GLOBAL BREASTFEEDING ADVOCACY INITIATIVE

Breastfeeding gives all children the healthiest start in life. It stimulates brain development and protects women’s health. Breastmilk acts as a baby’s first vaccine and breastfeeding leads to lower health care costs, healthier families and a smarter workforce. When mothers breastfeed, everyone benefits.

Yet, worldwide, less than 45% of children under the age of 6 months are fed only breastmilk.

UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) are leading a global Breastfeeding Advocacy Initiative to increase political commitment for breastfeeding—one of the smartest investments a country can make.

We seek to join forces with partners also working to realize the Sustainable Development Goals’ vision of a better world. Our aim is to integrate agendas, messages and advocacy to maximize our collective influence.

Together, we will go further.

Improved breastfeeding practices are crucial to achieving numerous Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.
The evidence is now stronger than ever: breastfeeding is critically important for women and children in both high- and low-income countries. Increasing the rates of breastfeeding worldwide will help meet numerous Sustainable Development Goals, including reduced child mortality, less undernutrition, better learning outcomes, and increased worker productivity and earnings.

Breastfeeding protects women’s health. It reduces a woman’s risk of ovarian cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. Increasing rates of breastfeeding could also prevent 20,000 maternal deaths each year from breast cancer.

Breastfeeding empowers women with greater reproductive autonomy by delaying the return of their menstrual cycle, thus helping with birth spacing. This supports women to pursue their education and jobs outside the home, both crucial to achieving gender parity.

Millions of mothers around the world stop breastfeeding before they want to because they do not get the support and time they need to continue. This has resulted in low or stagnant breastfeeding rates worldwide, which leads to greater child mortality, malnutrition and chronic diseases.

Mothers face many barriers to breastfeeding, both in high- and low-income countries. These barriers include poor health care and nutrition; insufficient prenatal care and lactation counseling; limited or no maternity leave; and a lack of time, privacy, and support from fathers, families, and society.

Aggressive marketing by the breastmilk substitute industry also undermines breastfeeding by eroding mothers’ confidence in their ability to feed their children. Breastfeeding mothers must have access to unbiased information. Protecting breastfeeding has become an urgent priority, since the sales of breastmilk substitutes are projected to increase, from $45 billion in 2014 to $71 billion in 2019.

Men can play a powerful role in supporting women to breastfeed. They can take on additional household or childcare tasks to give mothers additional time, sensitize their peers and community to the importance of breastfeeding, and advocate for a woman’s right to breastfeed in public places.

There is a popular misconception that breastfeeding is free and easy. In fact, it requires access to trained counselors and the time to breastfeed or express milk. Our leaders need to support policies and programmes that ensure mothers can nurse their babies for as long as they want. Supporting women who want to breastfeed—by providing paid family leave, quality health care and nutrition, and spaces to nurse—will strengthen both families and economies.

The reasons why women avoid or stop breastfeeding range from the medical, cultural, and psychological, to physical discomfort and inconvenience. Multiplied across populations and involving multinational commercial interests, this situation has catastrophic consequences on breastfeeding rates and the health of subsequent generations.

Genuine and urgent commitment is needed from governments and health authorities to establish a new normal: where every woman can expect to breastfeed, and to receive every support she needs to do so.

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