

FORUM: Working Women and Breastfeeding

In conjunction with World Breastfeeding Week 2008

Friday, 1 August 2008 • The Garden Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY

Mr. Youssef Oomar

UNICEF Malaysia Representative

Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Datin Paduka Seri Hajah Zaleha Ismail

Chairman, National Family and Population Development Board

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Adlina Suleiman

Malaysian Breastfeeding Action Group

Ms. Ma. Ines Fernandez

International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN)

Puan Siti Norjinah Moin

Director, Breastfeeding Information Bureau

Breastfeeding advocates

Members of the media

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon, Selamat Tengahari.

A tribute to working women

Please allow me to say what a pleasure it is to be with all of you this afternoon.

As a husband and a father first and foremost, above my professional commitments, I am fully aware of the sacrifices women make each day to ensure that their children and families are well-looked after, are nurtured, loved and cherished.

But in our changing landscape, with more women such as yourselves joining the workforce daily, to contribute to household incomes and to a country's economy as well as to play a role in nation-building, all the while finding time, energy and dedication to ensure your children receive the best start to life a special honour must be reserved for all of you.

The sacrifices of a working mother, particularly when she has to leave her infant only months after delivery to return to work, is heart-wrenching. Not surprising when for nine months before birth, your baby was an essential part of your life: part of your breathing, pains, and also your joy.

I am aware of your sacrifice, and I am humbled to be in your presence. Please accept my personal gratitude to you, working mothers, who endure and give up so much, yet still have the grace, spirit and love to give back to your families, your employers and your country – Thank you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Cherishing the first six months of life – benefits to children, families, employers and country

If we say that children are our greatest resource, to be loved, cherished and nurtured, then it only makes sense that we invest in them unreservedly – not when they are 7 years old and ready to enter schools, not when they are three years old, not even when they are born. Our investment in children must begin even before they are conceived. This means healthy, educated women with the knowledge, skills and confidence to welcome their newborns and raise them to become healthy, confident and happy children.

Our investments must continue to include the important first weeks, months and years of a child's life. As important as all phases are, the first six months are particularly crucial for a child's survival and development. High on the list of priorities is for an infant to receive no other food but mothers milk with all its nutrients required for growing and developing. Unlike formula milk, breast milk is easily digestible and remains the one and only natural, complete and complex nutrition for human infants.

The public health benefits are also well recognised. Breastfeeding is known to promote cognitive development and higher IQ, central nervous system development and visual acuity, and speech and jaw development while helping to protect mothers against osteoporosis as well as breast and other cancers of the reproductive organs.

Artificial formula feeding on the other hand substantially increases the risk of gastrointestinal illness, respiratory illness and ear infections in children. At the end of the day, sick and unhealthy children and women would adversely affect a country's productivity and economy with increasing demands on health expenditure, and work absenteeism.

Ensuring that women's rights to breastfeeding are protected will also enable several other valuable benefits. The time spent nurturing her baby will promote a very special bond between mother and child that only a mother can provide. Allowing a mom every opportunity to embrace these special moments with her baby is important for children to build crucial capabilities such as confidence, curiosity, and cooperation needed for lifelong learning and success. Not only does the child benefit, but so too do families, communities and the country.

Protecting the dignity of motherhood for working women

Embracing motherhood fully however is often challenging for the working woman in the absence of comprehensive national policies and programs that fully promote, protect and support breastfeeding practices.

Breastfeeding and work use a woman's time and energy. It is therefore imperative that adjustments be made in the workload of mothers of young children so that they may find the time and energy for breastfeeding. This should not be considered solely the mother's responsibility, but rather a collective responsibility.

While the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provide a basis for this collective responsibility as a means to fulfilling a child's right to the highest attainable standard of health, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) spells out a woman's right to be supported in carrying out her role as a mother and her right not to be discriminated against in the workplace on the basis of pregnancy or maternity.

Preserving the dignity of motherhood requires bold, innovative and accelerated actions to institutionalize support for the practice of breastfeeding, establish a culture of breastfeeding as the normal, natural and preferred method of feeding infants and young children and to provide specific measures to enable working mothers to continue breastfeeding.

Adequate paid maternity leave is invaluable in this regard as it helps reduce the barriers facing mothers to being both good nurturers and economic providers. The International Labour Organisation, through its Convention on Maternity Protection 2000 (183) recommends at least 14 weeks of paid maternity leave, as many weeks if not more are needed for some of the following reasons:

- Up to 12 weeks or more is needed for women to fully establish breastfeeding.
- Up to 14 weeks is needed for women to physically recover from the birth of their babies.
- Up to 16 weeks is needed for a baby and mother to form a secure attachment and for a mother to gain greater confidence in her mothering skills.
- Weeks and months of unlimited contact between mother and baby are needed to achieve emotional and physical health benefits for both parent and child.

Paid maternity leave acknowledges the work that all new mothers do in getting our new citizens off to a good start in life. Leave on its own however is simply not enough to protect breastfeeding. Complementary frameworks for maternity protection must also be in place including health and job protection, non-discrimination for pregnant, post-partum and lactating workers; paid nursing breaks and crèches in the workplace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Moving forward

In Malaysia, close to fifty per cent of women are contributing daily to development that will propel the country forward to achieve its Wawasan 2020 goals. Some of these women are mothers with older children, others with infants and toddlers. And many more will likely become mothers in the months and years ahead.

Having signed and ratified both the CRC and CEDAW, we are duty bound to protect a woman's right to breastfeed as well as the right of her infants to be breastfed. But aside from holding up to our obligations, meeting their rights will also ensure the wellbeing of communities and the country. No one loses, and everyone gains!

We must ask ourselves why then were only 1 in 7 infants in Malaysia breastfed exclusively for the first six months of life in 2006. What have we done wrong? What haven't we done? What do we need to do?

Maternity protection is a good step forward, and UNICEF is thankful to the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the National Family and Population Development Board for their support of today's Forum. Efforts of NGOs such as the Breastfeeding Information Bureau to move this agenda forward must also be congratulated. But most importantly, it is each and every one of you who must be acknowledged – you are our heroes – for your sacrifices, commitment and passion to carve out and establish an environment that will help your sisters in the future.

As we celebrate World Breastfeeding Week, I am hopeful that the Memorandum being put forward today to the Government will bring together working mothers and employers, the public and private sectors to find solutions to protect the dignity of motherhood and make breastfeeding in the workplace a reality.

The Memorandum on Maternity Protection Supporting Working Women deserves our unwavering commitment.

Exclusive breastfeeding is best for baby, best for mom, best for our economy, best for our country, and best for our future.

Thank you.