



**National Council of
Women of New Zealand**

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Wahine O Aotearoa

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**Submission to the Ministry of Social Development on the
Families Commission: Proposed Scope, Functions and Structure**

Introduction

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organisation representing 42 nationally organised societies. It has 34 branches throughout the country attended by representatives of those societies and some 150 other societies as well as individual members. Its purpose is to work for the well being of women, families and society through research, discussion and action. It forms a widespread and effective network, especially through its monthly publication known as The Circular. Submissions and responses are prepared on the basis of policies set at national meetings and, when time permits, from answers to questions published in The Circular.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Proposed Scope, Functions and Structure of the Families Commission (February 2003).

Concern for the welfare of children as individuals and in families is a thread that runs through NCWNZ's history since its inception in 1896. Indeed one of our ten standing committees is the Family Affairs Standing Committee, and it is this committee that is the writer of this submission. In June 1994, a submission to the Public Health Commission on a draft parenting paper stated that "Concern for [children's] physical and mental wellbeing, for the responsibilities of parents and of society towards them, and for the conduct of agencies involved on their behalf" is a central focus of NCWNZ's work.

However, until recently much of the focus for both government and NCWNZ policy has been on working to improve the quality of parenting, by means of, for example, support for parenting programmes and training in parenting skills. Little has been said, however, about the impact of the social and economic structures that affect parenting and parents' ability to provide the time and energy as well as the material requirements for raising their children. It appears as if the presumption is that any problems lie with parents themselves, not with the structures within which they live and work.

One NCWNZ submission, however, made in 1988 on the Early Childhood Care and Education Report stands out in contrast. It states:

"It is noted with concern that so little attention has been given to the status and financial needs of parents who wish to educate and care for their children in their own homes.... Concern is expressed that so much attention is given today to the provision of funding for care of children outside the home. This emphasis could lead (some) women to see childcare outside the home as the way of the future, and the accepted course for the so-called enlightened and/or liberated modern women".

This comment does raise concerns about privileging one option over and above another. It is NCWNZ's belief that good policy should be morally neutral in terms of the course of action women and men take in regard to parenting their children. Current policy is not.





Specific Comments on the Proposal

NCWNZ welcomes a broad and inclusive approach to families, recognizing the wide range of forms families take today. This includes the recognition that families cannot be confined to members living in a single household. A significant number of children live in more than one household, spending perhaps part of a week with one parent, and the rest with the other, or grandparents or other Whanau. Furthermore, families change over time, as the various members' circumstances change; parents may separate, repartner, move house, change employment status; children grow up, go to school, become teenagers, leave home, or not, bringing new partners into the home, look after ageing parents and so on. Each of these events has flow-on effects in regard to the nature of the family. These changes may be described as reflecting the 'seasonality of families'.

Functions of the Commission

NCWNZ supports the proposed primary function being one of advocacy on behalf of families. It is important to ensure the Commission retains a certain independence from government in order to effectively carry out its role as critic of government policy. Research is important, as this forms the basis of good policy development.

Parenting

NCWNZ has not had the opportunity to gather feed back from members as to whether a separate Parenting Council is warranted or not. However, NCWNZ does have strong views on the importance of parenting. On the strength of a remit passed in 2000 on tax partnerships for couples to give economic recognition to the work of the at-home parent, there is considerable opinion within NCWNZ's membership that the status of parents and parenting has been eroded over the last decade or two.

Conclusion

While NCWNZ has not had the opportunity to canvass members as to whether the proposal to set up a Families Commission is supported or not, by and large the principles contained in the brief dossier are congruent with NCWNZ policy. Once the draft Bill that will establish the Commission is released, we shall consult more widely amongst our members, in preparation for a fuller submission. We look forward to that occasion.

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National President

Christina Reymer
Convener, Family Affairs Standing Committee.