

Breastfeeding Advocacy Initiative Statement on the Occasion of the 60th Session of the Commission of the Status of Women: Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development

The annual session of the Commission on the Status of Women provides an important opportunity to review the progress made and gaps remaining in the achievement of women and girls' full equality and empowerment and the links to sustainable development, including the right to optimal health for mothers and children. World leaders must pay attention to the crucial contribution that women provide to sustain life, health, and growth of the world's population, particularly through breastfeeding. The members of the Breastfeeding Advocacy Initiative, a global partnership led by UNICEF and WHO to increase political commitment and financial investment in breastfeeding, urge the Commission to: 1) recognize and support the crucial importance of breastfeeding to healthier and more equitable societies and 2) call on governments to reflect this understanding in the provision of resources that ensure the respect, support and protection of women.

Breastfeeding is the biological norm and the cornerstone of child survival, nutrition, and development. Breastfeeding also promotes maternal health. It confirms a woman's power to control her own body and her unique ability to nourish her infant in the best way possible. Breastfeeding reduces a mother's economic dependence by reducing or eliminating the considerable costs of purchasing breast milk substitutes and equipment needed to feed the baby. Breastfeeding challenges the view of breasts as sex objects. Governments must protect breastfeeding by adequately regulating commercial interests that influence feeding decisions through the unethical marketing of breast milk substitutes.

Empowering women to breastfeed allows them to take the initiative to nurture and feed their children. Women desire the best for their babies and most will choose to breastfeed if they receive accurate information to make informed decisions, and are provided with skilled support, protection in the workplace, and freedom from manipulation by the baby food and formula industry.

Breastfeeding is fundamental to sustainable development. It addresses essential nutritional needs of young children without adding additional stress to the environment. A great equalizer, it helps prevent malnutrition by providing the same benefits to all children, whether girl or boy, and regardless of their socioeconomic status.

There is no food more locally produced or sustainable than breast milk. Low carbon and green, breastfeeding uses minimal natural resources or raw materials. It provides a natural and renewable food that involves no packaging, transportation, storage or fuel to prepare. While breastfeeding is a thoroughly eco-friendly feeding practice, the carbon footprint created by the baby food and formula industry from sourcing, producing, packaging, storage and transportation is massive. Breast milk is a valuable resource, yet one under threat from the ever-expanding market for commercial infant formula and baby foods.

Early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, along with continued breastfeeding for two years or beyond (with safe and adequate complementary feeding), are global recommended interventions. Optimal breastfeeding contributes to the realization of many of the Sustainable Development Goals, including: Ending hunger and improving nutrition (Goal 2); Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being (Goal 3); Ensuring equitable education (Goal 4) and Ensuring sustainable consumption (Goal 12). Despite the compelling scientific evidence about the importance of breastfeeding, currently less than 40 percent of the world's children under six months of age worldwide are exclusively breastfed.

The Breastfeeding Advocacy Initiative is working to galvanize political, financial and social support to scale up breastfeeding programmes and to encourage adoption of supportive laws and policies to enable and support women to breastfeed. We call on the Commission on the Status of Women to promote broad support of breastfeeding as an issue that is fundamental to women's and child's rights, maternal and child health, and sustainable development.

The Breastfeeding Advocacy Initiative

UNICEF, WHO, 1000 Days, Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine, Action Against Hunger, Alive and Thrive, A Promise Renewed, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute, Concern Worldwide, Helen Keller International, International Baby Food Action Network, International Society for Research in Human Milk and Lactation, International Lactation Consultant Association, Just Actions, Save the Children, The New Partnership for Africa Development, U.S. Agency for International Development, World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action and World Vision International.