

WABA STATEMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2021

WOMEN LEADERS: CHAMPION BREASTFEEDING FOR A MORE EQUAL WORLD

8 March 2021



The International Women's Day (IWD) calls for an equal and egalitarian world. Unfortunately, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic could [reverse many of the achievements gained towards gender equality](#). We have altered our lives rapidly and significantly to accommodate COVID-19 prevention and safety practices. However, in doing so, many existing inequalities across and within societies have worsened. As some high-income nations are beginning to recover from the detrimental effects of the pandemic and moving towards new normal by rolling out vaccination plans, there could be a widening gap between nations as some face longer wait for vaccine access and roll out. The crisis has again highlighted the disproportionate burden of vital unpaid care work that women carry, especially for the frontliners. Women leaders around the world have [stepped up in the COVID-19 response](#), showing once again the important effects of gender equality at all levels of society. This 8th March, WABA celebrates International Women's Day 2021 (IWD2021) and its theme "[Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world](#)".



Empowering Parents Campaign

[WABA](#) has always championed the right for women to combine their reproductive work and employment. This right is also enshrined in the ILO C183 convention, CEDAW and CRC. Breastfeeding is an important part of reproductive care work. [Breastfeeding needs to be protected and supported for the survival, health and wellbeing of the baby and mother](#). It benefits the whole of society as well as the planet. However, breastfeeding rates are stagnant or slow in most parts of the world.

Many breastfeeding women stop early due to a [lack of support](#) from their [healthcare system](#), [employer](#) and community. The right to maternity protection and breastfeeding support at work, without discrimination, is essential. However, about [800 million women](#) workers are not covered by maternity protection.



The COVID-19 pandemic response has affected breastfeeding in several ways. Remote working has enabled some women to breastfeed their babies more on-demand and have the support and encouragement of their partner at home. On the other end of the spectrum is the lack of access to breastfeeding support from the healthcare system due to resources being channelled towards COVID-19 care. Although some mothers are able to acquire virtual breastfeeding support, there is a huge [digital divide](#) across the world and this type of social support is not readily available to all breastfeeding mothers. This is yet another example of an inequality of access.

The situation is worse for frontline workers facing increased burden at work. Around 7 in 10 frontline workers are women. They face even greater challenges to juggle the dual burdens of care work and employment. [Frontline healthcare workers](#) need to be protected for their own safety and wellbeing as well as for their service role. Long shifts and increased risks of infection make the situation for breastfeeding frontline workers even more precarious. With vaccination plans underway, we need to ensure that policies and programs covering breastfeeding women are evidence-based to avoid [discrimination](#) against them. [WHO](#) and other international authorities ([CDC](#), [ACOG](#), [NHS](#)) have issued guidance on this matter.



In many aspects, one can say that the COVID-19 pandemic has worked against breastfeeding. To ensure that all breastfeeding women have equal access to support, we need to create a [Warm Chain of Support for Breastfeeding](#) as urgently and efficiently as the cold chain for vaccines.

The warm chain includes access to support across the 1000 days and equitable parental social protection. [Governments, healthcare systems, trade unions, employers and communities](#) make up the warm chain. Women leaders have a critical role in [advocating for breastfeeding support](#) as part of gender equality and leading by example. IWD2021 celebrates women in leadership as they can make a big difference in supporting breastfeeding women.

As the world slowly comes out of the pandemic, we need to look at lessons learned to build back better. Let's work together to create a warm chain of support for breastfeeding across healthcare, workplace and community and ensure that no one is left behind. For Women's Day this year, we call upon governments, UN agencies, health systems, trade unions, workplaces, communities and civil society organisations to:

- Invest in breastfeeding interventions as a means to improve the health, survival and wellbeing of women and children.
- Enact and monitor national legislation and policies that uphold the rights of women and their children in diverse contexts.
- Implement gender-equitable social protection, paid parental leave and workplace breastfeeding policies for women in the formal and informal economy.
- Provide breastfeeding counselling and peer support for breastfeeding women through health systems and communities.

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World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) is a global network of individuals and organisations dedicated to 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. 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 coordinates the annual World Breastfeeding Week campaign.

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