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## A CALL TO ACTION: CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR BREASTFEEDING MOTHERS

### OPTIMAL BREASTFEEDING COULD:

- Save the lives of over 820,000 children under 5;
- Save the lives of 20,000 women; and
- Prevent \$507 billion of economic losses.

*Every. Single. Year.*

Source: Global Breastfeeding Collective: A Call to Action, July 2020.

**Breastfeeding gives all children the best start in life – and the benefits are lifelong.** Packed with antibodies, breastmilk builds immunity and protects against infection and disease, reducing neonatal and child deaths.<sup>i</sup> It prevents malnutrition: as an infant’s first food, breastmilk contains the nutrients, proteins, growth factors and hormones that are vital for their development. As they grow up, breastfed children perform better on intelligence tests, have higher school attendance, are less likely to be overweight or obese and are less susceptible to diabetes.

A breastfeeding mother also reaps health benefits, with a lower risk of postpartum depression, breast and ovarian cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.<sup>ii</sup>

**Investing in breastfeeding is one of the ‘best buys’ a country can make.**

**Every \$1 invested in breastfeeding generates \$35 in economic returns** in low- and middle-income countries, while suboptimal breastfeeding in children results in yearly economic losses of US\$507 billion.<sup>iii</sup>

Optimal breastfeeding – including early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth, exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, and continued breastfeeding with complementary food until two years old or beyond – saves lives, improves health and nutrition, lowers health care costs, increases income, and strengthens the development of nations.

Yet, globally, only 44% of children younger than six months are exclusively breastfed.

In order to change this and realize the gains of breastfeeding, **women need an enabling environment that protects, promotes and supports breastfeeding.** We call for a set of policy measures and services spanning health care, social protection, and women’s role in the labour market and unpaid care work.

# TO PROTECT THE RIGHT OF EVERY MOTHER TO BREASTFEED, GOVERNMENTS MUST:

## PROTECT BREASTFEEDING

- **Enforce the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes** (the BMS Code) and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions, and monitor their implementation, to protect mothers and children from misleading marketing of breastmilk substitutes.

Women must have access to accurate information, free from commercial influence, to make informed choices about infant feeding. Despite the Code's prohibition on marketing breastmilk substitutes, formula milk marketing remains a powerful and pervasive issue. Enforcement of the Code remains a significant policy gap that harms the nutrition of newborns.

## PROMOTE BREASTFEEDING

- **Adopt family-friendly policies in the formal and informal sectors, including maternity protection policies**, e.g.: paid maternal leave for at least six months to accommodate exclusive breastfeeding; parental leave; paid breaks; dedicated spaces to breastfeed/express milk; and coverage of health services and counselling for breastfeeding.<sup>iv</sup>
- **In addition to paid maternal and parental leave, increase budget allocations for social protection programmes for women and girls to recognise the value of unpaid work in the care economy**, support incomes and household nutrition, promote women's economic inclusion, and recognise women's and girls' contributions outside of paid labour markets.

Globally, women perform around three-quarters of unpaid care work.<sup>v</sup> Women's unpaid labour has a high value, especially for the caring and rearing of children. Breastfeeding requires a significant amount of time and energy from women, as young babies need to breastfeed on demand, usually 8 to 12 times each day in the first six months.<sup>vi</sup> Social protection policies should therefore compensate women for their unpaid labour in caretaking and childrearing.

- **Widely scale up the integration of health and nutrition interventions in the workplace for women**, especially breastfeeding support, including: affordable, quality childcare; access to breastfeeding spaces in the workplace; safe and nutritious foods during working hours; employer-provided health checks and counselling; and the promotion of healthy diets.

## SUPPORT BREASTFEEDING

- **Develop regulations and programmes to expand access to quality breastfeeding counselling, skilled support before and after childbirth, and services for managing small and/or nutritionally at-risk infants** under 6 months:
  - Expand the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative, implement the 10 Steps to Successful Breastfeeding in all health facilities, as well as community breastfeeding support interventions.
  - Integrate breastfeeding counselling in the recommended eight antenatal visits and a postnatal visit with a health worker within 48 hours of delivering.<sup>vii</sup>
  - Scale up infant and young child feeding counselling at health facilities and community-based services as recommended in WHO guidelines on breastfeeding counselling.<sup>viii</sup>
  - Develop or strengthen national policies and guidelines for infant and young child feeding in humanitarian contexts to protect breastfeeding during emergencies.

<sup>i</sup> WHO: [Exclusive breastfeeding for optimal growth, development and health of infants](#) (2023)

<sup>ii</sup> Chowdhury et al: [Breastfeeding and maternal health outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#) (2015)

<sup>iii</sup> Jain et al: [The cost of inaction: a global tool to inform nutrition policy and investment decisions on global nutrition targets](#), Health Policy and Planning (2024)

<sup>iv</sup> WHO: [Ten steps to successful breastfeeding](#) (2018)

<sup>v</sup> ILO: [Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#) (2018)

<sup>vi</sup> WHO: [Breastfeeding](#) (2024)

<sup>vii</sup> WHO: [WHO recommendations on antenatal care for a positive pregnancy experience](#) (2016)

<sup>viii</sup> UNICEF and WHO: [Implementation guidance on counselling women to improve breastfeeding practices](#) (2021)