



Breastfeeding: A Feminist Issue



Breastfeeding is an important women's issue, human rights issue, and feminist issue, since breastfeeding empowers women and contributes to gender equality. Women who wish to breastfeed their babies but cannot - because of inadequate support from family or health workers, constraints in the workplace, or misinformation from the infant food industry - are oppressed and exploited. Groups and individuals interested in fighting for women's rights and human rights should take action to change this situation, and recognise breastfeeding as a woman's right.

Women are empowered by asserting the value of both their productive and reproductive work. Women should never be forced to make a choice between mother-work and other work. Conditions supportive to successful nurturing, including breastfeeding, are conditions which reduce gender subordination generally by contradicting negative images of women and emphasising the value of women's reproductive work.

Why should women's groups put their valuable time and resources behind breastfeeding campaigns and programmes?

1. *Breastfeeding requires changes in society to improve the position and condition of women.*

Breastfeeding encourages women's self-reliance by increasing their confidence in their ability to meet the needs of their infants. Breastfeeding requires women to have confidence in themselves, and enough self-esteem to protect (or in some contexts, demand) their rights, including their right to breastfeed. Women with a positive self-image may be less likely to assume that they do not have enough breastmilk, or that their breastmilk is of poor quality.



Breastfeeding focuses attention on the need to insure equality in the distribution of food and other resources within the household. Since breastfeeding women's nutrient requirements are higher per unit weight than those of adult men, priority must be given to breastfeeding women in the distribution of food. In some societies, women may not receive enough food to insure their own health and that of their children.

2. *Breastfeeding confirms a woman's power to control her own body, and challenges the male-dominated medical model and business interests that promote bottle feeding.*

Successful breastfeeding reduces women's dependence on medical professionals and discourages further medicalisation of infant feeding. The knowledge mothers and midwives have about infant care and feeding increases in value and importance.

When breastfeeding is highly valued, the social and physical costs of breastfeeding are more carefully considered. Women's bodies are finite, and cannot be over-burdened without causing suffering and loss of their productive and reproductive

capacities. Breastfeeding mothers need access to food, health care and a supportive environment.

3. *Breastfeeding challenges the media model of women as consumers.*

The decision not to spend cash on breastmilk substitutes is a rejection of a consumption pattern forcing women to rely on expensive, industrially produced foods. As purchasers of infant formula, women devalue their own capacities, and seek commercial solutions to infant feeding. The constant efforts of infant formula manufacturers to expand their markets for these products fuels the advertising campaigns directed to women as consumers.

4. *Breastfeeding challenges views of the breast as primarily a sex object.*

How did breasts become defined as sex objects for male pleasure rather than as the source of food and comfort for children? The sex industry and beauty industry have succeeded in objectifying women's breasts through media and advertising, making it difficult for some women to breastfeed in public. When feeding bottles are used in public for fear of public exposure of breasts, or when women's reasons for choosing bottle feeding include fears that breastfeeding will alter the shape of their breasts, then women are being treated as sex objects.



from *The Compleat Mother*,
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Women's fears about exposing their breasts are more than confirmed when North American women are arrested or asked to leave public places for breastfeeding openly. Thanks to the efforts of women activists, breastfeeding women are reclaiming their breasts as valued parts of their bodies and refusing to be treated as sex objects.

5. *Breastfeeding requires a new definition of women's work - one that more realistically integrates women's productive and reproductive activities.*

In the sexual division of labour, infant care usually falls to women. It is women who have the capacity to provide food for their infants, ensuring women's self-reliance and their infants' survival for the first few months of life. Women give birth and produce milk. If the work of breastfeeding is valued as productive work, not a woman's duty, then conditions for its successful integration with other activities must be arranged.



These arrangements include legislation to provide maternity leaves and nursing breaks, affordable child-care and other strategies developed by women workers. A woman-centred definition of work must take into consideration the importance of nurturance and caring, including breastfeeding.

6. *Breastfeeding encourages solidarity and cooperation among women at the household, community, national, and international level.*

Within households, women often work together to share child-care and other responsibilities. Other family members can play a useful role in assisting new mothers by providing advice on managing breastfeeding and helping with household tasks.



Internationally, women as individuals and as members of health and consumer organisations, have lobbied governments on behalf of breastfeeding and protested against the commercial interests that put profit over the well-being of mothers and infants. The campaigns against the promotion of infant formula mobilised women all over the world to join consumer groups and to rediscover for themselves how women in developed and developing countries face many similar problems. Coalitions between women in developed and developing countries on issues like breastfeeding are potential opportunities for empowering women and for identifying common constraints that limit women's power to care for their children. Men have an important role to play in changing conditions

WORDS AND ACTION

The meaning of the term feminism is continually contested and changing. In fact, there is no one "feminism" but a number of "feminisms". One general definition uses feminism to refer to theories that explain the causes of women's oppression and actions that seek the "eradication of gender subordination and of other forms of social and economic oppression based on nation, class or ethnicity (Sen and Grown 1987:18)."

A number of Asian activists and academics agreed upon the following definition of feminism: "An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation." (Bhasin and Khan 1986:2).

**I'M NOT A FEMINIST,
BUT ...**

I'M A FEMINIST, BUT ...

**NO BUTS!
BREASTFEEDING
EMPOWERS WOMEN!**

for women and in changing their own attitudes toward breastfeeding and women's work.

What can women's groups do?

- Campaign for politicians who support policies that help breastfeeding mothers.



- Lobby national commissions on women and status of women groups to include breastfeeding in their action plans.
- Boycott products whose advertising on TV and in magazines uses women's breasts as promotional tools.
- Make sure that female babies are breastfed and given complementary foods as often as male babies.
- Encourage artists to present paintings, photographs, poems, and plays celebrating the power of maternity and breastfeeding, and the beauty of breasts.
- Welcome breastfeeding mothers at women's meetings and seminars, and provide child-care facilities.
- Ask key women in public offices to endorse World Breastfeeding Week and to include breastfeeding messages in their speeches.

How does breastfeeding fit with other women's issues?

1. Human rights

By focusing on enabling women to breastfeed, we address women's rights since the improvement of women's social and economic status is necessary for supporting breastfeeding. Any violation of women's right to breastfeed is a violation of women's human rights.

2. Reproductive health

Breastfeeding helps child spacing and reduces the risks of ovarian and breast cancers.

3. Violence against women

Pregnant and lactating women are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Obstacles to breastfeeding such as inappropriate hospital practices and promotion of infant formula are also examples of violence against women.

4. Sisterhood is powerful

Mother-to-mother support among breastfeeding women is the most important gift one woman can give to another.

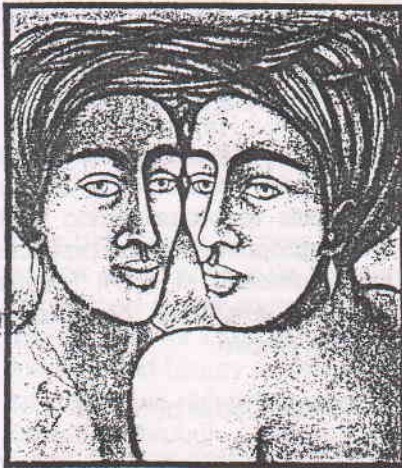


5. The Right to Education

Women with higher education are more likely to breastfeed. Education empowers women to ask questions and challenge the health care system and demand a supportive environment for breastfeeding.

6. Women and work

As more women enter the formal sector and increase their earning power, they are demanding more child care facilities and opportunities to continue breastfeeding. Productivity and work satisfaction increases.



sisters
(by phyllis mahon)

Backlash!

Some feminists have criticised breastfeeding advocates, arguing that they want to tie women down, and keep them at home to feed babies and change dirty diapers. This is not the case. Women's groups must make sure that their efforts on behalf of breastfeeding are not used by traditionalists and conservative policy makers against women's interests. How can this be done?

How can women's groups insure that their efforts on behalf of breastfeeding are not used by traditionalists and conservative policy makers against women's best interests?

- request that policy makers consult with women's groups before breastfeeding legislation is drafted;
- recognise that breastfeeding is an emotional issue for many

women and develop strategies for framing the issue in non-judgemental ways;

- plan how to counter possible negative effects such as employers threatening to fire women rather than provide maternity entitlements;
- insure that breastfeeding campaigns stress the welfare of both the mother and child.



REFERENCES

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Bhasin, K and NS Khan. 1986. *"Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia"*. New Delhi: Indraprastha Press.

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This activity sheet is part of a series from WABA to assist groups with their activities to protect, promote and support breastfeeding and in particular, to provide action ideas that could be focused on World Breastfeeding Week, August 1st to 7th.