

# Maternity leave

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## KEY MESSAGES

- Paid maternity leave is crucial to protect the health and economic security of women and their children.
- There has been a gradual global shift towards maternity leave periods that meet or exceed the ILO minimum standard of 14 weeks.
- The ILO maternity leave income replacement standard stands at two-thirds of previous earnings. Adequate cash benefits during leave sustain a mother's economic independence and can help to constrain traditional gender division of labour in the household.
- Very long leave periods, especially without job protection, may damage women's attachment to and advancement in paid work, resulting in wage penalties.
- When leave is too short, mothers may not feel ready to return to work and may drop out of the workforce. Limits on the duration of job protection and a low benefit level may also force women to return to work before the end of the maximum benefit period.
- Only two out of 185 countries and territories currently provide no statutory cash benefits during maternity leave and the small minority providing leave but no payment has declined since 1994. However, benefits in more than half were neither generous nor sufficiently long-lasting.
- More than 100 countries finance benefits through social security or public funds, reducing employers' liability, which is detrimental to women's opportunities in the labour market.
- An increasing number of countries are providing maternity cash benefits to low-income residents or informal workers through non-contributory maternity cash benefits financed by public funds. However, important gaps remain.
- Some 34 per cent of countries fully meet the requirements of Convention No. 183 on the duration of maternity leave, amount of cash benefits and source of funding. The current main challenges lie in improving the length of maternity leave while simultaneously reducing reliance on employers for payment of maternity cash benefits.
- Maternity protection is shown to be affordable even in lower income countries and to be conducive to social and economic development.
- The large majority of women workers in the world – equivalent to around 830 million women – do not have adequate maternity protection. Almost 80 per cent of these workers are in Africa and Asia. Only 28.4 per cent of employed women worldwide would receive cash benefits in case of maternity.
- Expanding the scope of maternity protection as set out by Convention No. 183 to cover non-standard work situations, and ensuring that governments adhere to its provisions, is of critical importance in ensuring the health and well-being of greater numbers of women workers and their children worldwide.