

SUDAN

Helping South Sudanese mothers save their children's lives

"The midwife told me I was going to have twins, so I was quite surprised when I gave birth to triplets," says 24-year-old Flora Michael, a South Sudanese mother of six. "I was anxious too because I did not quite know how I was going to feed all three of them. But the midwife assured me I have enough breastmilk to feed them. She also told me not to give them any food other than breastmilk until they are six months old."

Flora's triplets whom she named Sitna, Mariam and Fatima are now six months old and Flora continues to feed them with her breastmilk only.

"I could not believe I could actually do it, feed them with breastmilk only," explains Flora who also regrets that she did not breastfeed her older children exclusively for the first six months from the time of their birth.

Flora's three older children were born during the war in the Sudan. She and her husband had to run from one village to another to find temporary shelter for their children. As a result she felt too tired and stressed to breastfeed her children. Instead she fed them porridge and water in which she added sugar for flavour. She regrets that in those days she did not have a midwife to advise her on how she should breastfeed her children. She relied on the help of a traditional birth attendant who told her to throw away her first milk or *colostrum* because "it was dirty".

Exclusive breastfeeding is the issue

"Almost all African women breastfeed their children but not all of them practise exclusive breastfeeding for up to six months from the time they deliver their babies," says UNICEF's Nutrition Officer, Bertha Jackson.

"Soon after birth," Bertha adds, "mothers feed their babies with solid foods or water which is often dirty and contaminated. This may lead to diarrhoea and other life-threatening diseases. In times of conflict or displacement breastmilk is also the most reliable food as it is always available.

Polly Grace Osuo from the Ministry of Health for Central Equatoria, one of southern Sudan's ten states, expresses the same view, "Our women do not understand the value of exclusive breastfeeding and how this helps save the lives of our children. Our traditional birth attendants often tell expecting and nursing mothers to throw their first milk away because they believe it is dirty."

“South Sudanese mothers from rural areas complain of tiredness and fatigue and of not having enough breastmilk to feed their babies,” adds Polly Grace, “meanwhile, women from urban areas resort to buying canned milk, which has flooded southern Sudan’s markets since the end of war and conflict in 2005.”

The end of conflict and war brings the Ministry of Health new opportunities to improve health services in southern Sudan. One of the activities undertaken in 2007 was the training of 300 traditional birth attendants on prenatal care. This training will help them prepare women for breastfeeding right at the start of their pregnancy. “We teach them how to prepare the breasts of a woman, how to clean the nipples and how to put the nipples into a newborn’s mouth,” says Polly Grace.

The Ministry of Health also plans to organize mothers’ groups that will provide peer support to nursing mothers. “It is important for them to get emotional and other support from breastfeeding mothers. They should be able to listen to each others’ experiences on how to deal with problems related to their practice of breastfeeding,” explains Polly Grace.

Lastly, the Ministry of Health is enlisting the support of religious and traditional leaders to teach women the importance of breastfeeding.

“We try to get our message across through all possible means and resources – that breastfeeding is one of the easiest ways to save the lives of our children and to prevent childhood diseases. We survived the war and conflict. Our children should have better lives and opportunities now that peace has come,” declares Polly Grace