

Women in Development and Decision Making: where does breastfeeding fit in?

Commission on the Status of Women 2006 Theme: an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and for the advancement of women, with equal participation of women and men in decision making processes at all levels

Women stand at the crossroads between production and reproduction, between economic activity and the care of human beings, between economic growth and human development. Women are workers in both spheres—the most responsible and therefore with the most at stake, those who suffer most when the two spheres meet at cross-purposes, and those most sensitive to the need for better integration between the two.

Gita Sen, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)*

Women play a triple role in development.

1. Through participation in the workforce, women contribute to the growth of the economy. Women's *workforce involvement* has been increasing for decades.
2. Women are the primary providers in *social reproduction*, the care and maintenance of human beings, yet in almost all countries this contribution to the nation's economic well-being is still being overlooked in national economic accounts.
3. Women bear all but a tiny part of the *physical load of reproduction*. A woman makes a significant investment of nutrients and energy over the nine months of pregnancy, the intense mental and physical effort of childbirth, the healing weeks of post-partum recovery, and the 24-hour-a day process of producing and delivering milk to protect, nourish, and nurture her infant for months or years after birth.

All three of women's economic roles offer opportunities to achieve gender equality.

Maternity Protection includes an adjustment of a woman's workload during pregnancy, birth/recovery, and lactation; it is a basis for gender equality at work. Since 1919, the ILO has set global standards for maternity protection

for women in the workforce, most recently in Convention 183, adopted in 2000. ILO has called maternity protection "a precondition of genuine equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women."

Enabling mothers to feed their children optimally means supporting exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continued breastfeeding with appropriate and adequate complementary foods until age two or beyond. Breastfeeding is a contribution to social reproduction that only women can make, but they do not make it alone. Fathers, grandparents, other relatives, co-workers, employers, and health policy-makers have key roles to play. Optimal feeding—which is gender-neutral for the recipient child, provided that girls and boys have equal access to their mothers' milk—can prevent 19% of deaths in children under five around the world, or 1.9 million every year.

The gender roles that a culture assigns to women affect a mother's power to decide how to use her own time and energy. Many times in each 24-hour day, a lactating mother of an infant or young child makes a decision whether to give the breast, or to care for herself and her child in some other way. In an enabling environment that respects her decision to breastfeed, she is free to make that choice based on her needs and her child's needs.

Breastfeeding may look like a private activity, yet during the months or years when women are lactating (producing milk) they can and should fulfill a variety of public roles in addition to their role as mother. The world needs to hear the voices of breastfeeding women in committee rooms and board rooms, in union halls, in parliaments, in town meetings, at debates and rallies. For some communities this will require a broadening of acceptance and support when lactating women, sometimes accompanied by their babies, appear in the public forum, especially when the babies require care and comfort at the breast.

The civic decision-making process must be open to women and men with family responsibilities. Child care facilities would make it possible for people with young children to participate more fully in decision-making. Meetings should be held at times of day when family demands are low. Quiet babes in arms should be welcomed with their parents. If nursing mothers are not accompanied by their babies, they need regular breaks and a place to express milk. Technology that allows people to participate from remote locations can also facilitate breastfeeding women's involvement in public life.

Breastfeeding must not be permitted to be an excuse for systematically excluding women from the important policy discussions that affect all of our lives.

In 2002 the World Health Organization and UNICEF developed the *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding*** and identified sub-optimal child growth and development as a barrier to development. The *Global Strategy* spells out remedies, with a role for almost every institution of government and civil society, as well as for individual family members and women themselves. Everyone benefits when babies and young children receive optimal feeding, and there is no longer any excuse to ignore breastfeeding, or to tell a woman that it's *her* problem and she should just "get on with it."

* quoted by Naila Kabeer

<http://www.unescap.org/esid/committee2003/genderequality.pdf>

** *The Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding*

http://www.who.int/child-adolescent-health/New-Publications/NUTRITION/gs_iycf.pdf

Actions that NGOs, governments, and individuals concerned with women in development can undertake:

1. Read the *Global Strategy* and see what role you and/or your organization should play in protecting, promoting, and supporting breastfeeding and optimal child feeding.
2. Endorse the *Global Strategy* and make it part of your strategic planning, or what you do on a daily basis.
3. Work for ratification and implementation of ILO Convention 183 on Maternity Protection.
4. Measure the impact of your programs or what you do for women's and children's health by using standard indicators of breastfeeding incidence, exclusivity, and duration.
5. Ensure support for your organization's members and employees during pregnancy and lactation.
6. Ensure good nutrition and rest for pregnant and lactating women.
7. Establish community child care centers and crèches at the workplace.
8. Promote support from fathers and other family members in household work.
9. Collaborate with breastfeeding advocacy groups and take part in breastfeeding coalitions.

Inappropriate feeding practices and their consequences are major obstacles to sustainable socioeconomic development and poverty reduction. Governments will be unsuccessful in their efforts to accelerate economic development in any significant long-term sense until optimal child growth and development, especially through appropriate feeding practices, are ensured.

Global Strategy, Paragraph 6**

A statement for the UN Commission on the Status of Women meeting, March, 2006, from
International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), <http://www.ibfan.org/>
International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA), <http://www.ilca.org/>
La Leche League International (LLL), <http://www.la lecheleague.org/>
National Alliance for Breastfeeding Advocacy--(NABA-REAL), <http://www.naba-breastfeeding.org/>
World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA), <http://www.waba.org.my/>
Wellstart International, <http://www.wellstart.org>