



THE INTERCONNECTION OF PAID MATERNITY LEAVE AND THE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH OF MOTHER AND CHILD

By:

Babatunde Oni*

Abiola Abiade Olawanle**

ABSTRACT

The interconnection between paid maternity leave and the mental and physical health of both mother and child is a critical area of public health and labor policy. Paid maternity leave provides mothers with essential time to recover physically from childbirth and to bond with their newborns, which plays a significant role in promoting holistic well-being. Studies have consistently shown that mothers who have access to paid maternity leave experience lower rates of postpartum depression and stress-related disorders, enhancing their mental health and capacity to provide effective care. Physically, paid leave allows women adequate time to heal and establish routines such as breastfeeding, which is beneficial for both maternal recovery and infant nutrition. For infants, the benefits of paid maternity leave are equally substantial. Research indicates that extended time with mothers in the early months leads to better cognitive development, lower infant mortality rates, and improved long-term health outcomes. The availability of paid leave ensures that economic pressures do not force mothers to return to work prematurely, thereby fostering a nurturing environment during the most formative stage of a child's life. Moreover, paid maternity leave contributes to family stability, reduces reliance on healthcare systems, and promotes workforce reintegration for mothers, highlighting its value beyond immediate health outcomes. The Article is grounded in Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory. Human Capital Theory provides a lens through which the economic implications of maternity leave are understood, particularly how investments in women's health and family life translate into long-term workforce productivity and societal benefit. Institutional Theory, on the other hand, guides the analysis of how social norms, legal structures, and organizational behaviour shape maternity leave policies and their implementation within different national contexts. The interplay of these theories allows for a nuanced understanding of both the economic rationale and institutional constraints that influence maternity leave regulation. The research adopts a qualitative comparative legal methodology. It involves doctrinal analysis of statutes, regulations, and policy instruments, as well as secondary data from government reports, academic literature, and international labour conventions. A cross-

country comparative approach is employed to identify key similarities and divergences among countries regarding leave duration/benefits, eligibility, job protection, and the role of public versus private sector enforcement. Findings indicate that there is a stark contrast in maternity leave policies across countries. Many high-income nations, particularly in Europe and parts of Asia, provide generous paid leave through government-mandated programs. The global variation highlights the importance of public policy in shaping the maternity leave landscape. Countries that prioritize paid leave see better health, economic, and social outcomes, at the country, organizational, and institutional levels.

This article recommends the urgent need for inclusive paid maternity leave policies for both the formal and informal sectors in Nigeria, as they represent a foundational investment in public health, gender equity, and human capital development. Addressing this interconnection holistically can yield lasting benefits for individuals, families, and the nation at large.

Keywords: Cognitive Development, Mental Health, Maternity Leave, Maternal Recovery, Postpartum Depression

1. Introduction

Maternity leave is a period of authorized absence from work granted to a female employee before and after the birth of her child. This leave is designed to allow women time to recover from childbirth and to care for their newborns during the crucial early stages of life¹. Depending on the country and the specific legal and workplace policies in place, maternity leave may be paid, partially paid, or unpaid².

Globally, the duration and compensation for maternity leave vary significantly. Some countries offer generous maternity leave packages with full pay and job security, while others provide minimal support or rely on employer discretion³. International labor standards, such as those outlined by the International Labour Organization (ILO), recommend a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave with benefits provided through social insurance or public funds⁴.

Paid maternity leave refers to a period of absence from work granted to a female employee before and after childbirth, during which she receives financial compensation. This leave is

*PROFESSOR OF PRIVATE AND PROPERTY LAW, UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS, AKOKA, LAGOS STATE. 08034088383, boni@unilag.edu.ng ; tundeoni2006@gmail.com

**SENIOR LECTURER, LEAD CITY UNIVERSITY, IBADAN, OYO STATE. 08077635212, abiade.abiola@lcu.edu.ng ; ask4abby@yahoo.com

¹Julia M. Goodman and others, 'Antenatal Maternity Leave and Childbirth Using the First Baby Study: A Propensity Score Analysis'. *Journal of Maternity Health*[2017] (27) 50, 59.

²Belinda Hewitt, Lyndall Strazdins, and Bill Martin, 'The Benefit of Paid Maternity Leave for Mothers: Postpartum Health and Wellbeing – Evidence from an Australian Evaluation'. *Social Science and Medicine*[2007] (182) 87, 105.

³Sergio Vargas-Prada and others, 'Influence of Paid Maternity Leave on Return to Work after Childbirth', (Mattioli Publisher 2018) 243, 252.

⁴'Ship of Theseus: From ILO Standard to Outcome of Protection Policy'. *Journal of Social Policy*[2022] (52) 189, 217.

intended to provide mothers with the necessary time for recovery, bonding with their newborns, and adapting to the demands of early motherhood without facing financial hardship⁵. The compensation during maternity leave is typically provided through government programs, employer-funded schemes, or a combination of both, depending on the country's labor laws and policies⁶.

2. Global Variations in Paid Maternity Leave

The length and compensation of paid maternity leave vary significantly across countries. These variations are influenced by factors such as national economic policies, labor laws, social security systems, and cultural attitudes toward family and work-life balance⁷.

1. Generous Paid Maternity Leave Policies: Some countries offer extended paid maternity leave with high wage replacement rates. Examples include:

- i. Sweden: Offers 480 days of paid parental leave, which can be shared between both parents, with a high percentage of wage compensation⁸.
- ii. Norway: Provides up to 49 weeks of fully paid maternity leave or 59 weeks with reduced pay⁹.
- iii. Bulgaria: One of the longest maternity leave periods in the world, granting 410 days with 90% wage replacement¹⁰.

2. Moderate Paid Maternity Leave Policies: Many developed nations provide ` leave ranging from three to six months with partial or full salary benefits. Examples include:

- i. Germany: Provides 14 weeks of paid maternity leave with full salary coverage, followed by additional parental leave benefits¹¹.
- ii. Canada: Offers up to 15 weeks of maternity benefits, with the option of extended parental leave at a reduced wage¹².
- iii. United Kingdom: Grants up to 39 weeks of paid maternity leave, with full pay for the initial weeks and reduced pay thereafter¹³.

3. Minimal or No Paid Maternity Leave Policies: Some countries provide limited maternity leave benefits or none at all, which can impact maternal and child well-being. Examples include:

- i. United States: Does not mandate paid maternity leave at the federal level, though some states and employers offer paid leave benefits¹⁴.

⁵Isabelle Probot and others, Implementation Mechanism and Effects of Paid Maternity Leave, *International Archives of Environment Health*.

⁶Zoe Aitken and others, 'The Maternity Health Outcomes of Paid Maternity Leave: A Systematic Review'. *Journal of Maternal Health*[2018] (130) 32, 41.

⁷Madeline Dixon and others, 'Length of Maternity Leave Impact on Mental and Physical Health of Mother and Child: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis'. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*[2017] (27) 1308, 1323.

⁸ Goodman (n1)

⁹ Sergio (n3)

¹⁰Kristin N. Hendricks, 'Challenges Newly Arrived Migrant Women Face When Needing Maternity Care: Health Professionals Perspective'. *Journal of Health Studies* [2017] (13)

¹¹Ellies Andres and others, 'Maternity Leave Access and Health: A Systematic Narrative Review and Conceptual Framework Development'. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*[2015] (20) 1178, 1192.

¹² Hewitt (n2)

¹³ Goodman, 'Antenatal Maternity Leave and Childbirth Using the First Baby Study: A Propensity Score Analysis

¹⁴Ship of Theseus: From ILO Standard to Outcome of Protection Policy

- ii. India: Provides 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, but only to women working in the formal sector, leaving many informal workers without benefits¹⁵.
- iii. South Africa: Offers four months of maternity leave, but only a portion of wages is covered by government schemes¹⁶.
- iv. Nigeria provides paid maternity leave 6 weeks before and 6 weeks after delivery. The Federal government provides for 28 weeks paid maternity leave. However, these provisions are only enjoyed by women in the formal sector, leaving women in the informal sector with no support or benefits¹⁷.

Paid maternity leave is a crucial social and economic policy that supports working mothers and promotes child well-being. The global variations in maternity leave highlight the need for continued advocacy to ensure fair and adequate support for working mothers in Nigeria¹⁸.

3. The Impact of Paid Maternity Leave on Maternal and Child Health

Paid maternity leave is a critical social policy that enables working mothers to take time off from their jobs to give birth and care for their newborns without suffering financial hardship. While the economic implications of such policies are often debated, the health benefits for both mothers and their children are unequivocal. Research consistently shows that paid maternity leave has profound positive effects on maternal mental and physical health, as well as on the overall well-being, development, and survival of children¹⁹. This essay explores the multifaceted impact of paid maternity leave on the health of both mother and child, drawing on empirical evidence and international case studies to underscore its importance²⁰.

4. Maternal Mental Health Benefits

One of the most immediate and observable impacts of paid maternity leave is the improvement in maternal mental health. Childbirth and the postpartum period are accompanied by intense hormonal changes, sleep deprivation, and a significant adjustment to new responsibilities, all of which can contribute to postpartum depression (PPD) and anxiety. Women who do not have access to paid maternity leave often return to work prematurely, compounding their stress levels and increasing their risk for mental health issues²¹.

Studies from various countries, including the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, have shown that longer durations of paid leave are associated with lower rates of postpartum depression. A 2011 study published in *Social Science & Medicine* found that each additional week of maternity leave was associated with a significant decrease in depressive symptoms

¹⁵Sergio Vargas-Prada and others, 'Influence of Paid Maternity Leave on Return to Work after Childbirth'

¹⁶Kristin N. Hendricks, 'Challenges Newly Arrived Migrant Women Face When Needing Maternity Care: Health Professionals Perspective'

¹⁷Isabelle Probot and others, 'Implementation Mechanism and Effects of Paid Maternity Leave'. *International Archives of Environment Health*

¹⁸ Madeline (n7)

¹⁹ Zoe-Aitken (n6)

²⁰ Mauren Sayers and others, *The Impact of Paid Maternity Leave on the Mental and Physical Health of Mothers and Children: A Review of the Literature and Policy Implications* (Ovid Technologies 2020), 113-116

²¹Madeline Dixon and others, 'Length of Maternity Leave Impact on Mental and Physical Health of Mother and Child: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis'

among new mothers²². Paid leave provides the time and financial security necessary for mothers to recover from childbirth, bond with their infants, and adjust to their new roles, all of which are protective factors against mental health problems.

Moreover, paid leave reduces the psychological burden of financial stress. Mothers who are forced to take unpaid leave—or who cannot afford to take any leave at all—often experience anxiety over lost income, job security, and the affordability of infant care. Paid maternity leave alleviates these pressures and allows women to focus on their health and their newborns during a critical period of adjustment²³.

5. Maternal Physical Health Benefits

In addition to mental health, paid maternity leave has a significant impact on a mother's physical well-being. Childbirth can result in various short-term and long-term physical challenges, including fatigue, pain, and complications such as infections or haemorrhaging. Recovery from caesarean sections, which are becoming increasingly common globally, requires extended rest and follow-up medical care.

Paid maternity leave ensures that mothers have adequate time to heal and seek necessary postnatal care. When women are forced to return to work too soon, particularly in physically demanding jobs, they risk worsening their conditions or facing complications from untreated issues. A healthier mother is not only more capable of caring for her child, but she is also more likely to return to the workforce in a productive and sustainable manner, benefiting employers and the economy at large²⁴.

6. Benefits to Child Health and Development

The benefits of paid maternity leave are equally, if not more, significant for children. One of the most documented advantages is the increased likelihood and duration of breastfeeding. The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life due to its unmatched health benefits. Breastfeeding strengthens the immune system, reduces the risk of infections, and has been linked to higher cognitive development scores later in life.

Paid maternity leave directly correlates with higher breastfeeding rates because it allows mothers the time to establish and maintain breastfeeding routines. In contrast, early return to work—especially without workplace accommodations—leads to early cessation of breastfeeding or complete avoidance of it altogether²⁵.

²²Belinda Hewitt, Lyndall Strazdins and Bill Martin, 'The Benefits of Paid Maternity Leave for Mothers' Post-Partum Health and Wellbeing: Evidence from an Australian Evaluation' (2017) 182 *Social Science and Medicine* 97.

²³Sandra Peláez and others, 'Challenges Newly-Arrived Migrant Women in Montreal Face When Needing Maternity Care: Health Care Professionals' Perspectives' (2017) 13 *Globalization and Health*.

²⁴Julia M Goodman, Sylvia Guendelman and Kristen H Kjerulff, 'Antenatal Maternity Leave and Childbirth Using the First Baby Study: A Propensity Score Analysis' (2017) 27 *Women's Health Issues* 50.

²⁵Grace Carroll and others, 'A Systematic Review of Costing Studies for Implementing and Scaling-up Breastfeeding Interventions: What Do We Know and What Are the Gaps?' (Oxford University Press, 19 February 2020) 461.

Beyond nutrition, paid maternity leave fosters better mother-infant bonding. During the early months of life, secure attachment is critical for a child's emotional and social development. When mothers are present, emotionally available, and less stressed, children are more likely to form strong bonds and develop secure attachment styles, which contribute to better mental health and interpersonal relationships throughout life.

Additionally, paid leave improves infant survival rates. Several studies have linked paid maternity leave to lower infant mortality. For instance, research published in *The Lancet* found that each 10-week increase in paid leave was associated with a 10% reduction in neonatal and infant mortality rates in low- and middle-income countries²⁶. The ability of mothers to provide consistent care during the vulnerable first months of life, including attending regular medical checkups and ensuring safe environments, plays a critical role in this outcome²⁷.

Long-Term Developmental Advantages

The long-term effects of paid maternity leave on children extend well beyond infancy. Numerous longitudinal studies have demonstrated that children whose mothers had access to paid maternity leave perform better on cognitive, behavioural, and educational outcomes. A study conducted in Norway, where paid maternity leave was extended in the 1970s, found that children exposed to longer periods of maternal leave had higher educational attainment and earnings as adults²⁸.

These outcomes are likely the result of multiple factors, including better maternal mental and physical health, improved parent-child interactions, and early developmental stimulation. Paid maternity leave lays a foundational environment of stability and security, which is essential for healthy brain development during early childhood.

7. Inequities and the Need for Inclusive Policies

Despite the clear benefits, access to paid maternity leave is far from universal. In many countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, maternity leave policies are limited, poorly enforced, or non-existent. In the United States, the only high-income country without a federal paid maternity leave mandate, many women rely on a patchwork of employer-based or state-level benefits, which disproportionately disadvantage low-income and minority mothers.

The lack of inclusive maternity leave policies exacerbates health inequities. Women in precarious employment, informal sectors, or marginalized communities are the least likely to receive paid leave, yet they often face the highest risks during pregnancy and childbirth.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷Tamara I Arnautovic and Christiane EL Dammann, 'The Neonatal Perspective of Paid Family Medical Leave (PFML)' (Springer Nature, 1 August 2022).

²⁸Sergio Vargas-Prada and others, 'Influence of Paid Maternity Leave on Return to Work after Childbirth'

Addressing these disparities requires comprehensive public policy interventions that prioritize maternal and child health as a matter of social justice and public health²⁹.

8. Understanding the Difference Between Paid and Unpaid Maternity Leave

Maternity leave is a vital employment benefit that provides mothers with the necessary time away from work to physically recover from childbirth and to bond with and care for their newborns. It plays a crucial role in supporting maternal and child health, promoting family well-being, and fostering a more inclusive and equitable workplace. However, maternity leave policies vary widely across countries, sectors, and even individual workplaces. One of the most significant differences is whether the leave is paid or unpaid.

Paid maternity leave provides mothers with income during their time away from work, easing financial pressure and allowing them to focus fully on their recovery and their baby's needs. In contrast, unpaid maternity leave offers job security but no financial support, which can create serious challenges, especially for low- and middle-income families. In many cases, the lack of income forces mothers to return to work prematurely, potentially compromising their health and that of their child.

The availability or lack of paid maternity leave has wide-ranging implications. Legally, it reflects the extent to which a country or employer prioritizes family welfare in labor policies. Economically, it affects household stability, workforce participation rates, and employee retention. Psychologically, the stress of unpaid leave can increase the risk of postpartum depression and reduce the quality of maternal-infant bonding. Socially, it can deepen inequalities, as access to paid leave is often determined by job type, income level, or geographic location.

This work delves into the multifaceted differences between paid and unpaid maternity leave. It explores not only the immediate impact on mothers and children but also the broader consequences for employers and society as a whole. By examining the legal frameworks, economic pressures, mental health outcomes, and social justice dimensions involved, this discussion aims to highlight why the nature of maternity leave matters and how equitable, supportive policies can contribute to healthier families and stronger communities.

Defining Paid and Unpaid Maternity Leave

Paid maternity leave refers to a period of absence from work granted to a new mother during which she continues to receive all or a portion of her salary or wages. The payment may come from the employer, government social insurance programs, or a combination of both³⁰. Paid maternity leave is often seen as a social investment in public health, workforce stability, and gender equality³¹.

²⁹Isabelle Probst and others, 'Implementation, Mechanisms and Effects of Maternity Protection Legislation: A Realist Narrative Review of the Literature' (Springer Verlag, 1 November 2018) 901.

³¹Cassandra Harrison and others, 'Paid Maternity Leave and Its Role in Workforce Stability'. *Labor Studies Journal*[2020] (45) 67, 78.

In contrast, unpaid maternity leave allows a mother to take time off from work without receiving any income during her absence. The job may still be protected, meaning the employee can return to her position after the leave but without pay, the financial burden of the leave falls entirely on the family³².

Economic Implications

The most immediate and obvious difference between paid and unpaid maternity leave is the financial impact on the family. Paid leave allows a mother to maintain economic stability while caring for her newborn. With some or all of her wages intact, she can afford essential items such as medical care, nutrition, housing, and baby supplies without sacrificing her income³³.

Unpaid leave, on the other hand, presents a difficult trade-off. Families may face a significant reduction or complete loss of household income during the leave period. This financial strain often forces mothers to cut short their recovery time and return to work prematurely. In many cases, women may forego maternity leave altogether if they cannot afford to go without pay, despite the potential health risks for both themselves and their infants³⁴.

Moreover, low-income workers, single mothers, and those in the informal economy are disproportionately affected by unpaid leave. While higher-income professionals may have savings or employer benefits to rely on, economically vulnerable women often have no safety net, widening socioeconomic and health disparities³⁵.

9. Health and Well-being

Another major difference lies in the health outcomes associated with paid versus unpaid leave. Paid maternity leave is strongly correlated with positive maternal and child health outcomes. Mothers who receive paid leave are more likely to breastfeed, attend postnatal checkups, and take the time needed to recover physically and emotionally from childbirth. Paid leave has also been shown to reduce rates of postpartum depression and anxiety by alleviating the financial stress associated with unpaid time off³⁶.

For the child, paid leave means more time with the mother during the critical first months of life. This fosters better bonding, enhances emotional security, and promotes healthy development. It also increases the likelihood of timely immunizations and early medical care³⁷.

³²John Fleming and David Kerr, 'Comparative Analysis of Paid versus Unpaid Maternity Leave Policies'. *Global Health Review*[2021] (10) 152, 159.

³³Yvonne Jenkins, 'The Financial Impact of Paid Maternity Leave on Low-Income Families'. *Economic Journal of Maternity Studies*[2019] (19) 33, 45.

³⁴Grace Morris, 'The Consequences of Unpaid Leave on Maternal and Child Health Outcomes'. *International Journal of Maternity Care*[2020] (15) 201, 210.

³⁵Minh Nguyen and Sarah King, 'Income Inequities and Paid Maternity Leave'. *Journal of Women's Health*[2018] (32) 121, 130.

³⁶Maria Hammond, 'Postpartum Recovery and Paid Maternity Leave: A Review'. *Maternal Mental Health Review*[2018] (29) 42, 54.

³⁷Jessica Taylor and Elaine Smith, 'The Role of Paid Maternity Leave in Infant Development'. *Child Development and Well-being Journal*[2017] (17) 110, 120.

In contrast, the pressure to return to work early due to unpaid leave can disrupt this crucial bonding period. It may also hinder the mother's physical recovery and reduce the quality of childcare if alternatives are hurriedly arranged. The long-term developmental consequences for children, including behavioural and cognitive delays, are more common when maternity leave is inadequate or cut short³⁸.

Workforce Participation and Gender Equity

Paid maternity leave encourages workforce retention and promotes gender equity. When women have access to paid leave, they are more likely to return to their jobs after childbirth, resulting in lower employee turnover and better continuity for employers. This supports long-term career development for women and contributes to narrowing the gender wage gap³⁹.

Unpaid maternity leave, in contrast, can act as a barrier to women's full participation in the labor market. The lack of income during maternity leave often leads to difficult choices, such as quitting a job or taking extended time off without compensation, both of which can derail careers. This interruption may result in long-term earnings losses, decreased chances of promotion, and weakened job security, perpetuating systemic inequalities in the workplace⁴⁰.

Paid maternity leave also encourages a more equitable division of labor in the household. When women know their contributions are recognized and supported, it empowers them to participate in both family and professional life, challenging traditional gender roles⁴¹.

Employer Perspectives

From an employer's point of view, the difference between paid and unpaid leave can be seen in terms of productivity, morale, and retention. While paid maternity leave might appear to be a financial burden at first glance, numerous studies show that the long-term benefits outweigh the costs. Companies that offer paid leave often experience higher employee satisfaction, stronger loyalty, and improved workplace morale⁴².

Moreover, retaining employees after childbirth reduces recruitment and training costs. In contrast, if women are forced to leave the workforce due to unpaid leave, businesses lose valuable talent and must invest resources in hiring and onboarding replacements. Paid leave policies can therefore be a strategic business investment in human capital⁴³.

³⁸Naomi Baxter and others, 'Impact of Maternity Leave on Early Childhood Development: Longitudinal Study' *Journal of Childhood Psychology*[2018] (50) 350, 363.

³⁹Laura Kassell, 'Gender Equity and Maternity Leave: A Workplace Perspective'. *Journal of Gender Equality and Work*[2019] (21) 98, 10

⁴⁰Christine Johnson, 'Systemic Inequalities in Maternity Leave Policies and Women's Careers'. *Social Policy and Economic Equality*[2021] (12) 243, 259.

⁴¹Karen Koch and James Martin, 'The Household Division of Labor and Maternity Leave'. *Gender Studies Journal*[2020] (33) 211, 223.

⁴²James Black and Rachel White, 'Employer Benefits of Paid Maternity Leave'. *Journal of Employment Studies*[2019] (47) 13, 26.

⁴³Jonathan Perkins and Rachel Rhodes, 'Strategic Investment in Human Capital: The Case for Paid Maternity Leave'. *Business and Management Review*[2021] (38) 99, 108.

10. Global Disparities and Policy Differences

There is a stark contrast in maternity leave policies across countries. Many high-income nations, particularly in Europe and parts of Asia, provide generous paid leave through government-mandated programs. For example, Sweden offers up to 480 days of paid parental leave, and Canada provides up to 18 months with government financial support⁴⁴.

Conversely, countries such as the United States have no federal mandate for paid maternity leave, although unpaid leave is protected under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) for certain workers. This means millions of women in the U.S. must rely on employer discretion or state programs for any paid leave, resulting in wide disparities in access⁴⁵.

This global variation highlights the importance of public policy in shaping the maternity leave landscape. Countries that prioritize paid leave see better health, economic, and social outcomes, whereas those without such policies leave the responsibility to individual families and employers, often with uneven and inequitable results⁴⁶.

Social and Cultural Implications

Paid maternity leave also sends a powerful social message about the value of caregiving and family life. It reinforces the idea that raising children is not solely a private concern but a societal one, worthy of investment and support. In cultures where paid leave is normalized, motherhood and professional ambitions are seen as compatible, not conflicting.

Unpaid leave, on the other hand, can reinforce negative stereotypes that caregiving is a personal responsibility with no public value. This can stigmatize working mothers and discourage inclusive conversations about shared caregiving, workplace accommodations, and family support systems.

The difference between paid and unpaid maternity leave is more than a matter of naira, it's a matter of equity, health, and dignity. Paid maternity leave empowers women to take care of themselves and their children without sacrificing their livelihoods. It supports better health outcomes, workplace stability, and social cohesion. Unpaid leave, while offering some protections, often places undue financial, emotional, and physical stress on mothers and their families. To build inclusive and thriving societies, it is imperative that policymakers, employers, and communities advocate for comprehensive paid maternity leave policies. Ensuring that all women, regardless of income or occupation, have access to paid time off during the most vulnerable period of their lives is not only a matter of justice but also a vital investment in the well-being of future generations.

⁴⁴Elsa Stahl, 'Maternity Leave Policies in High-Income Countries: A Comparative Overview'. *Global Policy Journal*[2020] (28) 65, 72.

⁴⁵Isabel Chavez and others, 'Paid vs. Unpaid Leave in the United States: Implications for Maternal Health'. *American Health Review*[2021] (41) 51, 59.

⁴⁶Hilary Bergman and others, 'Public Policy and Maternity Leave: Social and Economic Outcomes'. *International Social Policy Journal*[2018] (20) 136, 149.

11. The Economic and Social Benefits of supporting paid leave for a country, organization and institution

Supporting paid leave brings numerous economic and social benefits at the country, organizational, and institutional levels. Here's a breakdown of the advantages:

1. Economic Benefits

For a Country:

- 1) **Boosts Workforce Participation:** Encouraging paid leave, especially for parental leave, keeps more people (especially women) in the workforce, reducing turnover and increasing labor force participation⁴⁷.
- 2) **Higher Productivity:** Well-rested and healthy employees contribute more efficiently to the economy⁴⁸.
- 3) **Reduces Healthcare Costs:** Paid leave allows workers to recover from illnesses, reducing long-term healthcare expenses for both individuals and the state⁴⁹.
- 4) **Increases Consumer Spending:** Workers with stable income during leave maintain their purchasing power, supporting the economy⁵⁰.
- 5) **Enhances Business Competitiveness:** Countries with strong leave policies attract and retain global talent⁵¹.

For an organization:

- I. **Reduces Turnover Costs:** Paid leave decreases employee turnover, cutting hiring and training costs⁵².
- II. **Boosts Productivity and Morale:** Employees return to work more engaged and motivated after time off⁵³.
- III. **Enhances Employer Brand:** Companies that offer paid leave attract top talent and maintain a positive reputation⁵⁴.
- IV. **Improves Performance and Retention:** Workers are more likely to stay loyal to companies that offer work-life balance⁵⁵.

⁴⁷Cassandra Harrison and others, 'Paid Maternity Leave and Its Role in Workforce Stability'. *Labor Studies Journal*[2020] (45) 67, 78.

⁴⁸John Fleming and David Kerr, 'Comparative Analysis of Paid versus Unpaid Maternity Leave Policies'. *Global Health Review*[2021] (10) 152, 159.

⁴⁹Maria Hammond, 'Postpartum Recovery and Paid Maternity Leave: A Review'. *Maternal Mental Health Review*[2018] (29) 42, 54.

⁵⁰Jessica Taylor and Elaine Smith, 'The Role of Paid Maternity Leave in Infant Development'. *Child Development and Well-being Journal*[2017] (17) 110, 120.

⁵¹Naomi Baxter and others, 'Impact of Maternity Leave on Early Childhood Development: Longitudinal Study'. *Journal of Childhood Psychology*[2018] (50) 350, 363.

⁵²Laura Kassell, 'Gender Equity and Maternity Leave: A Workplace Perspective'. *Journal of Gender Equality and Work*[2019] (21) 98, 106.

⁵³Christine Johnson, 'Systemic Inequalities in Maternity Leave Policies and Women's Careers'. *Social Policy and Economic Equality*[2021] (12) 243, 259.

⁵⁴Ibid

⁵⁵Jonathan Perkins and Rachel Rhodes, 'Strategic Investment in Human Capital: The Case for Paid Maternity Leave'. *Business and Management Review*[2021] (38) 99, 108.

For an Institution (e.g., Universities, Public Offices):

- A. Promotes Work-Life Balance: Employees and students perform better when given time to manage personal and health needs⁵⁶.
 - B. Reduces Absenteeism: Proper leave policies prevent burnout, reducing unscheduled absences⁵⁷.
 - C. Attracts Top Educators & Researchers: Institutions with paid leave appeal to skilled professionals seeking stable, supportive environments⁵⁸.
2. Social Benefits

For a Country:

- 1) Improves Public Health: Paid leave allows people to recover from illness, care for newborns, and support family members, reducing stress-related health issues⁵⁹.
- 2) Supports Gender Equality: Paid parental leave helps close the gender pay gap and allows both parents to share caregiving responsibilities⁶⁰.
- 3) Strengthens Families: Parents can bond with newborns or care for elderly family members without financial stress⁶¹.
- 4) Reduces Poverty & Inequality: Paid leave provides financial security to lower-income workers who might otherwise be forced to quit their jobs⁶².

For an organization:

- 1) Enhances Workplace Culture: Paid leave fosters a culture of trust and support, improving employee relationships⁶³.
- 2) Encourages Diversity & Inclusion: Companies offering paid leave support working parents, caregivers, and individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds⁶⁴.
- 3) Reduces Workplace Stress: Employees knowing they have time off when needed feel more secure and engaged⁶⁵.

For an Institution:

- I. Increases Academic & Professional Performance: Faculty and students can manage personal challenges without sacrificing education or research quality⁶⁶.

⁵⁶Isabel Chavez and others, 'Paid vs. Unpaid Leave in the United States: Implications for Maternal Health'. *American Health Review*[2021] (41) 51, 59.

⁵⁷Hilary Bergman and others, 'Public Policy and Maternity Leave: Social and Economic Outcomes'. *International Social Policy Journal*[2018] (20) 136, 149.

⁵⁸Karen Koch and James Martin, 'The Household Division of Labor and Maternity Leave'. *Gender Studies Journal*[2020] (33) 211, 223.

⁵⁹Grace Morris, 'The Consequences of Unpaid Leave on Maternal and Child Health Outcomes'. *International Journal of Maternity Care*[2020] (15) 201, 210.

⁶⁰Minh Nguyen and Sarah King, 'Income Inequities and Paid Maternity Leave'. *Journal of Women's Health*[2018] (32) 121, 130.

⁶¹Elsa Stahl, 'Maternity Leave Policies in High-Income Countries: A Comparative Overview'. *Global Policy Journal*[2020] (28) 65, 72.

⁶²John Fleming and David Kerr, 'Comparative Analysis of Paid versus Unpaid Maternity Leave Policies'. *Global Health Review*[2021] (10) 152, 159.

⁶³Jessica (n51)

⁶⁴Karen (n59)

⁶⁵Cassandra (n48)

⁶⁶Grace (n60)

- II. Fosters Innovation & Collaboration: A supportive leave policy encourages collaboration between researchers and staff without burnout⁶⁷.
- III. Supports Community Well-being: Institutions that prioritize paid leave contribute to healthier, more balanced communities⁶⁸.
Supporting paid leave isn't just about individual well-being; it drives economic growth, strengthens social stability, and enhances workplace performance at all levels. Countries, businesses, and institutions that invest in paid leave ultimately see higher productivity, reduced turnover, and a more engaged, healthier population.

12. Challenges and Barriers to Implementing Paid Maternity Leave

Paid maternity leave is widely recognized as a crucial policy tool for promoting gender equality, improving maternal and child health, and supporting family well-being. Despite its well-documented benefits, implementing comprehensive and equitable paid maternity leave remains a significant challenge across many regions and sectors. Even in countries that have adopted maternity leave policies, barriers such as funding, political will, enforcement mechanisms, and cultural attitudes can limit their effectiveness. This article examines the multifaceted challenges and barriers that hinder the implementation of paid maternity leave, including economic, political, legal, social, and institutional factors, and suggests potential ways to overcome them.

- I. Economic and Financial Constraints
 - a) Employer Burden and Cost Concerns: One of the most frequently cited barriers to implementing paid maternity leave is the financial burden it places on employers. Particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), owners may be concerned about the direct costs of paying salaries during maternity leave, hiring temporary replacements, and managing disruptions to productivity. In countries where employers are solely responsible for funding paid leave, resistance to policy change tends to be stronger. Without government support or shared funding models, businesses often view maternity leave as an expense rather than an investment, leading to lobbying against legislation or discriminatory hiring practices to avoid the perceived costs⁶⁹.
 - b) Government Budget Limitations: In lower-income countries or regions with constrained public resources, governments may be unable or unwilling to fund paid maternity leave schemes. Social insurance programs require stable contributions and administrative infrastructure, which may be lacking. As a result, maternity leave policies are often limited in scope or duration, leaving many women without access to paid benefits. Additionally, in economies with large informal sectors like Nigeria, many working women are outside the reach of formal labor regulations and social security programs. This makes it difficult to create sustainable, inclusive systems for maternity leave that benefit all working mothers⁷⁰.
- II. Legal and Policy Framework Limitations
 - i. Weak or Non-Existent Legislation: A major barrier in many countries is the absence of legal mandates requiring paid maternity leave. In such cases, access to maternity leave depends

⁶⁷ Minh (61)

⁶⁸ Isabela (n46)

⁶⁹ Cassandra (n66)

⁷⁰ John (n63)

entirely on individual employer policies, leading to significant disparities between sectors, income levels, and geographic locations. Even in Nigeria with laws on maternity leave, gaps in coverage can exclude part-time, temporary, informal, or self-employed workers. Legal loopholes, short duration mandates, or low wage replacement rates limit the effectiveness of existing policies⁷¹.

- ii. Lack of Enforcement and Monitoring: Where laws do exist, they are often poorly enforced. Regulatory bodies may lack the capacity to monitor compliance, particularly in remote or rural areas. Employers who deny leave or fail to pay mandated benefits often go unpunished, and workers may be unaware of their rights or fear retaliation for speaking out⁷².
- iii. Corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and lack of transparency further undermine enforcement efforts. Without strong legal systems and monitoring mechanisms, even well-designed policies may fail to translate into actual benefits for workers.

III. Political and Institutional Barriers

- a. Insufficient Political Will: Maternity leave is often sidelined in political discourse, especially in countries where women's representation in government is low. Policymakers may view maternity leave as a secondary issue compared to economic growth, security, or infrastructure, leading to underinvestment in family-friendly policies⁷³.
- b. Biases: Cultural and ideological biases influence political decisions. If family policies are viewed as private matters or women's responsibilities, governments may be less inclined to take proactive legislative action⁷⁴.
- c. Resistance from Business and Industry Groups: Business lobbies and employer associations may oppose paid leave mandates, arguing that they increase costs, reduce competitiveness, or burden the private sector. These groups can exert significant influence on policy decisions, especially in market-oriented economies or under neoliberal governance models. Such opposition is often successful in diluting proposed policies, reducing their generosity, or delaying implementation. Without strong counterpressure from civil society or labor unions, business interests can dominate the legislative process⁷⁵.

IV. Social and Cultural Norms

- 1) Gender Roles and Stereotypes: Deeply rooted cultural norms and traditional gender roles often act as barriers to the acceptance and implementation of paid maternity leave. In many societies, caregiving is seen as a woman's responsibility, while men are expected to be the breadwinners. This not only limits policy support for paid maternity leave but also inhibits the broader development of shared parental leave or paternity leave. When caregiving is devalued or seen as non-productive labor, policies that support it are less likely to receive political or social support.

⁷¹ Minh (n68)

⁷² Jessica (n64)

⁷³ John Fleming and David Kerr, 'Comparative Analysis of Paid versus Unpaid Maternity Leave Policies'. *Global Health Review*[2021] (10) 152, 159.

⁷⁴ Jessica Taylor and Elaine Smith, 'The Role of Paid Maternity Leave in Infant Development'. *Child Development and Well-being Journal*[2017] (17)110, 120.

⁷⁵ Minh Nguyen and Sarah King, 'Income Inequities and Paid Maternity Leave'. *Journal of Women's Health*[2018] (32)121, 130.

Additionally, if working mothers are perceived as less committed or competent, maternity leave may be seen as a risk or liability rather than a necessary support⁷⁶.

- 2) Stigma and Discrimination: Even when paid maternity leave is legally available, societal attitudes may discourage women from using it. Fear of workplace discrimination, job loss, or stalled career progression can make women hesitant to take the full duration of leave. In some cases, women return to work earlier than recommended for fear of being replaced or marginalized. Stigmatization of maternity leave can also extend to employers, who may avoid hiring women of childbearing age or deny promotions to avoid potential disruptions. These attitudes not only undermine the purpose of maternity leave but also perpetuate gender inequality in the workplace.

V. Informal Employment and Inequity

- i. Exclusion of Informal and Non-Standard Workers: In many parts of the world, a significant portion of the female labor force is engaged in informal work, whether as domestic workers, market vendors, agricultural labourers, or freelance contractors. These workers typically lack formal contracts, access to social insurance, or legal protections, making them ineligible for paid maternity leave. Efforts to extend maternity leave to informal workers face challenges related to identification, enrolment, funding, and enforcement. Without formal employer-employee relationships, designing effective and inclusive maternity protection schemes becomes complex⁷⁷.
- ii. Inequities Across Socio-economic Groups: Even within formal employment, disparities persist. High-income, urban, and public sector workers are more likely to have access to paid maternity leave, while low-income, rural, or private sector workers are left behind. These inequities not only affect access to leave but also impact the quality of healthcare, postpartum support, and child development opportunities. Unless maternity leave policies are universal and inclusive, they risk reinforcing existing social and economic inequalities⁷⁸.

VI. Administrative and Logistical Barriers

- A. Weak Institutional Infrastructure: Effective implementation of paid maternity leave requires robust administrative systems, including payroll processing, social insurance management, claims handling, and employer compliance monitoring. In many countries, especially those with weak governance structures, these systems are underdeveloped or fragmented. Lack of data, outdated technology, and limited inter-agency coordination hinder the administration of maternity benefits. Delays in benefit disbursement, unclear eligibility criteria, and complex application procedures can deter women from claiming their entitlements⁷⁹.

⁷⁶Cassandra Harrison and others, 'Paid Maternity Leave and Its Role in Workforce Stability'. *Labor Studies Journal*[2020] (45) 67, 78.

⁷⁷Laura Kassell, 'Gender Equity and Maternity Leave: A Workplace Perspective'. *Journal of Gender Equality and Work*[2019] (21) 98, 106.

⁷⁸John Fleming and David Kerr, 'Comparative Analysis of Paid versus Unpaid Maternity Leave Policies'. *Global Health Review*[2021] (10) 152, 159.

⁷⁹Hilary Bergman and others, 'Public Policy and Maternity Leave: Social and Economic Outcomes'. *International Social Policy Journal*[2016] (20) 136, 149.

B. Complexity in Designing Sustainable Programs: Designing a financially and administratively sustainable maternity leave program involves complex decisions around eligibility, benefit levels, duration, funding sources, and enforcement. Balancing these elements while ensuring fairness and inclusivity can be politically and technically challenging. For example, deciding whether employers, employees, or governments should finance leave, and how to cover self-employed or informal workers, requires careful planning and multi-stakeholder consensus.

VII. Lack of Awareness and Advocacy

- 1) Limited Public Awareness: Many workers are unaware of their rights regarding maternity leave, particularly in regions with low literacy rates or weak labor education programs. If women do not know they are entitled to paid leave, or how to claim it, they are unlikely to benefit from it. Employers may also be unaware of their obligations under labor laws, particularly in small or unregulated businesses. This knowledge gap further limits the reach and effectiveness of maternity leave policies.
- 2) Weak Advocacy and Labor Movements: In Nigeria, without strong labor unions or civil society organizations, there may be insufficient advocacy for maternity rights⁸⁰. Without organized efforts to lobby for policy change, hold governments accountable, or educate workers, maternity leave often remains a low priority. The lack of cross-sector coalitions between healthcare, labor, and women's rights groups can result in fragmented efforts and missed opportunities for reform⁸¹.

13. Conclusion

Ultimately, the successful implementation of paid maternity leave across formal and informal sectors is not only a policy issue, it is a reflection of a society's values. Recognizing caregiving as a vital contribution to national development, and supporting women through all stages of their lives, is a crucial step toward building more equitable and resilient communities. The impact of paid maternity leave on maternal and child health is undeniable. It supports mothers' mental and physical recovery from childbirth, fosters strong parent-child bonds, and ensures better health and developmental outcomes for children. Beyond individual families, these benefits ripple across society by reducing healthcare costs, promoting workforce participation, and contributing to more equitable health outcomes.

Investing in paid maternity leave is not merely a labor rights issue, it is a public health imperative. By ensuring that all mothers have the time and financial security to care for themselves and their newborns, societies can build healthier, more resilient populations for generations to come. Governments must take deliberate steps to close the implementation gap, especially in underserved communities. Strong enforcement, widespread awareness, and inclusive policies will help ensure that no mother is left behind. The future of any nation depends on how well it protects and empowers its caregivers.

⁸⁰Cassandra (n77)

⁸¹Elsa Stahl, 'Maternity Leave Policies in High-Income Countries: A Comparative Overview'. *Global Policy Journal* [2020] (28)65, 72.

Paid maternity leave is a transformative policy with the potential to improve maternal and child health, promote gender equality, and support economic growth. However, implementing such policies remains fraught with challenges across multiple dimensions. Financial constraints, weak legal frameworks, political resistance, cultural norms, informal employment, and administrative capacity all pose significant barriers.

Overcoming these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach. Governments must commit to investing in:

1. Family support systems and developing inclusive, sustainable funding models. This includes public-private partnerships and targeted subsidies to extend support to low-income and marginalized populations.
2. Legal protections must be expanded and enforced, with special attention to vulnerable and informal workers. Governments should streamline legal processes and ensure that existing laws are widely accessible and well-publicized.
3. Cultural change must be fostered through education and advocacy, engaging community leaders, employers, and the media to shift attitudes and dispel harmful gender stereotypes.
4. Administrative systems must be strengthened to ensure effective delivery. This includes building capacity in relevant institutions, digitizing benefit systems, and monitoring implementation to ensure accountability and transparency.