

Maternity and paternity leave in the Pacific: a work in progress

by Hilary Gorman

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Father and child play on the beach
Photo Credit: Hilary Gorman

Parental leave is an integral form of social policy that provides extensive benefits to children, parents, families and society more broadly. Maternity leave supports maternal health by providing time to recover from birth. Studies have shown it enhances **postpartum mental health** and wellbeing, **supports breastfeeding** and even reduces **the risk of intimate partner violence**. It also **supports infant health** and is associated with lower mortality rates, increased paediatric health visits and vaccination rates, and **supports cognitive development**. Paternity leave provides time for **supporting one's partner postpartum**, bonding with and caring for their newborn child, and contributing to **relationship stability**. Parental leave also **supports gender equity** by sustaining women's ability to work and enabling men to contribute to care and household work.

Expansion of parental leave is an important benefit of economic growth and development processes, enhancing health, wellbeing, equity, the economy and care and support systems. Many Pacific governments have made commitments to gender equality and children's rights through signing declarations such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights 2018-2030. Yet implementation of gender-equitable and family-friendly policies in their own countries, such as expanded parental leave, is very much a work in progress. This is an issue that I am both personally and professionally passionate about as someone who works in the Pacific gender equality space and as a mother of Pacific Islander children. I see the limitations of parental leave as an indication of a lack of commitment to equity and care.

In the Pacific region, maternity and paternity leave are limited but slowly expanding. The average duration of maternity leave is 11 weeks in the public sector and six weeks in the private sector; six countries have no legal provision for maternity leave for private sector workers, as illustrated in Table 1. Efforts to expand maternity leave in the private sector face pushback from employers due to costs and labour

shortages.

Paternity leave is scant and insufficient in enabling men to be fathers. It is provided in seven countries for public sector workers and ranges from two days to two weeks. Only in Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa and Tuvalu are fathers in the private sector eligible for paternity leave.

Table 1: Maternity and paternity leave in Pacific island countries

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Public sector maternity leave (weeks)</i> | <i>Private sector maternity leave (weeks)</i> | <i>Public sector paternity leave (weeks)</i> | <i>Private sector paternity leave (weeks)</i> |
|------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Cook Islands | 6 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Fiji | 14 | 14 | 1 | 1 |
| Kiribati | 12 | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| Marshall Islands | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| FSM | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Nauru | 12 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Niue | 18 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Palau | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| PNG | 18 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Samoa | 12 | 6 | 1 | 1 |
| Solomon Islands | 12 | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| Tonga | 12 | 6 | 1 | 0 |
| Tuvalu | 12 | 12 | 2 | 2 |
| Vanuatu | 12 | 12 | 0 | 0 |

Source: Author's research • Created with Datawrapper

The International Labour Organization's *C183 — Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183)* stipulates that maternity leave should be a minimum of 14 weeks, with 18 weeks recommended. This means that only public servants in Fiji, Niue and PNG meet the minimum threshold. In the *Asia-Pacific region*, the average duration of maternity leave is 19 weeks, and paternity leave is available in 14 of 33 countries in Asia and the Pacific. In Australia and New Zealand, parental leave is 26 weeks,

and in many European countries it is more extensive.

Many Pacific countries do not meet the ILO standard, particularly for women working in the private sector. In Palau, maternity leave is provided to public sector workers with one month paid and up to five months unpaid. **Attempts were made** in 2013, 2019 and 2022 to introduce maternity leave for all workers, yet all failed to pass the House of Delegates. Recently, a new bill that includes maternity and paternity leave was tabled in 2025 by a prominent female politician, Senator Rukebai Inabo. On International Women's Day in 2026, President Surangel Whipps **also called** on National Congress to “craft stronger maternity and family leave policies” and all actors to tackle “gaps in economic access, leadership, violence protection and services that demand ‘continued commitment and collective action’”.

In some Pacific countries there have been positive developments. In Fiji, amendments to the *Employment Relations Act 2025* stipulate breaks and suitable facilities for women to breastfeed, and reinstate five days paternity leave and three days family care leave, which were removed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the Republic of the Marshall Islands, women in the public sector receive four weeks of paid maternity leave for the first four deliveries, despite many Marshallese women having more than four children. This is **misaligned with Marshallese custom and culture**, and even four weeks limits the ability to practise postpartum customs which are central to social reproduction. Similarly, in Nauru, women in the public sector receive 12 weeks maternity leave with full pay until the fourth child, after which they receive half pay. In Fiji, pay is also reduced to half after the third child. There is much that could be done to expand maternity and paternity leave in a way that recognises the importance of birth, women and children, and also aligns with cultural traditions of postpartum birth practices, having large families, adoption and the role of grandparents as carers.

In the Cook Islands, where I live, the situation is improving. In presenting the 2025/26 national budget, the Cook Islands **government announced** that maternity leave would be extended in a phased manner, increasing by two weeks per year to 14 weeks in 2029, and introducing two weeks of paid paternity leave from July 2026 — for public and private sector workers. This is a notable increase from six weeks paid maternity leave and two days paid paternity leave. As a Canadian woman married to a Cook Islander and raising three children, I can attest that expansion of maternity leave is much needed. With maternity leave limited to six weeks paid leave, each time I had a child I opted to take additional unpaid leave. This is a privilege that many women in the Cook Islands and the wider Pacific cannot afford.

Parental leave is part of a range of much-needed family-friendly policies, including

quality and affordable childcare, aged care services and social protection in the form of child benefits, pensions and support for caregivers. Advancing these policies requires Pacific governments and leaders going beyond rhetoric and signing declarations.

Disclosures:

The author has consulted on various donor-funded projects in the field of gender equality, including some specifically relating to maternity and paternity leave in the Pacific. The views expressed are those of the author only.

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