

EI Maternity & Parental Benefits

Maternity and parental benefits are essential for women's economic equality. Women fought hard to gain Employment Insurance benefits along with job protection while on leave.

Unfortunately, many women are unable to qualify for these benefits, especially since the rules changed in 1997. Due to women's low wages, many of the women who qualify find it impossible to live on 55% of their earnings. For instance, 55% of a minimum wage salary amounts to earning \$3.85 per hour (based on the current NL minimum wage of \$7/hour). Things are even worse for self-employed women because they aren't allowed to pay into EI, so they have no access to these benefits at all.

Two women's groups are doing a great deal of work on these issues: the Women's Network PEI (WNPEI) and the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL).

Women's Network PEI, with the help of the Atlantic Advisory Committee, have completed extensive research and developed a set of recommendations for improving EI maternity and parental benefits. The following recommendations are at the core of their current lobby effort:

- *Allow parents to reach back over the three-to-five-year period prior to the birth of the child in order to qualify for benefits.*
- *Provide self-employed individuals the option to pay into the employment insurance program so they can be eligible for benefits.*
- *Eliminate the unpaid two-week waiting period and add two weeks to the maternity leave benefit.*
- *Increase the weekly payable benefits to at least 65% of earnings, based on the best 12 weeks of earnings in the last 5 years, and index it annually.*

Visit the Women's Network PEI website for comprehensive information on this issue and a full description of their recommendations – www.wnpei.org

The National Association of Women and the Law has also done extensive work on this issue. They have also developed a comprehensive set of recommendations to improve EI benefits, create a universal support program for women who do not qualify for EI or receive inadequate benefits, and increased maternity and parental leave protection under the Canada Labour Code.

In May 2007, NAWL held a one-day EI Maternity and Parental Benefits workshop, a two-day "Mothering Rights Conference", and a Mother's Day Lobby on Parliament Hill.

Visit the NAWL website for details about these events and a full description of their recommendations - www.nawl.ca

The Advisory Council joins these groups in lobbying the federal government to improve EI Maternity and Parental Benefits. We also advocate the creation of

additional supports for those who cannot benefit from EI, as well as increased job protection for women who take maternity and parental leave.