

A STRONG MATERNITY LEAVE POLICY: A STRONG INVESTMENT IN VIET NAM'S FUTURE





"Most **women**
in Viet Nam spend
30 to 35
years
of their lives **working**
and on average a

woman has one or two
children. **Providing**
mothers 6 to 12
months off from their
30 years of working
is an intelligent
investment in the
health and well-being of
50 percent of our nation's
current workforce and 100
percent of our nation's future
workforce."

*Nemat Hajeebhoy, Country
Director, A&T*

"In Viet Nam, **one in three children under**
5 years old is moderately or severely
stunted (low height for their age, 29.3 percent)."

National Institute of Nutrition

"By 2020, the average height of Vietnamese people would
increase by 1.65cm [if we achieve our goals]."

National Human Resource Development Strategy (2011 – 2020)

"Feeding practices during the first two years of life can
have measurable, life-long impacts on a child's growth,
development, educational achievement, and even their
future economic status."

UNICEF

Why do we need to extend maternity leave to six months?

- ✓ Short- and long-term benefits to children's health and development from breastfeeding
- ✓ Benefits to women, families, and society
- ✓ Benefits to the economy and Viet Nam
- ✓ Ensure the rights of children and women
- ✓ Improve the quality of Viet Nam's workforce

Should Viet Nam extend maternity leave to six months?

- ✓ 89 percent of female workers want six months of maternity leave
- ✓ 79 percent of employers and trade union representatives agree to increase maternity leave to six months
- ✓ The Social Insurance Fund can cover the additional costs if maternity leave is increased to six months



Background on the status of child malnutrition and the female workforce in Viet Nam

Viet Nam has experienced significant economic growth during the last decade, yet malnutrition persists among children less than 5 years old.

One in five Vietnamese children under the age of five is moderately or severely underweight (17.5 percent) and one in three is moderately or severely stunted (low height for their age, 29.3 percent).¹

Nutrition Surveillance 2010 - National Institute of Nutrition (NIN).

Early childhood nutrition also affects a child's education and eventual earning capacity. Children who are undernourished are less able to learn effectively, and more likely to start school later and to drop out. On average, individuals who experience malnutrition earn 10 percent less throughout their lifetimes.²

It is estimated that investing in infant and young child nutrition can increase a country's gross domestic product by up to 3 percent.³

International experts agree that early and exclusive breastfeeding is one of the single greatest opportunities to reduce child illness and death. However, data from NIN indicates that in 2010, only **61.7 percent of mothers initiate breastfeeding within the first hour of**

birth, and only 19.6 percent of infants less than 6 months of age are exclusively breastfed in Viet Nam.¹

In this context, the Viet Nam General Federation conducted a survey in July and August of 2011 on the opinions of female employees, employers, and trade union representatives on breastfeeding practices and the proposal to extend Viet Nam's maternity leave policy to six months. More than 1,200 female workers, 150 employers, and 150 trade union representatives in 12 provinces were interviewed. The survey found that "going back to work" was the primary reason working mothers cited for stopping breastfeeding.

In 2007, females accounted for approximately 32,402,000 of Viet Nam's 66,968,000 total working population. Therefore, female workers account for half of the current workforce and supply 100 percent of Viet Nam's future workforce.⁴

Ministry of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs (MOLISA)

Viet Nam is mobilizing all resources for social and economic development and the Communist Party and State always prioritize maternal and child health care. This reflects the Government's strong commitment to protect, nurture, and educate children – the future of our country. By providing children with the best possible nutrition during their first two years of life, we are making sound investments in the quality and productivity of the current and future workforce. However, this can only be achieved if fathers, grandparents, health workers, and employers all support and encourage mothers to breastfeed early and exclusively for six months. Simultaneously, policymakers need to improve policies that support infant feeding, including the revision of Decree 21/2006/ND-CP and the extension of maternity leave to six months.

As we promote optimal nutrition practices and strengthen relevant policies, Viet Nam's children will become healthier, taller, and more intelligent, and will further contribute to developing our nation into an economic and social leader.

How is six months of maternity leave beneficial to our country?

“The promotion of breastfeeding must not be seen as an excuse to exclude women from the labor force. The burden should no longer fall on women to choose between breastfeeding and work. The burden is on society to facilitate breastfeeding and indeed child care.”

Grant, former Executive Director, UNICEF



1. Ensure children's rights

Viet Nam was the first country in Asia and the second country in the world to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Government has introduced a series of policies and programs in recent years to protect child rights and well-being. The Convention, particularly Articles 18 and 24, relates to child survival and development, and the accountability of States to recognize child rights and health standards. Breastfeeding is directly addressed in each provision. Breastfeeding is a legal right of a child and the promotion of breastfeeding is a legal obligation of the State.

2. Ensure women's rights

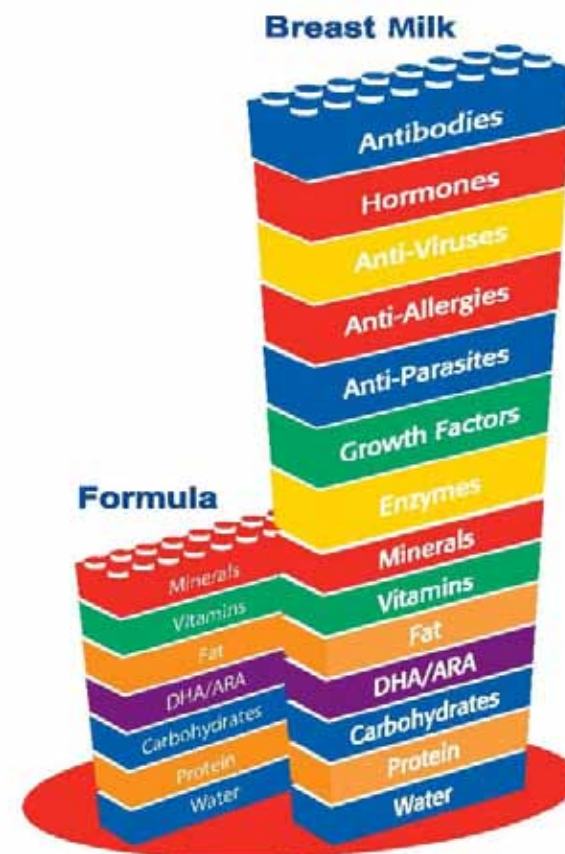
Parental leave is an employee entitlement that provides time off from work to care for a child and to make arrangements for a child's welfare. Often, the term parental leave includes maternity, paternity, and adoption leave. In Viet Nam, the Labor Code covers maternity leave benefits. Amending the Labor Code to increase maternity leave to six months is one effort to protect the rights of the mother – and the rights of the child.

Strong maternity leave policies contribute to the health and well-being of mothers and babies, and to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals four and five, which seek to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health. By safeguarding women's employment and income security during and after maternity leave, maternity protection also contributes to the realization of Millennium Development Goal three, which seeks to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

3. Ensure health, development, and economic gains

Breastfeeding benefits children

- ★ Breastfeeding is one of the most effective practices a mother can undertake to protect her baby from bacteria and viruses. Infant formula lacks many of the essential qualities present in breast milk, including special antibodies and other bioactive substances that protect children from illness.^{5,6}
- ★ Breastfed babies typically need fewer hospital visits or prescriptions and have a lower risk of infections and diseases, including diarrhea, pneumonia, asthma, ear infections, and lower respiratory infections.^{6, 7, 8} Additionally, not breastfeeding may increase the risk of childhood obesity, types I and II diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.⁶
- ★ Human milk is species specific and designed to meet the exact needs of human babies. Breast milk is a living substance that changes to meet the growing needs of the child – something that formula cannot do.⁶
- ★ Breastfeeding is associated with an increase in IQ scores and improved school performance. The longer a baby is breastfed, the more likely they are to have better cognitive, linguistic, and motor skills.⁹
- ★ Exclusive breastfeeding also provides an essential means of food security for infants and families worldwide, in the event of a natural disaster or economic crisis.^{10, 11} In emergencies, breastfeeding can protect babies from diseases contracted through contaminated water supplies and can prevent hypothermia.⁷



Breastfeeding benefits mothers

- ★ Mothers who breastfeed have a lower risk of contracting type II diabetes, breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and postpartum depression.
- ★ Women who breastfeed are less likely to become anemic and can have higher levels of oxytocin, which can reduce stress.^{6, 7, 10}
- ★ Women who breastfeed experience, on average, faster rates of weight loss after giving birth.⁶
- ★ Breastfeeding helps women space their children. Women who exclusively breastfeed do not generally ovulate until at least six months after delivery, but non-lactating women may begin ovulating by six weeks after birth. Research has indicated that if a woman is exclusively breastfeeding during the first six months and has not yet resumed menstruation, the likelihood of pregnancy is less than 2 percent.¹²



Breastfeeding benefits families

- ★ Breastfeeding prevents the high costs associated with formula feeding. On average, it costs approximately VND 800,000 - 1.2 million per month - to feed a child with breast milk substitutes. This costs 53-79 percent of an average Vietnamese income (VND 18,227,000), a significant portion of a family's financial resources.¹³
- ★ Due to the health benefits of breastfeeding, families will spend less time and money responding to medical issues.¹⁰
- ★ By exclusively breastfeeding their children for six months, Vietnamese mothers could save the equivalent of VND 11,435,670,000,000 that would otherwise be spent on breast milk substitutes.¹³



Breastfeeding benefits employers

- ★ Exclusive breastfeeding for six months can benefit employers over time, as mothers are less likely to miss work to take care of an ill child. Fewer missed days of work results in a more stable workforce.¹⁴

Breastfeeding benefits health systems

- ★ Researchers in other countries have demonstrated the benefits of breastfeeding to health systems. In the United States, a 2001 study showed the country can reduce a burden of USD \$3.6 billion on health systems if exclusive breastfeeding rates increased from 29 percent to 50 percent.¹⁵ Another study in 2007 revealed a more impressive number: if 90 percent of infants were exclusively breastfed during the first six months, the country would save USD \$13 billion each year from medical costs for infant illnesses and avoid 911 infant deaths.¹⁶
- ★ In Viet Nam, a recent study showed that each year, approximately VND 208,300,000,000 is spent on illnesses caused by poor infant and child feeding practices.¹⁶ This substantial amount of money could be saved and utilized for other prioritized medical treatment if we could improve infant and young child feeding—and especially breastfeeding practices among mothers.¹⁴



4. What do women say?

Most women support extending Viet Nam's maternity leave policy. The General Confederation of Labor recently conducted a survey in 12 cities and provinces with 1,200 female workers of reproductive age, and/or who have children less than 2 years old. The study found that returning to work is the primary reason that working mothers stop breastfeeding. The findings also indicated that 89.2 percent of female workers support six months of maternity leave.¹⁷

Furthermore, during World Breastfeeding Week 2011, the Ministry of Health coordinated with international organizations to hold a Breastfeeding Festival in Ha Noi to gather the opinions of mothers and women about the proposal to extend Viet Nam's maternity leave policy to six months. Hundreds of signatures were collected in support of the proposal. Additionally, an online poll on VNexpress.net gathered thousands of audience votes in favor of six months of maternity leave.¹⁸



5. What do employers say?

“You cannot get the best and brightest by choosing only from 50 percent of the population and ignoring women who constitute the remaining half of the pool.”

Indra Nooyi, CEO, PepsiCo

The General Confederation of Labor also consulted 150 employers and 150 trade union representatives on the proposal to extend maternity leave to six months. Of those interviewed, 79.2 percent supported or agreed with the proposal. In addition, 84.4 percent felt that extending the maternity leave policy would meet the need of their female employees who ask for an extra one to two months of leave without pay beyond the four months provided to them through Viet Nam's current policy. Additionally, 92 percent agreed that supporting breastfeeding is a sound investment in the current and future workforce.¹⁷

Furthermore, MOLISA's Legislation Department held a series of nationwide consultative workshops focused on listening to concerned agencies and business representatives voice their opinions on the proposal to extend the maternity leave policy to six months. All participants acknowledged the importance of early nutrition and the necessity of having a strong maternity leave policy that supports female workers to exclusively breastfeed for six months and continuously breastfeed through two years. There was consensus on the proposed extension and all participants have committed to make it happen.

6. Longer maternity leave does not lead to labor shortfalls

At the consultative workshops held by the Legislation Department, business owners and trade union representatives said that extending the maternity leave to six months could address their difficulties with employee replacement. Since most mothers apply for one or two months of unpaid leave beyond the four months mandated by law, employers already have to arrange replacement workers. By extending the policy to six months, employers said that it would be easier for their companies to sign short-term six month contracts with substituted staff than four month contracts that are extended one or two months further. This encourages available workers to participate in legal, short-term, or seasonal employment contracts, and reduces the turnover rate of working mothers.



7. Can the Social Insurance Fund cover the extension?

According to data from Viet Nam Social Insurance, in 2010, 32,018,000 social insurance holders contributed nearly VND 20 trillion to the Social Insurance Fund (SIF).¹⁹ For the period between 2007 and 2010, with the current maternity duration of four months, only 46 percent of the total fund (equivalent to VND 8 trillion) has been paid to 2.44 million insured mothers.

Viet Nam Social Insurance estimates that if the maternity leave policy were to be extended up to 180 days (6 months), the indemnity amount paid for delivery between 2007 and 2010 would be VND 12 trillion. This is within the affordability of the fund.

For the period of 2011 to 2030, presuming that the premium remains unchanged (3 percent of total salary), Vietnam Social Insurance has confirmed that it is affordable to compensate mothers for 180 days of leave. The total indemnity amount is estimated at 92 percent of the total receivable premium, and a reserve/surplus of 8 percent will remain mandatory.¹⁹

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