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### Breastfeeding: Key to mother, child health Withering laws need strict implementation blocked by commercial influence

F.P. Report

ISLAMABAD: A large number of infants in Pakistan suffer from malnutrition for the only reason that breastmilk 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 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.

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.

An ongoing nationwide survey of TheNetwork for Consumer Protection reflects that the violation of International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes is common in the cities and even remote towns and

villages where the powerful industry makes the health workers promote infant formulae.

Some of the diametrical traditionalistic persuasions, such as breastfeeding not efficacious for mothers' health or breastmilk 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 breastmilk.

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 wellbeing is a peril to breastfeeding.

Law? What Law?

International organizations such as UNICEF and WHO having realized the need to regulate the marketing practices of Breastmilk substitutes developed an "International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes" in 1981.

Pakistan also endorsed and occupies a place among 118 countries, but formal legislation in the form of Ordinance came, when "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 sporadic efforts and formulated some lame rules and regulations recently but those have failed to effectively address the real issue.

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.

The State took 21 long years (from 1981 to 2002) to translate the minimal provisions of the International Code for Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes into law, and has since then largely ignored implementation. Notification of Rules and Regulations are necessary for the implementation of any law; however, in the last 4 years since promulgation of the Ordinance, the Ministry of Health has just recently been able only to notify rules for a National Infant Feeding Board formed under the Ordinance.

This Board, which is tasked to formulate Rules and Regulations of the Ordinance, formally includes a representative from the industry which is to be regulated! The presence of Industry's representative on the National Board is actually prohibited under the International Code.

All this despite the fact that draft Rules and Regulations, proposed by health experts, have been available with the Ministry of Health for over two years. Consequently, the provisions of the legislation remain on the Ministry's shelves, and no action can be initiated against the industry's unethical promotion despite the fact that a law has been passed to control it.

Where to Next?

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. 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. How long can we afford to jeopardize that future?

Why Breastfeeding?

Breastfeeding benefits both mother and child. From birth till two years of age, breastfeeding provides adequate nutrition for child growth and helps in developing immunity that protects the child against diseases and reduces risks of diarrhea and malnutrition.

The mother-child relationship established while breastfeeding also sets the basis for emotional and psychological well-being throughout the child's life. Breastfed children are healthier and face fewer health problems in their life than those who are not breastfed. The mother benefits through delayed fertility leading to reduced risk of maternal and child mortality. Breastfeeding is the most economic, natural and viable way to control, Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) and Maternal Mortality Ratio.

Over the past few decades, the natural prac-

tice 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.

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 breastmilk 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.

Startling Facts

Breastfed babies are less likely to develop diabetes, childhood cancer or suffer sudden infant death syndrome. It makes immunization more effective and may prevent long term bowel disease, certain autoimmune conditions and coronary heart disease.

Breastfeeding can provide up to 98% protection against pregnancy as long as one year after delivery. Breastfeeding prevents more pregnancies than other forms of contraceptives combined. There is evidence that breastfeeding improves learning ability and intelligence quotient. Where clean drinking water is not available, a bottle-fed baby is 25 times more likely to die of diarrhea and four times more likely to die of acute respiratory infections than an optimally breastfed baby.

Breastfeeding is identified as the single most effective intervention that could prevent 13-15 per cent of all child deaths. Worldwide 6m children under five die because of malnutrition and two-thirds of them, about 4m, die before completing their first year of life.



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