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Editorial

Recent trends and policy shifts on empowering breastfeeding in developing countries

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Breastfeeding provides a vital source of nourishment for infants, particularly young infants not on complementary feeding. It provides benefits, both physiological and psychological, to not only infants but also their mothers (Ali Dawed et al., 2023). According to the World Bank and the United Nations (UN), developing countries, also sometimes referred to as low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), are nations that are home to about 50% of the world's population, with much of their population living below the poverty line, and with economies marred by inconsistent growth and stagnancy. For such nations, breastfeeding provides an additional benefit through cost-effective interventions (Ali Dawed et al., 2023).

As the recent global trends have been geared increasingly towards sustainable development, several endeavors are being undertaken to streamline breastfeeding policies globally. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), mainly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), entail that among all the various essential aspects of attaining improved nutrition through numerous interventions, strengthening breastfeeding practices can be one of the best ways to help achieve the desirable outcomes (Elechi et al., 2023). The world at large, and the developing nations in particular, is exposed to multifaceted challenges, primarily, in the current context, high mortality rates in neonates and infants. As per the World Health Organization (WHO), this problem can be addressed explicitly through diligent planning to make breastfeeding, the clinical gold standard for infant feeding and nutrition, a preferred practice for mothers (Darboe et al., 2023).

Numerous studies have reported initiating and implementing programs to promote exclusive breastfeeding through public–private partnerships in the developing world (Balogun et al., 2016; Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2023). The UN is working with much impetus in various countries for the abovementioned purpose. Enhanced Nutrition and Value Chain (ENVAC) project (2016–2021) was one such program for the population of Ghana by the UN's World Food Programme (UNWFP). Apart from this intervention, multiple other action plans have been executed over the years to empower breastfeeding; for instance, the establishment of the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) and the Ghana Breastfeeding Promotion Regulation of 2000 (Adokiya et al., 2023).

Prenatal, Perinatal, Postnatal, and Nutritional Support in Grande Anse and Southern Haiti (A3PN) was a four-year (2016–2020) project targeting the hurricane-affected regions of the Republic of Haiti. Improving beliefs and practices about breastfeeding through support groups and other complementing activities was one of the significant elements of this initiative. Positive impacts can further be brought through monetary benefits resulting from the other project activities (Decelles et al., 2022).

Several programs have been patterned after the BFHI. In sub-Saharan African countries such as Gambia and Rwanda, the collaborative efforts of the ministries of health of these regions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for enhancing exclusive breastfeeding through maternal counseling and upgrading healthcare systems had varying results in improving breastfeeding practices (Ameyaw et al., 2023). Post-partum educational sessions for exclusive breastfeeding have been conducted in various healthcare institutions in the developing countries of the Arab world, for instance, Libya, Somalia, and Tunisia (Aboul-Enein et al., 2023).

South Asia, comprised of developing countries, has relatively better legislative frameworks regarding breastfeeding support, but so far, only on paper rather than in practice. To name a few, Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan have frameworks in line with the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes (1981), however with loopholes allowing exploitation of these policies (Tharwani et al., 2023). The current editorial can assert that, albeit many policies and programs have been formulated over the years in developing nations, national public health policies still require careful consideration for empowering breastfeeding policies made with real intent to be translated into practice. The gaps identified in studies can be addressed through pragmatic and breakthrough exclusive legislation encompassing:

1. Public health legislation aimed at empowering breastfeeding practices.
2. Limit marketing of alternatives for breast milk.
3. Prolonged maternity leaves.

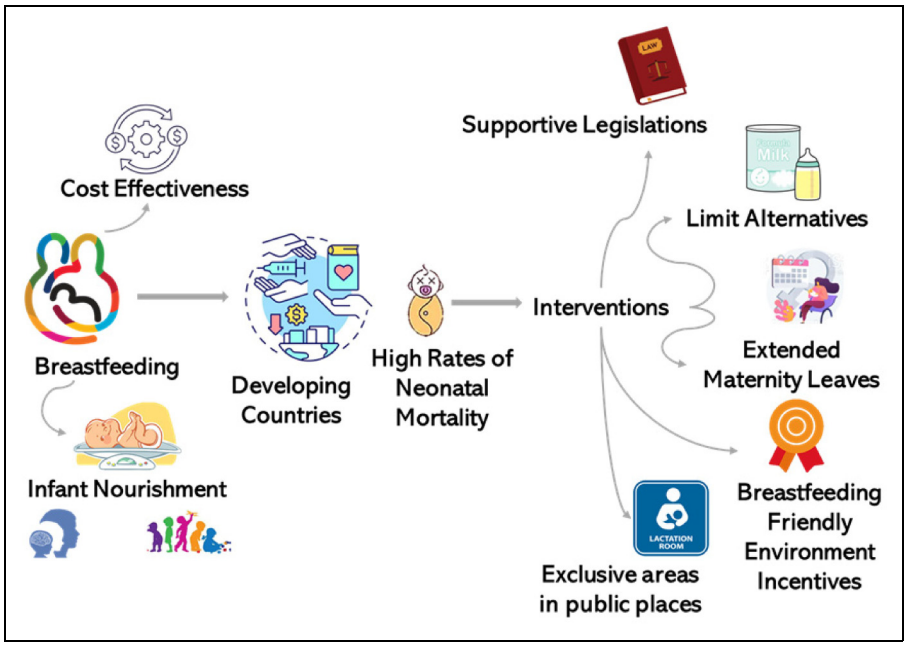

Figure 1. Benefits of breastfeeding and proposed interventions to empower breastfeeding in developing countries.

4. Exclusive breastfeeding areas in public places and daycare facilities at workplaces to support the breastfeeding of young infants.
5. Extending incentives for organizations enabling a breastfeeding-friendly environment.

Figure 1 shows these proposed interventions and the benefits of breastfeeding in developing countries. Creating enabling conditions for breastfeeding is the need of the day. However, regrettably, owing to cultural barriers in some and political upheavals in others, it remains to be an elephant in the room needing to be addressed across many developing parts of the world. Breastfeeding has scientifically proven to be a natural contraceptive; hence, it can also help tackle the population explosion in the least developed nations, indirectly contributing to the SDGs.

Exclusive breastfeeding is cost-effective for countries already under the economic burden of double-digit inflation. The costs incurred by using breast milk alternatives are a significant burden for the families bearing these expenses and for society. Implementing optimal breastfeeding practices can help decrease the expenditures on healthcare systems by approximately USD 300 billion (Tharwani et al., 2023). This monetary benefit is directly linked to the mother's milk's miraculous nutrients that aid in infant development and limits the incidence of malnutrition.

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Izma Zahir and Waqas Asghar
Department of Food Science and Technology, School of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

Nauman Khalid
Department of Food Science and Technology, School of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan; College of Health Sciences, Abu Dhabi University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates