

World Breastfeeding Week 2008
Statement by HM Queen Rania Al-Abdullah
UNICEF Eminent Advocate for Children

The image of a mother cradling a baby to her breast is one of the most natural in the world – a symbol of both the tender love and fierce devotion that parents feel for their children. There is nothing more elemental than a mother’s desire to feed and care for her hungry child, and nothing more important to society than ensuring she succeeds.

That is why I believe World Breastfeeding Week 2008 is so important. A mother’s milk is the most complete form of nutrition she can offer her newborn – affordable, efficient, easily digestible, and with just the right balance of essential nutrients required for growth and development. In addition, breast milk provides immediate, irreplaceable protection against infectious disease; indeed, exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months remains the single most effective intervention in reducing child mortality.

Eight years ago, the world committed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, including significant improvements in child survival and maternal health by the year 2015. We are halfway there, and we have much to celebrate -- but also much more to accomplish.

In Sub-Saharan Africa – a region beleaguered by poverty, drought, famine and insecurity – the past decade has seen exclusive breastfeeding rise from 22 to 30 percent, a rate of progress well above that of many other parts of the world.

South Asia, as well as East Asia and the Pacific, have sustained exclusive breastfeeding rates at 45 and 43 per cent respectively – though more must be done to expand neonatal health-care services and outreach to vulnerable and underserved communities.

Breastfeeding advocates have made pioneering strides in developing innovative, community-based partnerships and approaches to meet the diverse needs of breastfeeding mothers in the Philippines, India, Madagascar, Honduras, and other nations.

And the Baby Friendly Hospital initiative has taken root worldwide, with more than 20,000 facilities in more than 150 countries,¹ encouraging dialogue among medical professionals, parents, and communities to promote breastfeeding and ensure parents have the information and support they need to make the best feeding decisions for their babies.

Yet if we are to maintain and deepen this progress, we need our message to reach farther, faster.

Currently standing at 28%, the Middle East and North Africa region still suffers heartbreakingly low rates of exclusive breastfeeding, and progress rates remain below average in developing countries around the world.

¹ Sam – I got that number from <http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/bfhi/en/index.html>.

Breastfeeding is not only the best choice for infants, it is also a mother's right. Networks in place in many countries need to be supported in their efforts to promote community-friendly breastfeeding. This means women-friendly workplaces, balanced parental responsibility, and the endorsement of structures at all levels, including peer and professional, to support breastfeeding. Governments must be held accountable in their commitment to devise social services that enable breastfeeding mothers to uphold their work responsibilities and remain unhindered in public life.

We need to fully grasp the importance of optimal infant feeding as an essential key to human development.

Global policymakers must do their part to enable interventions that will enhance infant feeding in least developed settings, emergencies, and other exceptionally difficult circumstances.

And societies as a whole must respect, protect, and facilitate mothers' rights to breastfeed their children, and foster a supportive culture and environment for nursing mothers and infants. Every child deserves the best possible start to life, and every mother deserves to provide it.