Taking forward the Maternity Benefits

What is the issue?

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- The government made amendments to the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 earlier this year.
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- Recently, the Labour Ministry placed the financial burden of implementing the measures under the act squarely on the employers.
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- This has led to concerns over the feasibility of bringing it into implementation.
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What are the notable amendments to the act?

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- The amendments seek to improve infant mortality rate (34/1,000 live births) and maternal mortality rate (167/100,000 live births).
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- The amendments act increased the maternity leave to 26 weeks from the earlier 12 weeks.
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- It also provided for leave up to 12 weeks for a woman who adopts a child below the age of three months, and for commissioning mothers.
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- It also facilitates 'work from home' for nursing mothers once the leave period ends.
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- These directives will be applicable to all establishments employing 10 or more persons.
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- It has made creche facility mandatory in respect of establishments with 50 or more employees.
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What are the roadblocks in implementation?

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- The provisions can help thousands of women and produce much healthier children but the challenge lies in their implementation.
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- The measures introduced, particularly the creche facility, are cost-intensive.
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- Making employers solely liable for the cost of maternity benefits will hamper the desired implementation.
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- The cost burden may in first place deter employers from hiring or retaining pregnant women in work.
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What should be done?

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- **Funds** - It is high time that the government shoulder the financial responsibility of providing maternity benefits.
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- Maternity benefits should necessarily be provided either through compulsory social insurance or public funds.
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- Government can create a corpus fund to partially sponsor the costs to be incurred by the employer to provide maternity benefits.
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- **Paternity leave** - Providing for paternity leave would avoid the discrimination by the private sector in employing women.
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- If both men and women are entitled to leaves, the presumption will be that a man will also avail of it and it won't be disadvantageous for women.
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- **Breastfeeding** - The World Health Organisation has termed breastfeeding the “best investment in global health”.
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- Notably, the high level of child mortality and growing number of deaths in women from cancers and Type II diabetes are directly attributable to inadequate breastfeeding.

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- Government must thus find innovative and cost-effective ways to ensure that working women are not forced to discontinue breastfeeding.
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Source: The Hindu

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