

Obstacles to breastfeeding in the workplace:

From paper to practice

OVER THE PAST three years, governments, through the United Nations, have reaffirmed the importance and benefits of breastfeeding to infants, mothers and society at large in four key documents:

- *Innocenti Declaration on the Protection, Promotion and Support of Breastfeeding* (1 August 1990);
- *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (September 1990);
- *Declaration of the World Summit on Children* (30 September 1990); and

permanent contracts;

- Agricultural workers, domestics, and women working in the informal sector in many countries are not covered by existing conventions;
- If costs for leave and child-care are borne by the employers alone, they may prefer to hire male workers;
- The lack of adequate income, guaranteed job security, and workplace child-care or transportation to community-based care hinder possibilities for breastfeeding, even

International documents

Innocenti Declaration

THE *Innocenti Declaration on the Protection, Promotion and Support of Breastfeeding*, signed by 30 governments, states that for optimal breastfeeding

all women should be enabled to practise exclusive breastfeeding and all infants should be fed exclusively on breastmilk from birth to four to six months of age. Thereafter, children should continue to be breastfed, while receiving appropriate and adequate complementary foods, for up to two years of age or beyond.

As part of its operational targets, this declaration calls on all governments by 1995 to:

- *Enact imaginative legislation protecting the breastfeeding rights of working women and establish means for its enforcement; and*
- *Ensure the implementation of the International Code of*

Breastfeeding

- *World Declaration on Nutrition and Plan of Action for Nutrition* (December 1992)

Governments have acknowledged:

- *The right of infants and mothers to exclusive breastfeeding;*
- *The right of women to correct and consistent information and support in child health and nutrition; and*
- *The right of children to protection and development.*

These UN documents, together with the International Labour Conventions (ILO) on Maternity Protection, are minimum standards. They recognise women's rights to maternity and the rights of working mothers to breastfeed their infants. But, in practice, women employed in various work environments face many different obstacles to breastfeeding. For instance:

- Maternity leave may only be available to formally employed women on annual or

when maternity leave is available;

- Child-care facilities and breastfeeding breaks may be available in large companies, but not in small companies or non-formal work settings where most women work;
- Baby food companies target employed women by promoting their products as the only solution available to working mothers;
- Male-oriented attitudes of governments and employers result in treating maternity benefits as 'doing a favour to women' instead of as an entitlement and an investment in the health of society;
- National socio-economic conditions (e.g. poverty, heavy debt financing) leave little resources to support breastfeeding; and
- The overall low status of women in many countries gives lower priority to women's needs.

Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes so that the marketing of such substitutes is not targeted at employed women.

The Technical Meeting of June 1990 prior to the Innocenti Declaration also recommends:

- The establishment of a task force on Women, Work and Breastfeeding within National Breastfeeding Committees, and
- The integration of issues relevant to employed women in all breastfeeding promotion programmes.

ILO Conventions

MEASURES to protect breastfeeding women in commerce and industry were first outlined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as early as 1919 (Convention No 3) and revised in 1952 (Convention No 103). These conventions set the following standards:

- 12 weeks maternity leave (six weeks before and six weeks after birth) with cash benefits of at least 66 per cent of previous earnings;
- Two half-hour breastfeeding breaks during each working day; and
- Prohibition of dismissal during maternity leave.

Later conventions and recommendations provided increased benefits to working women, extended these to other groups of women, including agricultural workers, and suggested measures such as parental leave to assist workers with families.