

# Why maternity leave is an investment in our future

*While Indonesian law promises maternity leave, structural barriers and the undervaluation of care transform this vital right into an inaccessible luxury for many working mothers.*

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PREMIUM

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**E**ach year, International Labor Day in the country is marked by renewed calls for fair wages, job security and decent working conditions. These demands remain essential. Yet, one critical issue continues to receive far less attention than it deserves: maternity leave.

Indonesia currently guarantees three months of maternity leave, with the possibility of extension up to six months under specific medical conditions following the enactment of Law No. 4 of 2024 on maternal and child Welfare. While this represents a step forward, in practice, most women workers still experience only the minimum duration. More importantly, the current framework remains insufficient to address the broader realities of women's health, early childcare, and workplace equity.

In formal terms, maternity leave exists. In practice, access remains uneven.

Findings from field-based research in labor-intensive sectors show that many women return to work before their bodies have fully recovered, and before their infants are ready to be separated. Financial pressures, unclear compensation mechanisms and concerns about job security often force workers to shorten their leave.

My doctoral research further indicates that a significant proportion of workers lack clear information about their maternity rights and face inconsistent communication from employers. In some cases, women are discouraged, implicitly or explicitly, from taking their full entitlement.

This reveals a persistent gap: Maternity leave may be guaranteed by law, but it is not always experienced as a real, accessible right.

The implications of inadequate maternity leave extend far beyond the workplace.

Global health evidence shows that the first six months of life are critical for both maternal recovery and infant development. The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for six months, yet many working mothers are unable to sustain this due to early return-to-work pressures.

In Indonesia, exclusive breastfeeding rates have improved in recent years, reaching over 60 percent. However, many mothers discontinue breastfeeding around the three-month mark, closely aligned with the current maternity leave duration. This suggests a clear disconnect between health recommendations and labor policy design.

From a public health perspective, maternity leave is not simply a workplace benefit. It is a preventive intervention that influences maternal health, child development and long-term health outcomes. When mothers are forced to return to work too early, the consequences are not eliminated, they are transferred to families, communities and eventually the healthcare system.

At the heart of this issue lies a broader structural challenge: the undervaluation of care.

Caring for a newborn, recovering from childbirth, and establishing early developmental foundations are essential processes. Yet, these activities remain largely invisible in economic calculations. When maternity leave is too short or poorly supported, this work does not disappear, it becomes compressed, fragmented or silently absorbed by women.

This dynamic highlights a fundamental imbalance. The economy depends on care, but care itself is insufficiently recognized and supported within labor and policy systems. As a result, women disproportionately bear the burden of sustaining both productive and reproductive roles.

Ignoring this reality risks reinforcing gender inequality while undermining long-term economic productivity.

Indonesia is not alone in facing these challenges, but it is increasingly out of step with regional developments.

Several Asian countries have adopted longer maternity leave policies, ranging from 16 to 26 weeks, supported by more structured financing mechanisms. These systems often involve shared responsibility between the state, employers, and social insurance schemes, reducing the burden on any single actor.

Indonesia, by contrast, remains in a transitional phase. While recent reforms acknowledge the need for improvement, they stop short of establishing a universal, accessible and adequately financed system.

The issue, therefore, is not only about duration. It is about whether maternity leave is treated as a private responsibility or as part of a broader social protection framework.

One of the key barriers to reform is the (mis)perception that maternity leave is primarily a cost borne by employers. This has led to uneven implementation and, in some cases, reluctance to fully support female workers.

A more sustainable approach requires a shift toward shared responsibility. This includes strengthening integration with national social security systems, developing equitable financing mechanisms, and providing incentives for employers, particularly small and medium enterprises. At the same time, stronger enforcement is needed to ensure that workers are not penalized for exercising their rights.

Without such structural adjustments, maternity leave will remain unevenly implemented and unequally experienced.

May Day 2026 offers an opportunity to broaden our understanding of what “decent work” truly means.

Decent work is not only about wages or contracts. It is also about whether workers, particularly women, are supported through critical life transitions. Maternity leave is not simply time away from work; it is time for recovery, care, and the foundation of future human capital.

Treating it as a peripheral issue risks undermining the very workforce that labor policies seek to protect.

Reforming maternity leave is not merely a technical adjustment. It is a reflection of national priorities.

Do we see care as a private burden, or as a shared social responsibility? Do we treat maternity leave as a cost, or as an investment in human development? These questions are central to Indonesia’s future.

Because eventually, a country that gives its mothers adequate time to recover and care is a country that is investing in its next generation.

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