

Review of national maternity and paternity policies and support for breastfeeding in the workplace in Latin America and the Caribbean

International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) and UNICEF—Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

Maternity, paternity and parental leave, as well as policies to support breastfeeding in the workplace, are a fundamental part of comprehensive social protection systems and early childhood development strategies. The positive effects of these policies in terms of children's health, socio-emotional and cognitive outcomes are well established in the literature. In addition, when involving both parents more equitably, these policies can play an important role in supporting gender equality in the workplace and at home. Finally, they contribute to the fulfilment of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹

One way in which these policies achieve their results is through their effect on breastfeeding, as they are crucial to enable women to breastfeed according to the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF): six months of exclusive breastfeeding and, subsequently, complementary breastfeeding until the child reaches 2 years of age. The several benefits of breastfeeding are well known, including reducing the risk of acute and chronic diseases. In fact, it is estimated that breastfeeding can save the lives of 823,000 children under 5 years of age worldwide every year. Likewise, for every USD1 invested in breastfeeding, USD35 is generated in economic returns. Additionally, support for breastfeeding in the workplace is considered a 'business case', contributing to the reduction of absenteeism and retention of employed women.

In this context, UNICEF's Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) have developed a study² which compares current leave policies and policies supporting breastfeeding in the workplace in 24 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to the standards established by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and international best practices. The analysis shows that there are still significant gaps in the region.

Main findings of the study:

- Parental leave and breastfeeding rooms generally only benefit formal workers, which means that only a small part of workers in the LAC region are covered. About 54.3 per cent of women and 52.3 per cent of men in LAC work in the informal sector.
- Only 15 countries in the region regulate a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave as established by ILO Convention 183, and only 5 countries reach the 18 weeks recommended by the ILO.
- Only Brazil,³ Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay and Venezuela provide eight days or more of paternity leave. Parental leave is only offered in Chile, Cuba and Uruguay.
- Belize, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Jamaica and Nicaragua still depend on the employer to finance maternity leave, which can lead to discrimination against women in the labour market.
- Almost all countries in the region offer paid daily breaks of a minimum of 60 minutes to breastfeed or express milk in the

workplace during the first six months. However, only Chile allows mothers to take breaks for up to two years.

- On the other hand, Belize, Cuba, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica and Suriname have not yet enacted legislation regarding breastfeeding rooms in the workplace.
- The available figures show that the total number of breastfeeding rooms is still very limited, reaching an average of less than 100 rooms in the countries with information available, except for El Salvador and Peru (1,600 and 1,467, respectively).
- Few laws specify the financial support from the State to breastfeeding rooms, which may discourage hiring workers with family responsibilities.
- Likewise, low awareness of rights on the part of workers, and inspection and monitoring deficits of the State are important obstacles for these policies to reach greater coverage and improve in quality.

Recommendations for countries in LAC

Leave policies: (i) Expand the coverage of leave, and invest in non-contributory maternity benefits for those who are not yet covered by conventional leave policies; (ii) implement measures such as 'use it or lose it' quotas for paternity and parental leave to encourage men to participate in childcare; (iii) increase maternity leave to a minimum of 14 weeks in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras and Jamaica; (iv) increase advocacy efforts to extend maternity leave to 18 weeks in Belize, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Uruguay, Peru, Panama and Suriname, accompanied by studies on possible financing options; and (v) ideally, leave should be financed through a mandatory social insurance system, so that employers do not assume financial risks exclusively.

Policies supporting breastfeeding in the workplace: (i) Legislate the right to breastfeeding breaks and rooms, and promote similar policies for women in the informal sector through, for example, a shared breastfeeding room for several establishments; (ii) extend the current period of entitlement to breastfeeding breaks to two years; and (iii) consider tax reductions or direct government contributions for companies that establish breastfeeding rooms.

Monitoring and evaluation: (i) Improve the reporting and consolidation of comparative data on the coverage of these policies; and (ii) strengthen inspection mechanisms through, for example, independent commissions that monitor compliance with the relevant law.

Notes:

1. Specifically, SDGs 1.3, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

2. IPC-IG and UNICEF LACRO. 2020. "Maternidad y paternidad en el lugar de trabajo en América Latina y el Caribe — políticas para la licencia de maternidad y paternidad y apoyo a la lactancia materna" Brasília: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.

3. This applies only to companies registered in the Programa Empresa Cidadã (Corporate Citizenship Programme) and the public sector.