



EXPANDING VIET NAM'S MATERNITY LEAVE POLICY TO SIX MONTHS:

An Investment Today in a Stronger, Healthier Tomorrow

"The promotion of breastfeeding must not be seen as an excuse to exclude women from the labour 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."

-James Grant, former Executive Director, UNICEF

Every parent wants to secure the healthiest possible future for their newborn child and we all have a role in helping families make the best feeding decisions for their infants and young children. Government laws, workplace policies, and other social support systems impact these decisions, which can have lasting, irreversible impacts on a child's future. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that all babies have the same opportunity for healthy nutrition from the very outset of life, so they have the best chance at a healthy and productive future.

Breastfeeding exclusively for the first six months—no water, no infant formula, and no additional foods—improves a child's chances of survival, as well as growth and development. Good nutrition also contributes to educational achievement and earning potential.

While the practice of breastfeeding is almost universal in Viet Nam, fewer than 1 in 5 infants are breastfed exclusively for the first six months of life.¹ Without the strong nutritional foundation of exclusive breastfeeding, babies are more vulnerable to immediate health impacts like diarrhea and respiratory infections, as well as long-term health problems like diabetes and cardiovascular disease. For employers and for Viet Nam, not breastfeeding exclusively results in increased health care costs and a less stable workforce. Although formula milk is often viewed as an adequate substitute, research shows that it cannot adequately replace breast milk. Providing formula milk may also pose potential threats to the infant's health and survival.

Maternity leave is key to ensuring that babies are breastfed exclusively from the minute they are born to the time they are six months old. However, Vietnamese mothers indicate that going back to work is one of the main reasons they abandon exclusive breastfeeding. No mother should have to choose between her career and the best nourishment for her infant.

VIET NAM'S PROGRESSIVE MATERNITY LEAVE IS GOOD FOR BREASTFEEDING

Viet Nam offers four months of paid maternity leave to mothers who work in the formal sector. This progressive legislation gives the working mother the time she needs to establish breastfeeding with her baby. To achieve the maximum benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, we need to work together to *lengthen our maternity leave to six months*.

A SIX MONTH MATERNITY LEAVE WOULD BE EVEN BETTER

Evidence from other countries demonstrates that long-term, well-funded maternity leave encourages breastfeeding.

- A recent study from Taiwan found that early maternal return to work—especially within six months after giving birth—was a barrier to the initiation and continuation of breastfeeding.²
- An Australian study found that women who return to work full-time between three and six months after birth are three times more likely than non-employed women to stop breastfeeding before their baby reaches six months of age.³
- In Canada, after paid maternity leave was extended from six months to one year, the percentage of infants exclusively breastfeeding for at least six months increased by 40 percent.⁴
- In Norway, when paid maternity leave increased from 10 to 40 weeks, breastfeeding rates at six months went from 10 percent to 80 percent.⁵

STRONGER MATERNITY LEAVE IS GOOD FOR EMPLOYERS

For employers, stronger maternity leave policies create a more stable and loyal workforce. When mothers practice exclusive breastfeeding, it leads to healthier children and reduces the estimated VND 208,300,000,000 spent each year on addressing illnesses caused by poor infant and child feeding in Viet Nam.^{6,7}

Countries that guarantee paid family leave have among the highest levels of economic competitiveness.⁸ Additional economic benefits of policies supportive of breastfeeding include:

- *Reduced employee turnover and absenteeism.* Compared with non-breastfed infants, breastfed infants have fewer illnesses, resulting in fewer days of missed work to care for sick children.⁹
- *Increased participation levels of women in the workforce.* This can also lead to more income taxes and government revenues.¹⁰



STRONGER MATERNITY LEAVE IS GOOD FOR MOTHERS AND FAMILIES

There is no evidence that longer maternity leave will lead to fewer employment opportunities for women. In fact, studies have shown that there is no relationship between family-friendly policies, such as paid leave, and a country's unemployment rate.⁷ There's also evidence that paid family leaves increase employee retention.

Paid maternity leave guarantees mothers employment security and a continued source of income following the delivery of their child. This helps to not only retain women in the labour force, but also attracts women to join the labour force.

EMPLOYERS ALSO HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY

Simply expanding maternity leave to six months is not enough. Workplace interventions supported by employers are also key to success, including:

- A safe, private space for mothers to express breast milk and a secure, hygienic place to store it during work hours.
- A minimum of one hour of work or more each day for breastfeeding mothers to return home to breastfeed their children or express their milk.
- Guaranteed job security for mothers upon returning from maternity leave.
- The provision of kindergarten or crèche services, if possible.

JOIN THE EFFORT TO PROMOTE BREASTFEEDING

Momentum is building to expand Viet Nam's maternity leave policy to six months. Join us to ensure that working mothers can provide the best possible nutrition for their children — the children of Viet Nam. By strengthening maternity leave, we can support a healthy, educated, and productive workforce and the social and economic development of our entire country.

For more information on infant and young child feeding, please visit www.aliveandthrive.org, (+84-4) 3573-9066; www.mattroibetho.vn, (+84-4) 3971-7090; and www.unicef.org/vietnam, (+84-4) 3942-5706.

"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

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