



Legal Assistance Centre

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Note 1. Among the benefits of breastfeeding: it is cheaper, safer, cleaner and faster than bottle feeding. Breast milk also helps to prevent the development of allergies and babies who are breastfed have a lower risk of developing health problems such as obesity, health disease, high blood pressure and some kinds of diabetes later in life

Breastfeeding is also better for the mother. Breastfeeding immediately after birth helps to reduce bleeding from the uterus. Breastfeeding also delays the start of ovulation and menstruation, which will help stop the mother from becoming pregnant again right away. Breastfeeding also helps the mother to lose weight from the pregnancy and helps protect against breast and ovarian cancer. Breast cancer is the most common kind of cancer affecting women in Namibia.

Note 2. Babies who are HIV positive are more likely to get sick. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a child's life protects the baby from health problems that can cause death – such as diarrhoea, pneumonia and malnutrition. However there is a risk that HIV can be transmitted through breast milk. Feeding a baby formula milk eliminates the risk of transferring HIV infection, but increases the risk that the child may die from diarrhoea, pneumonia or malnutrition, which is particularly relevant in Namibia where people may not have access to adequate sanitation facilities.



10 REASONS TO EXTEND MATERNITY LEAVE TO 6 MONTHS AFTER BIRTH

- 1. The National Agenda for Children states that the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life is a government priority.** This is in line with the World Health Organisation recommendation that mothers should exclusively breastfeed their children for six months. However the National Agenda does not make it clear how the government intends to balance this commitment with the provisions in the Labour Act and Social Security Act which provide for just eight weeks maternity leave after the birth of the child. The current maternity leave provision is a push factor for many mothers to wean their children early. Extending maternity leave to six months after the birth of the child will allow mothers to exclusively breastfeed their children for six months. Whilst not all mothers will take advantage of this opportunity, allowing mothers the option to do so will provide an enabling environment and it is likely that over time more and more women will exclusively breastfeed given the numerous benefits for their child and for themselves.
- 2. The Ministry of Health and Social Services National Guidelines for Infant and Young Child Feeding, which are in line with World Health Organisation guidance, state that HIV-positive mothers should also exclusively breastfeed their children for six months** (if the baby is HIV negative, the mother should take anti-retroviral therapy to prevent mother-to-child transmission). Therefore HIV status is not a barrier to breastfeeding and so is not a reason against a recommendation for six months maternity leave after the birth of the child.
- 3. Breast milk contains antibodies. This helps protect a baby from illness. If the baby is healthy, the mother will not have to take off so much time from work to care for an ill child.** It is disruptive to the employer if a mother returns to work eight weeks after the birth of the child and continually takes time off work unexpectedly when the child gets sick. It will be less disruptive if the employer plans for the mother to be on maternity leave for six months after the birth of the child and when she returns to work she takes less time off unexpectedly.
- 4. The Legal Assistance Centre recommends that an extension of time on maternity leave should be gradually introduced to ensure that the change has a gradual impact on employers.** For example, each year the time on maternity leave could be extended by just one or two weeks.

5. The Legal Assistance Centre recommends that the government covers the cost of the increased time off. Currently the Social Security Commission increases the ceiling for maternity leave pay each year. In future years, the SSC could increase the ceiling more slowly and use the allocated money instead to gradually increase the time off.

6. Employers may choose to hire a temporary employee on a fixed contract to fill the position of the mother who is on maternity leave. Some employers may argue that the temporary employee will require training and this adversely affects their business. Currently some women may resign when they realise that to return to work eight weeks after the birth of their child is too soon. In contrast, six months maternity leave after the birth of the child will allow more women to return to the workplace. This means that **six months maternity leave may result in employers having to provide less training as an experienced person returns to the workplace.**

7. Six months maternity leave after the birth of the child will have a big picture impact on the economy, promoting productivity and stimulating business. Businesses will benefit from staff retention, decreased absenteeism and better staff morale.

8. Six months maternity leave after the birth of the child will help Namibia better meet over half of the Millennium Development Goals. A realistic maternity leave allowance will help to meet MDG1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger), MDG3 (promote gender equality and empower women), MDG4 (reduce child mortality), MDG5 (improve maternal health) and MDG6 (combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases).

9. Some people may think that six months maternity leave will encourage women to have more children; however this is an illogical assumption. Six months maternity leave does not mitigate the impact of the following 17.5 years.

10. Some people argue that it is not fair that women may have six months maternity leave when the government does not recognise paternity leave is provided in Namibia. The Legal Assistance Centre also supports the need for paternity leave and calls on the government to also consider the option of paternity leave.

Note 3.

MDG1: Approximately one third of all Namibian children under the age of five are malnourished and stunted. Breast milk is free and the best nutrition a new born baby can receive.

MDG3: As noted under point six, extending the maternity leave allowance will encourage women to return to the workforce.

MDG4: See Note 2, front page.

MDG5: See Note 1, front page.

MDG6: Mixed feeding during the first six months of a baby's life can greatly increase the risk of HIV transmission even if the mother is taking ART. This is because food other than breast milk can affect the development of the baby's digestive system. This could mean that viruses, including HIV, will be able to pass into the baby's blood stream. Breast milk helps to keep the baby's digestive system healthy, which can help prevent viruses from affecting the baby.

