Dear Committee Members,

*[If writing on your own behalf, give a little introduction to yourself. Are you a mum? Or a dad? Planning to have a family? Or just someone who cares? Explain why changes to paid parental leave matter to you. If you are writing on behalf of an organisation, write a brief introduction to your organisation here.]*

*[I'm / we’re]* writing to express [*my/our]* concerns about the proposed changes to the paid parental leave scheme.

Our scheme is already one of the least generous in the world. Australia ranks third lowest in paid parental leave entitlement compared to similar countries. If the proposed changes go ahead this will decrease even further and many women will be left with access to just 18 weeks paid leave. This will reduce women’s choices about when to return to work and will be a significant step back for gender equality in Australia.

The proposed amendments will place many women in a position where they are forced to choose between returning to work before they are ready and incurring additional childcare costs, or being forced to take unpaid leave and being thousands of dollars worse off. We already have a significant gendered pay gap in this country. Financially disadvantaging women who take time off work to be with their babies will only further widen that gap.

*[If this is relevant to you, you may want to include your own story here. E.g. how would a reduction in the length of paid parental leave impact on you financially?]*

Changes to paid parental leave may also adversely impact on workplace attitudes towards pregnancy and parenthood. The obligation of paying parental leave will fall to the employer, rather than the current shared responsibility between the government and employers. There is a risk that this will increase the perception that pregnant women and mothers are a business risk for employers; further entrenching gender stereotypes.

A reduction in paid parental leave can also impact negatively on the health outcomes for mothers and babies. Both the World Health Organisation and the Commonwealth Department of Health recommend six months (26 weeks) of exclusive breastfeeding wherever possible, which is most easily achieved on leave. Additionally, at 18 weeks’ babies are still feeding 1-2 times per night, which can make it difficult for parents returning to work. Women who take shorter periods of leave have been found to report higher levels of mental distress than women who took longer leave. In fact, research has shown that women who return to works less than six months’ after having a child are at a greater risk of experiencing symptoms of postpartum depression. The potential added financial pressure caused by reduced paid leave entitlements may also contribute to higher levels of stress among mothers and families.

*[If this is relevant to you, you may want to include your own story here. E.g. what would it have meant for you to return to work at 18 weeks? Why do you feel a longer period of leave is important based on your own experiences?]*

*[I'm / we’re]* counting on you to stand up for mothers and babies and help protect our paid parental leave. The suggested changes to paid parental leave are a backwards step in achieving gender equality. Australia’s scheme is already among the least generous in the world, let’s not make it even worse.