

International Women's Day

Press Release

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BREASTFEEDING IN THE CONTEXT OF 'ENDING IMPUNITY FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS'

Penang, March 2, 2007- Discrimination and violence against women and the girl child can affect breastfeeding at various points in the life of a female from infancy to old age. Recognizing the inconsistencies and violence that the girl child and women face every day, World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) supports and endorses the International Women's Day theme of 'Ending impunity for violence against Women and Girls.' International Women's Day will be celebrated the world over on 8th March, a date designated by the UN since 1975.

The causes and risk factors of violence against women and the responsibilities of the state were clearly enunciated by the Secretary General in the UN Study of 9 October 2006. He noted that violence against women is rooted in structural relationships of inequality between women and men and is not confined to a specific culture, region or country or to particular groups of women within a society. Physical, sexual, psychological and economic forms of violence against women can take place in an intimate relationship, in the family, in the community, within a State set-up, and during and after armed conflicts.

Regarding breastfeeding, violence manifests itself beginning with exclusion through to physical and psychological violence and abuse. As an infant, the girl child may receive inadequate nutrition due to preference for sons, which can lead a mother to cut short the breastfeeding time for her baby girl due to familial and societal pressures, in the hope of quickly starting a new pregnancy that might result in a boy. Additionally, where son preference is strong, girls who have older sisters are more likely to be neglected than boys who have older brothers. Such practices deny the girl-child adequate nutrition and the right to exclusive breastfeeding for six months and complementary feeding up to two years and beyond, which is the global recommendation for infant and young child feeding.

Further, attitudes towards the breast have been shaped by patriarchal constructions of sexuality and have led to harmful practices such as breast augmentation through cosmetic surgery or "breast ironing" as practiced in Cameroon. Community attitudes can affect a girl's self esteem, her understanding of her body, her self-image and how her family, friends and community treat her as a person, often limiting her choice in

living a full and active life. When sexually abusive behaviour is directed towards her breasts, a girl may develop a life-long aversion to touch, which can affect her decision to breastfeed and be close to her baby when she becomes a new mother.

Violence and discrimination against women by family, workplace or State do not stop because a woman is pregnant or is a new mother. Such experiences cause deep stress and anxiety which can affect a mother's ability to breastfeed her baby. Prolonged stress can lead to abnormally high or low levels of the hormone cortisol in mothers, which can result in suppressed or delayed milk production. Another barrier to breastfeeding that a woman may encounter is her partner's view that her breasts "belong" to him and not to her or to their baby. A common form of abuse is for a workplace to make no accommodation for mothers' right to breastfeed, expecting mothers to work long hours without regard to their health or the health of their children. Where competition for jobs is keen, factories and businesses may feel they have impunity to deny paid maternity leave and breastfeeding breaks to mothers, to fire women who become pregnant, or even to discriminate in hiring women at all.

Taking into consideration the impact of the different forms of violence on the health of girls and women and women's choice to breastfeed their infants, WABA calls for a multi-pronged approach involving the State, civil society, the community and the family. States cannot afford to behave with impunity towards perpetrators of violence against women and girls, for otherwise it gives the message that it is acceptable or normal to deny justice to women. In doing so, they also reinforce the prevailing structural inequalities that face women and girls every day. States must therefore make concrete efforts to secure gender equality and protect women's human rights. They must effectively bridge gaps between international standards and national laws, policies and practices. They must unflinchingly redress violence against women and must exercise leadership towards ending violence against women.

Civil society must engage meaningfully with the State and the community to influence family choices in how they treat women and the girl child. As a community we must care for our young people and make informed efforts towards educating both girls and boys about key life experiences such as birthing, breastfeeding and sexuality. Family members can do simple things for mothers, for instance tell her she is doing a good job as a mother, refrain from using violent and abusive words to her, do household chores while she breastfeeds the baby in a relaxed state of mind.

WABA reiterates its own position that women have the right to breastfeed as enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and that all forms of violence against women affect breastfeeding. Gender equity is therefore basic to the breastfeeding movement.

References:

Ending Violence against Women: From words to action Study of the Secretary General. 9 October 2006

A statement from the UN Breastfeeding Advocacy Team. 2007.