

World Wide Campaign to Support Women to Breastfeed Launched



[(left to right) Dr. Arun Gupta, Regional Coordinator IBFAN Asia and National Coordinator BPNI, Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar, the Minister for Panchayati Raj (community institutions), Mr. Lars-Olof Lindgren, Ambassador of Sweden]

A new global campaign was launched in India and 30 other countries, including Korea, Mongolia and UK, on 9th February 2009. The *ONE MILLION CAMPAIGN: Support Women to Breastfeed* brings together people from all over the world to take action ranging from signing petitions demanding support for women to breastfeed to individual actions such as pledging to support at least one woman for breastfeeding at www.onemillioncampaign.org . The Campaign was initiated in response to a global need for support to women to breastfeed. While breastfeeding rates are slowly improving after the drastic decline in the 70's and 80's, this improvement is not even.

The launch was held in partnership with a Hindi TV channel, Complete News & Entertainment Broadcast Pvt. Ltd. (CNEB). Several national organisations took part

including Trained Nurses Association of India (TNAI), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organisation (WHO), National Neonatology Forum (NNF), India Medical Association (IMA) , Mobile Crèches, Jan Swasthya Abhiayn (JSA-PHM), Public Health Resource Network (PHRN), Right to Food Campaign, SPHERE India, Delhi Public School, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (A.I.I.M.S) , Lady Hardinge Medical College, Vistaar , ICCID, Supreme Court Commissioner's Office, Welt Hunger Life, University College of Medical Sciences (UCMS) & Guru Teg Bahadur (GTB) Hospital, YG Consultants Pvt. Ltd., Bhargava Associates, DGS Travel House, Success Horizon, and several individuals advocates of child health and development.

Several electronic media & print media also took part including C.N.E.B. ,Press Trust of India (PTI), Mail Today, Sandhya Veer Arjun(Hindi), Jan Shakti Express , Punjab Kesari(Hindi), DLA Newspaper, Quami Patrika (Urdu),The Tribune, Navdenna , E.TV, Pace-H, Times of India ,Hindustan Express, Bhaskar(Hindi), Bussiness (Nagpur), Deccan Chronicle , K.V. News, NDTV, Reuters, Samvad Sanchi, Age and Enlightenment news Service, and India News .

According to UNICEF: "Improved breastfeeding practices and reduction of artificial feeding could save an estimated 1.5 million children a year."

Despite the irrefutable evidence about breastfeeding and its importance to infant survival with health, it is clear that out of 135 million children born annually only 64 million begin breastfeeding within an hour. The women need support to adopt and sustain the practice of breastfeeding. Women in particular are often unable to practise exclusive breastfeeding for six months in several parts of the world for diverse reasons such as unsupportive maternity and labour laws, lack of adequate crèches and other support, lack of financial support, lack of support from the health sector, incorrect information about breastfeeding, and aggressive promotion of breastmilk substitutes and baby foods. These findings have also been highlighted in the reports of the *World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative* that is assessing the status of breastfeeding and of policies and programmes related to breastfeeding in 59 countries globally.

This issue assumes great importance in India given India's track record on infant mortality, which is 57 deaths per 1000 live births according to National Family Health Survey 3 (NFHS

3); that is more than one in 18 children dies within the first year of life. This is even starker in rural areas. NFHS 3 data shows that in 2001-05, the infant mortality rate was 50 percent higher in rural areas (62 deaths per 1,000 births) than in urban areas (42 deaths per 1,000 births).



Realizing the urgency of the issue, Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar, the Minister for Panchayati Raj (community institutions), extended his commitment to the issue. He offered to involve the Panchayat Raj Institutions in the entire process of motivating women and educating concerned stakeholders to facilitate women to adopt consistent breastfeeding practices. “Today when we talk about the importance of breastfeeding for infant survival, we are backed by solid scientific evidence to prove its necessity and efficacy. Today there are about 28 lakh persons elected to Panchayats, and over 10 lakh of them are women. They can be the best promoters, going from door to door with the message of the, addresses the following message to all world leaders:

“As citizens, we call for a stop to commercial interference in infant nutrition, the strict implementation of the International Code for Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and ensuring support for women to breastfeed. We urge you to create/implement legislation that restricts infant milk manufacturers from promoting their products as breastmilk substitutes/baby foods, to have a budgeted plan of action to promote and support women for optimal breastfeeding and to ensure breastfeeding friendly workplaces with adequate nursing breaks in the public and private sector so that working women are not forced to abandon breastfeeding.”

The *ONE MILLION CAMPAIGN Support Women to Breastfeed*, initiated by International Baby Food Action Network – Asia (IBFAN-Asia), is a global response to the preventable tragedies like one which happened last year in which 300,000 infants, several of them under one year of age, developing incurable kidney disease as a result of consuming contaminated infant formula in China. Such catastrophes could be prevented if women are supported to breastfeed their babies. Whether it contains melamine or not, there is growing evidence that

the powdered formula is not a sterile product and there could be intrinsic contamination with lethal pathogenic microorganisms like E. Sakazakii and Salmonella which may lead to life threatening illness in neonates. Products of companies such as Nestle and Mead Johnson have had to be recalled from across the world because of such contamination.

The International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) monitors the baby food industry around the world and works for implementation of the International Code and subsequent, relevant Resolutions of the World Health Assembly (WHA) in legislation. The World Health Organisation's Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding, adopted by the WHA in 2002, calls for implementation of the Code and Resolutions and other action to provide support to mothers. Irrespective of contamination, there is enough evidence that no infant formula can match breastmilk as the best food for babies. Further, dangers of infant formula are well known and suggest that women be supported overwhelmingly to be able to provide optimal care to their children effectively.

Speaking about the challenges faced by the poor and socially marginalized women in doing



consistent breastfeeding, Dr. Arun Gupta, Regional Coordinator, IBFAN Asia and National Coordinator BPNI stressed on the multi-sectoral and multiple levels of support women need to carry out optimal breastfeeding practices – from skilled counselling to proactive health systems to effective implementation of maternity entitlements, mother and child

friendly communities and workplaces and quick and efficient implementation of the International Code for Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes – the IMS Act in India.



Dr. Gupta's presentation was vindicated by the voices of several women. Women construction workers associated with Mobile Creches, an NGO, repeatedly informed about the need for crèches and child care services to be made

available to women working in the unorganised sector.



Smt. Devika Singh of Mobile Creches spoke that support to women to breastfeed should be a part of the comprehensive strategy to ensure child development and survival.

Dr. Shanti Ghosh, the well-known internationally famous paediatrician stressed on the need



that women, particularly working women, have for financial support during lactation. While applauding the six months maternity leave that will be granted to central government employees as well as women employees in a few states, she cautioned, “this does not touch even fraction of the working women, over 90 percent of whom are in the unorganised sector.

Several of these women are poor and need to work. If they do not get financial support, they will be forced to stop breastfeeding and go back to work”, she said. She pointed out that providing this support was the responsibility of the state, and that it was already being done in the State of Tamil Nadu.

Dr. S. Aneja, Head of Department of Pediatrics at Lady Hardinge Medical College shared the



experience of the institution in setting up breastfeeding counselling clinics for women at no cost. “We only needed one room; the trained nurses and other professionals were already there” she said, adding that this venture has provided interns and young

doctors with practical experience in assisting and counselling women on problems related to breastfeeding.



Smt. Amarjit Kaur, Trade Union Leader (CPI) spelled out the difficulties faced by working women in both the organised and unorganised sector with respect to child care specially breastfeeding. She also stressed the need to make NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) and projects undertaken up under this act more

breastfeeding friendly.

Shri N M Prusty stressed on the need for counselling on breastfeeding during disasters.



“Women are the worst affected; they in fact are the last to seek help and support because they have to look after others in the family first. They experience the greatest trauma and have to work the hardest.” He also alerted the audience to the pressures put on relief services by the baby food industry and the need to be vigilant that they do not

use disaster situations to create new markets for their products.

Shri. Rahul Dev, Chief Executive Officer of a new Hindi channel, CNEB, took the issue very



seriously mentioning how in early 70s and 80s mothers and children were exposed to aggressive promotion of bottle-feeding. calling it a danger to babies in all developing countries, he said" there should be a media coalition on this issue and both the advertising agencies and media should

together take leadership in turning it around."

His Excellency, Mr. Lars-Olof Lindgren, Ambassador of Sweden, who presided over the launch, informed of the support given to women to breastfeed in his country. Sweden, which



ranks third in the world in the gender gap index, has very high breastfeeding rates. “This has become possible”, said the Ambassador, “because Sweden has taken steps to make it possible”. He noted that the support given to women has to be multi-

sectoral – maternity benefits that allow them to stay with the baby, health sector support to deal with any problems, and most important, creating a societal value system where breastfeeding and breastfeeding women are highly valued.

The *ONE MILLION CAMPAIGN Support Women to Breastfeed* is being actively supported by IBFAN partner organisations such as World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action.