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WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
World Breastfeeding Week 2019 Message**

Becoming the parent of a new baby is both a life-altering gift and an immense responsibility. This week, as countries around the world celebrate World Breastfeeding Week, UNICEF and WHO are calling on governments and all employers to adopt family-friendly policies that support breastfeeding.

The theme of this year's World Breastfeeding Week is "Empower Parents, Enable Breastfeeding." Family-friendly policies – such as paid parental leave – enable breastfeeding and help parents nurture and bond with their children in early life, when it matters most. The evidence is clear that during early childhood, the optimal nutrition provided by breastfeeding, along with nurturing care and stimulation, can strengthen children's brain development with impacts that endure over a lifetime.

Family-friendly policies are particularly important for working parents. Mothers need time off from work to recover from birth and get breastfeeding off to a successful start. When a breastfeeding mother returns to work, her ability to continue breastfeeding depends on having access to breastfeeding breaks; a safe, private, and hygienic space for expressing and storing breastmilk; and affordable childcare at or near her workplace.

Time off work is also important for fathers: Paid paternity leave allows fathers to bond with their babies and promotes gender-equality, including through the sharing of childrearing and household responsibilities.

Returning to work too soon is a barrier to the early initiation of breastfeeding, exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months and continued breastfeeding until age 2 or longer – practices that can boost children's immune systems, shield them from disease, and provide protection from noncommunicable diseases later in life. Breastfeeding also protects maternal health -- women who breastfeed reduce their risk of breast and ovarian cancers.

In addition to their impact on children, family-friendly policies support women's participation in the workforce, improve their physical and mental health^{1,2} and enhance family well-being. They also advance business objectives and strengthen the economy. Such policies have been shown to increase employee retention, improve job satisfaction, and result in fewer absences. In short, family-friendly policies are good for families, babies and business.

As the world marks World Breastfeeding Week, WHO and UNICEF call on governments and all employers to adopt family-friendly policies – including paid maternity leave for a minimum of 18 weeks, and preferably, for a period of six months – as well as paid paternity leave.

In line with the policy actions advocated by the WHO-UNICEF-led Global Breastfeeding Collective, we also call for greater investments in comprehensive breastfeeding programmes, improved breastfeeding counselling and support for women in health facilities and the community, and an end to the promotion of breast-milk substitutes to enable parents to make informed decisions on the best way to feed their infants.

Together, with the support of governments, employers and communities, we have the power to enable breastfeeding and support families in fostering a nurturing environment where all children thrive.



Henrietta H. Fore



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¹ Aitken, Z., Garrett, C. C., Hewitt, B., Keogh, L., Hocking, J. S., & Kavanagh, A. M. (2015). The maternal health outcomes of paid maternity leave: a systematic review. *Social Science & Medicine*, 130, 32–41. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.02.001.

²Dagher, R. K., McGovern, P. M., & Dowd, B. E. (2014). Maternity leave duration and postpartum mental and physical health: implications for leave policies. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 39(2), 369–416. doi:10.1215/03616878-2416247.