

WABA Statement for International Women's Day 2020

Closing the gap: ensuring breastfeeding rights for generation equality



As the world is facing imminent threats of economic uncertainty, global warming and growing inequalities, there is a looming urgency to achieve gender equality as [girls and women are more vulnerable to these threats](#). The [World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action \(WABA\)](#) celebrates International Women's Day on 8th March 2020 and its theme "[I am Generation Equality, Realising Women's Right](#)".



One major obstacle to achieving gender equality is the unbalanced distribution of unpaid care and domestic work. Across the region, there are deeply entrenched gender-specific roles that dictate who is responsible for dependent care and housework. Social norms that emphasize domestic work as a woman's primary responsibility substantially restrain their social activities, mobility and time for breastfeeding. Women perform almost [three times more](#) unpaid care and domestic work than men. Consequently, their opportunities at paid work, education and even leisure become [limited](#). Women's reproductive and productive roles are becoming increasingly more difficult to integrate.

This situation is further aggravated when it involves breastfeeding mothers who are not properly supported. Breastfeeding is not only a beneficial and healthy choice for the mother, baby and society but is also a human right issue for both the woman and child.



"Working mothers are entitled to paid breastfeeding breaks during their working hours in several Southeast Asian countries. Mothers can take two paid nursing breaks, each of 30-minute duration in Cambodia, one hour in Viet Nam and Laos, and at least 40 minutes in the Philippines. Providing working mothers with 'time, space, and support' for breastfeeding when they

return to work can increase breastfeeding duration and adherence to recommended breastfeeding practices. Improved breastfeeding practices result in reduced health care costs for both mother and child, reduced absenteeism, and improved female worker productivity."

-Alive & Thrive, Southeast Asia-

"In the United Arab Emirates, the extension of maternity leave to 120 days for the civil sector is encouraging to pave the way for a more gender-balanced workforce. The female employees can feel more confident about being able to retain their role as an employee and a mother as well. This provides comfort to the working mothers and meets their need for family-work balance."

-Khalid Iqbal, UAE-

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive director of UN Women, stated that gender equality not only benefits the women and girls but for everyone whose lives will be changed by a fairer world that leaves no one behind. This is also true in the case of supporting breastfeeding whereby [scaling up breastfeeding](#) could prevent more than 823,000 child and 20,000 maternal deaths each year, and economic losses of about \$302 billion annually. A continuum of care and support for breastfeeding during the first 1000 days is critical and support from the healthcare, workplace and community sectors is also needed. WABA's [Warm Chain of Support for Breastfeeding](#) campaign aims to link the different actors across the sectors to ensure an effective and satisfying breastfeeding experience for all women.



How do we ensure that a woman's right to breastfeeding support is realised in the era of generation equality? The solution is to demand a more equal sharing of care work within the parenting team, enhanced community understanding of existing inequalities, engaging with men and boys to support women's needs and rights, improving women's access to health services, and last but not least gender-equitable parental social protection (PSP) policies and legislation. Policies that promote more flexible and parent-friendly workplaces, allowing equitable and efficient distribution of time, will attract more women to the workforce and reduce constraints on women's time and child health. Equitable implementation of maternity protection policies to include women working in the large informal sector will be required for all the benefits of breastfeeding to be maximised.



Men need to step up and share the unpaid care work to ensure that women get to fulfil their opportunities at work and in other domains. WABA champions the concept of parenting teamwork whereby mothers and fathers work together to share the unpaid care and domestic work. [Fathers' roles have evolved](#) and now they are generally more involved in their child's life. Fathers who used their portion of the shared parental leave to care for their baby also tend to share the care burden with the mother [throughout](#). Fathers' support is [especially crucial](#) during the breastfeeding period. Many mothers perceive that their partner's support is [vital to their breastfeeding successes](#). WABA's [Warm Chain breastfeeding information card](#) for fathers summarises how a father can

support the mother through [breastfeeding teamwork](#). Although there is some progress as illustrated in the examples below, more needs to be done to ensure gender-equitable attitudes and legislation that support both parents and do not discriminate in any way.



"The 2017 amendment to Maternity Benefit Act 1961 brought about much-needed improvements in the laws bringing mothers increased duration of paid maternity leave, telecommuting option, in-house crèches, inclusiveness of adoptive/commissioning mothers but is silent on paternity leave."

-Taru Jindal, India-

"Germany has a wonderful legal framework in place for both maternity and parental leave but often the career of a mother (or father) who takes maternity/parental leave is regarded as broken, and women stay often in lower position after maternity leave, in comparison to their colleagues who do not take parental leave."

-Elien Rouw, Germany-

With an estimated [47.2%](#) of women in the labour force in 2019, the civil and private sectors are playing an essential role in realising women's right of support to breastfeed. The [World Breastfeeding Week \(WBW\) 2019](#) called for the implementation of PSP, which includes public-funded paid leave policies, legislation, and parent-friendly or family-friendly workplaces. There is a large difference in the realisation of the rights of breastfeeding mothers between countries. The [Parents at Work Advocacy Tool](#) was developed to showcase the level of support parents are currently receiving worldwide.



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"Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution provides a strong legal framework for the promotion and attainment of gender equality and women's empowerment in breastfeeding. Maternity protection is realized through paid maternity leave of 98 days and a right to a breastfeeding hour until the child stops breastfeeding."

-Rufaro Madzima, Zimbabwe-

In the United States, women's right to breastfeed is supported by the Affordable Care Act which requires employers with 50 or more workers to provide some women with the time and space to pump while at work but there is no right to maternity leave—the federal law only provides some women with six weeks of unpaid leave.

-Paige Hall Smith, USA-

For Women's Day this year, we call upon governments, UN agencies, health systems, workplaces, communities and civil society organisations to:

- Implement gender-equitable social protection that will enable breastfeeding and greater gender equality.
- Enact and monitor national legislation and policies that uphold the rights of women and their children in diverse contexts.
- Enact paid parental leave and workplace breastfeeding policies for women in the formal and informal economy.
- Create a warm chain of support for breastfeeding across healthcare, workplace and community from pregnancy until the child's second birthday.
- Invest in interventions such as support for breastfeeding as a means to improve the health and survival of women and children.

These measures may be enough to tilt the scale for generation equality and realisation of women's rights.

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The World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) is a global network of individuals and organisations concerned with the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding worldwide based on the Innocenti Declarations, the Ten Links for Nurturing the Future and the WHO/UNICEF Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding. Its core partners are international Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), La Leche League International (LLL), International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA), and Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine (ABM). WABA is in consultative status with UNICEF and an NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). WABA is incorporated in Malaysia as World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action Bhd (847762-P), a non-profit company limited by guarantee.

