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Commercialism threatens breastfeeding in Pakistan: report

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ISLAMABAD: A latest consumer report of The Network for Consumer Protection has disclosed that a large number of infants in Pakistan suffer from malnutrition for the only reason that breast-milk substitutes are marketed and promoted unchecked in the absence of any mechanism to regulate them, as the only law in this context still prevails in papers with no defined implementation procedure at all.

The report entitled "Withering breastfeeding laws need implementation" says that this dismal situation is critical not only from the children's health point of view but also from public health cost viewpoint as billions of rupees are additionally spent by the state and the people, which are simply avoidable by promoting breastfeeding practices.

Report says that over the past few decades, the natural practice of breastfeeding has been increasingly threatened by commercial influence of baby food manufacturers.

"Aggressive and unethical promotion by the industry has affected society's behavior towards this healthy practice," it says.

An ongoing nationwide survey of the pro-consumer organization reflects that the violation of International Code of Marketing of breast milk substitutes is common in the cities and even remote towns and villages where the powerful industry makes the health workers promote infant formulae.

It suggests that "Some of the diametrical traditionalistic persuasions, such as breastfeeding not efficacious for mothers' health or breast-milk does not serve all the nutrients for a baby, etc, have also

proved anchoring for the industry to expand their influence on mothers and even the cow milks is the primal substitute for breast milk.

It is worth to mention an infrangible fact that the dilemma orchestrated by the industries' magnetic and cozening advertisements that promises infants' healthy state of well being is a peril to breastfeeding.

The report says that Protection of Breastfeeding and Child Nutrition Ordinance, 2002 was passed with an aim to protect breastfeeding practice from the commercial onslaught of the industry, manifested in blatantly unethical marketing practices, and to fulfill international commitments.

"This legislation just like all the other piecemeal legislations of our country lacks enforceability. Responsible government departments have put some spo-

radic efforts and formulated some lame rules and regulations recently but those have failed to effectively address the real issue," it says.

"The law lacks substance to tackle the powerful commercial influence as provided for in the International Code, and is fraught with lacunas. Despite its obvious loopholes, implementation of even this law could have brought some respite to consumers. However, there is no progress to be seen in implementing even current provisions, despite promises by successive governments," it adds.

The Network cautions that if the Breastfeeding Protection Law is not to become yet another in a series of unimplemented pieces of social legislation in Pakistan, action needs to be taken now.

It suggests that government needs to demonstrate its commitment to protecting the health and lives of its citizens by

notifying full Rules and Regulations of the law for its implementation; developing a national plan of action for implementation of the law in public and private facilities; establishing an independent mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the law for its stated objectives; making necessary amendments in the law to meet its stated objectives; informing health professionals particularly related with mother and child health about the provisions of the law; and our future is in the hands of our children and their health.

The lives of an estimated 1.5 million infants could be saved every year and the health and development of millions of others could be greatly improved if all babies were fed only breast milk for the first six months of their life. International initiatives as well as community-based programs that have resulted in the reduction

of malnutrition have focused on the promotion of breastfeeding.

The infant mortality rate in Pakistan is estimated at 75.9 per 1000 births which is the highest in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) region, according to Pakistan Demographic Survey (DPS) and the State of the World Children Report 2005 by UNICEF Pakistan.

According to UNICEF only 16 per cent of the newborns (from 1995-2003) in Pakistan were exclusively breastfed up to the age of 6 months while this ratio stood at 37 in India and 46 in Bangladesh. According to the same report 38 per cent of Pakistani children of up to 5 years of age are underweight while 12 per cent of them are severely underweight. Under-5 mortality rate in Pakistan is also highest in South Asia, which according to UNICEF stood at 107 per 1000 live births in 2002.



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