



## ADVOCACY BRIEF

# BREASTFEEDING AND GENDER EQUALITY

## GLOBAL BREASTFEEDING COLLECTIVE

Breastfeeding protects the health and well-being of mothers and babies.

Breastfeeding gives infants the healthiest start to life by stimulating brain development and acting as a baby's first vaccine. Breastfeeding leads to lower health care costs, healthier families and a smarter workforce.

Breastfeeding is also critically important for mothers, protecting and improving their health and providing them with greater reproductive freedom.

Women face multiple barriers to breastfeeding in the home, community, health care system and workforce. Indeed, 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.

To better support them, we need to invest in programmes and policies that put women's rights, dignity and choice at the centre. Supporting a woman's right to breastfeed is a measure of gender equality—and building a breastfeeding-friendly society is everyone's responsibility.

Led by UNICEF and WHO, the Global Breastfeeding Collective is a partnership of more than 20 prominent international agencies calling on donors, policymakers, philanthropists and civil society to increase investment in breastfeeding worldwide.

The Collective's vision is a world in which all mothers have the technical, financial, emotional and public support they need to breastfeed. The Collective advocates for smart investments in breastfeeding programmes, assists policymakers and NGOs in implementing solutions, and galvanizes support to get real results to increase rates of breastfeeding, thereby benefiting mothers, children and nations.

GLOBAL BREASTFEEDING  
COLLECTIVE



# BREASTFEEDING AND GENDER EQUALITY: TIME FOR A NEW NORMAL

## KEY MESSAGES

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 the Sustainable Development Goals—including Goal 5 on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Women have the right to bodily autonomy. This means they have the right to make decisions about their bodies with accurate information, free from fear, pressures and discrimination, including whether to breastfeed and for how long.

Breastfeeding is a right. Women who wish to breastfeed should have the right to do so—whenever and wherever they choose—with the full support of their families, communities, employers and governments.

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.

Reproductive autonomy includes a woman’s decision whether to breastfeed, wherever and for as long as she wants to. Breastfeeding delays the return of the menstrual

cycle, thus helping with birth spacing. Combined with provision of adequate reproductive services and information, this can help support women to pursue their education and jobs outside the home, both crucial to achieving gender parity and economic independence.

Breastfeeding empowers women as mothers, giving them the means to nourish their infants and protect them from illness with their own bodies, even during emergencies and times of crisis.

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 have access to good nutrition and can nurse their babies for as long as they want.

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 substitutes industry undermines breastfeeding by spreading false or biased information and eroding mothers’ confidence in their ability to feed their children. Breastfeeding mothers have the right to access to unbiased information and make choices about feeding their babies without external pressures. Regulating unethical industry marketing 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 key role in supporting women to breastfeed. They can provide emotional support and take on additional household or childcare tasks to give mothers time and space to breastfeed. They can also sensitize their peers and community to the importance of breastfeeding, and advocate for a woman’s right to breastfeed in public places.



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**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.**

**Editorial, *The Lancet*, January 2016**

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Supporting women to breastfeed is everyone's responsibility. By providing paid family leave, quality health care and nutrition, and spaces to nurse we can strengthen both families and economies.

## KEY FACTS

Breastmilk is personalized medicine, providing a perfectly-adapted nutritional supply to all children. Increasing breastfeeding worldwide would prevent over 800,000 child deaths every single year.

Breastfeeding supports healthy brain development, providing, on average, a 3-point increase in IQ among children and adolescents across all income levels and independently of maternal IQ. This IQ boost leads to higher academic performance and a smarter workforce in the future.

The costs of lower cognitive ability associated with not breastfeeding amount to more than \$300 billion each year, a figure comparable to the global pharmaceutical market.

The majority of the 830 million women workers in the world do not benefit from workplace policies that support nursing mothers. This figure does not even include women working in informal, seasonal, or part-time employment.

Breastfeeding mothers make enormous contributions to the health and prosperity of families, economies and nations. Still, the benefits of breastfeeding remain largely hidden and undervalued. We can change that.

Breastfeeding programmes can support gender equality and foster women's empowerment—but they must respect women's agency by treating them as partners, decision makers and rights-holders.

## CALL TO ACTION

Countries have shown that breastfeeding rates can be dramatically improved within a short time. Actions, policies, and programmes that support mothers at health facilities, home and work can both increase breastfeeding and support gender equality.

Gender, maternal health and nutrition advocates are joining forces to advance this agenda. Working together we must:

- **Define common ground between the gender, maternal health and nutrition communities and promote an integrated advocacy agenda to build political will.**
- **Seek and value women's contributions to this integrated breastfeeding agenda and work to raise their voices.**
- **Disseminate accurate information on the value of breastfeeding as a powerful intervention benefitting women and their families.**
- **Foster positive social attitudes towards breastfeeding by raising the public profile for this issue and building a breastfeeding culture for the twenty-first century.**
- **Promote the active involvement of men and other family and community members in support of breastfeeding.**
- **Advocate for paid maternity leave in line with International Labour Organization Convention 183 and recommendation 191, and advocate for paternity leave.**
- **Advocate for regulating the breastmilk substitutes industry by implementing, monitoring and enforcing the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly Resolutions.**
- **Strengthen the health system by providing breastfeeding-friendly health and maternity services, including skilled lactation counseling.**



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## FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO JOIN THE COLLECTIVE: [breastfeeding@unicef.org](mailto:breastfeeding@unicef.org) [unicef.org/breastfeeding](http://unicef.org/breastfeeding)

Global Breastfeeding Collective Partners: 1000 Days |  
Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine | Action Against  
Hunger | Alive and Thrive | Bill and Melinda Gates  
Foundation | Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute |  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention | Concern  
Worldwide | Helen Keller International | International  
Baby Food Action Network | International Lactation  
Consultant Association | Nutrition International |  
New Partnership for Africa's Development | PATH |  
Save the Children | UNICEF | United States Agency  
for International Development | WHO | World Alliance  
for Breastfeeding Action | World Bank | World Vision  
International

**World Health Organization (WHO)**  
Avenue Appia 20  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland  
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**United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)**  
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New York, NY 10017, USA  
[www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

[unicef.org/breastfeeding](http://unicef.org/breastfeeding)

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