previous period of maternity leave had been from the same company.

**Importance of paid maternity leave**

FSU members surveyed demonstrated strong support for the introduction of a form of universal paid maternity leave. A large majority (88%) of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “It is important that everyone has access to some form of paid maternity leave when they have a baby.”

**Income support during maternity leave**

As indicated above, around three quarters of those surveyed were entitled to a period of paid maternity leave. Some 76.9% indicated that their companies offered paid maternity leave, and of these 94.6% said that they were entitled to paid leave. Nonetheless, six weeks is the standard period of paid leave while most of those surveyed intended to take 12 months leave. This leaves a large amount of time without income. We asked members a number of questions in an attempt to quantify some of the issues around income support during maternity leave.

A total of 80.9% of our members surveyed said that they qualified for some government payments (such as Maternity Allowance, Family Tax Benefit A or B, or Parenting Payment). Of these, however 90% said that these payments didn’t compensate them for their lost income while on maternity leave.

When asked to identify some of the types of income used to provide financial support during maternity leave, the most commonly identified was personal or family savings (79.3%), followed by government payments (55.4%), annual leave payments (47.3%), long service leave payments (25%) and other forms of financial support (22.3%). The other forms identified included husband’s income, selling shares or investment income.

It is revealing that 84.8% of those surveying either strongly agreed (49.5%) or agreed (35.3%) with the statement “I feel much less financially secure than I did before I went on maternity leave”. Nearly half (45.7%) agreed or strongly agreed “I may have to return to work earlier than I would like to because of my financial situation.” A further 17.9%
were unsure. Fifty percent agreed or strongly agreed that “My partner / husband has had to do extra work to compensate for my lost income while on maternity leave”. Anecdotally, some added that this placed extra strain on both the partner caring for the baby and the one having to do the extra work.

These results demonstrate that the period of maternity leave is often a difficult one financially, even for those who have been entitled to some paid leave. Family savings are drawn on, which diminishes family resources, many women feel less financially secure and often are faced with considering a return to work before they want to. A longer period of paid leave may ameliorate some of these financial difficulties.

The survey shows that financial considerations are a component of the decision about the timing of having a baby and the amount of maternity leave to take. Some 60.9% agreed or strongly agreed “Financial considerations were a big part of my decision whether or not to have a baby at this time.” Some 75.8% agreed or strongly agreed “I thought about my financial situation when deciding how much maternity leave to take.” However the availability of paid maternity leave was largely rejected as a factor in the decision whether or not to have a baby. Only 29.3% agreed or strongly agreed with this, but 64.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “I considered whether or not paid maternity leave was available when deciding to have a baby.” This suggests that the introduction of a universal paid maternity leave scheme will not, without other measures, solve the problem of Australia’s declining birth-rate.

Return to work
Generally, the women surveyed intend to return to work to the same company and being on maternity leave doesn’t undermine a sense of connection to their employer. Seventy six percent of those surveyed agreed “I intend to return to work to the same company when my maternity leave finishes.” Over half (56.3%) agree, “I still feel like an employee of my company even though I am on maternity leave”.

The question of whether the provision of paid maternity leave influenced this intention to return to work to the same company produced mixed results. To the statement, “Whether or not I get paid maternity leave is a big factor in whether I return to work for the same company” 33.5% expressed some level of agreement while 45.6% disagreed in some way with 20.9% unsure. This indicates that paid maternity leave is only one component of building a family friendly workplace. While more than half the women surveyed (59.2%) agreed with the statement “Companies that have paid maternity leave seem to value their employees more than those who don’t”, it is recognised that a number of family friendly provisions are necessary to make it possible to return to work after maternity leave. This is supported by the example of the Commonwealth Bank [see The Business Case for Paid Maternity Leave in the Finance Sector] where despite, having 12 weeks paid maternity leave since the 1970s, the retention rate only started to improve when other family friendly provisions, such as job share became available.

On the issue of return to work, a couple of issues emerged from comments provided on the surveys or by phone. The first was that a number of respondents expressed a view that
while they believed extending the provision of paid maternity leave was an important issue, the provision of paid maternity leave did not alleviate the difficulties experienced by those trying to juggle the demands of young children with a working life when they return to work. These members encouraged the FSU and policy makers not to forget this in the paid maternity leave debate.

A second and related issue arose from women about to return to work who were having difficulty negotiating work arrangements that suited them with and their family responsibilities. Members raising this issue also urged the FSU and policy makers not to neglect consideration of initiatives to assist with this transition. Such initiatives could include provisions for childcare leave, rights to return to work part time, provision for job sharing, working from home arrangements, flexible hours and family leave taken in hours.

It should also be noted that many finance sector enterprise agreements contain a number of such family friendly provisions. However research by the FSU and RMIT\(^1\) showed that the capacity to take advantage of provisions in agreements was often undermined by a workplace culture of excessive hours and workloads or unsympathetic management culture.

**Time for mothers and fathers after the birth**
The survey revealed that 75% of fathers took time off after the birth of their baby, the majority (53.1%) taking 2-4 weeks off, 34.6% taking one week or less and 12% taking 5 week or more. It seems most fathers were taking as much leave as they could while being paid as 77% indicated that it was paid leave. Obviously taking time off after their baby is born is important for both parents. Almost all respondents (91.8%) agreed or strongly agreed, “It is important to find ways to extend the period of leave both parents can take together after their baby is born.”

**Conclusions**
The survey clearly demonstrates that even for women in an industry with a good proportion of companies offering paid maternity leave, the maternity leave period is a time of financial uncertainty and insecurity. A large proportion of employees are drawing on family savings to provide additional financial support during this time. In spite of the reputation of the finance sector for being “family friendly”, clearly the financial pressures faced by women on the birth of a child, require support. A range of other measures are also needed, including:

- Improved flexibility on return to work
- Increased concurrent leave for mothers and fathers at the time of birth
- Child care subsidies and provision of work-based child care
- Enhanced career-break schemes and provisions for special family leave

---

\(^1\) Probert, Whiting and Ewer, Pressure from all sides: Life & Work in the finance sector, (FSU/RMIT) 2000
• Improved EEO and anti-discrimination training for managers to ensure that pregnancy and maternity leave are seen as inevitable experiences for many working women, which should be factored into workplace and career planning.