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World Breastfeeding Week Message
Breastfeeding and work -- Let's make it work!

Every year, the global community sets aside a week to draw attention to the vital importance of breastfeeding, not only in the lives of the most disadvantaged children but also in the strength of societies. The theme of this year's World Breastfeeding Week, ***Breastfeeding and Work -- Let's make it work!***, focuses on what we can do to help millions of working mothers give their babies the best possible start in life -- by supporting stronger workplace policies that promote breastfeeding.

We know that breastfeeding helps children to survive and thrive -- enabling infants to withstand infections, providing critical nutrients for the early development of their brains and bodies, and strengthening the bond between mothers and their babies. And the benefits of breastfeeding last a lifetime. A recent Lancet study¹ found that infants who were breastfed for at least one year went on to stay in school longer, score higher on intelligence tests, and earn more as adults than those who were breastfed for only a month.

Despite this growing evidence, only 38 per cent of infants around the world today are breastfed exclusively for even the recommended first six months of life. And while breastfeeding rates have increased in all regions of the world, global progress has stalled.

The World Health Assembly has set a global target of increasing exclusive breastfeeding rates for children under six months of age to at least 50 per cent by 2025. To achieve this ambitious and very important goal, we need to tackle all the barriers to breastfeeding.

Governments should lead the charge by making breastfeeding a policy priority in national development plans, increasing resources for programming that supports breastfeeding, and working with communities and families to promote the full benefits of breastfeeding.

But we should also do more to overcome an obstacle that prevents potentially millions of women from breastfeeding: Workplace policies that do not support the right of working mothers to breastfeed their babies on the job.

¹ Victora, C. G. et al. "Association between breastfeeding and intelligence, educational attainment, and income at 30 years of age: a prospective birth cohort study from Brazil" *Lancet*, vol. 3, no. 4, April 2015, pp. e199 - e205.

Today, of the approximately 830 million women workers in the world, the majority do not benefit from workplace policies that support nursing mothers². And this figure does not include women working in informal, seasonal or part-time employment -- often the poorest women in poorer countries -- who may face even greater barriers to continued breastfeeding.

This is not only a loss to working mothers and their babies. It is also a loss to employers. Working mothers with adequate maternity benefits -- including a breastfeeding-supportive workplace -- report increased job satisfaction and greater loyalty to their employers. Breastfed children fall sick less often, so their mothers are absent from work less often, too. These effects in turn contribute to higher productivity -- ultimately benefiting businesses and the larger economies to which they contribute.

Recognizing these connections, the International Labour Organization has adopted three Conventions to establish protective measures for pregnant women and new mothers, including the right to continue breastfeeding -- and to promote feasible options for women who are outside formal work settings. Globally, 67 countries have ratified at least one of the three maternity protection Conventions. More governments should join this growing movement -- and take action to implement these important protections.

We know that breastfeeding improves the lives of millions of children and ultimately benefits families, communities, and societies. Our challenge now is to make breastfeeding work in the workplace, too. Together, we can help working women to breastfeed and reap the benefits for themselves, for their children, and for the health and well-being of future generations.

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² ILO Report, "Maternity and paternity at work," May 2014. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_242617.pdf