EXPRESSING BREAST MILK: A STRATEGY FOR EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING

Experience of a working mother

Irish Aid supports a Gender Rights driven nutrition program in Chamba District in Dodoma to reduce stunting in children under 5 years old.

As part of World Breastfeeding Week, 1st - 7th August 2019, the Gender Driven Nutrition Program demonstrated how working mothers can protect their child’s and owns health by expressing breastmilk to facilitate exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of the child’s life.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that mothers exclusively breastfeed their infants for the first six months to achieve optimal growth, development, and health. Thereafter, they should be given nutritious complementary foods and continue breastfeeding up two years of age and beyond.

Continuing to breastfeed after returning to work is a challenge, especially for new mothers. Only 58% of Tanzanian mothers are able to exclusively breastfeed for the first 6 months. As a result, most mothers who are in formal employment introduce complementary foods immediately after returning to work – much earlier than recommended.

Discontinuing breastfeeding after returning to work is attributed to insufficient and inappropriate pre-natal information and preparations. When asked about breastfeeding and returning to work, healthcare providers’ advice is often anecdotal rather than research based. Other reasons for discontinued breastfeeding include lack of resources, such as electricity and storage facilities (freezer/fridge); traveling long distance to work; inability to balance work with household chores and breastfeeding; and the general cultural acceptance of early initiation of complementary foods.

Mothers need the support of health care providers, spouses, family members and the employers to maintain a healthy balance. Unfortunately, many mothers are overwhelmed with many chores at home and at work hence having limited time to breastfeed. Mother can express milk (squeezing milk out of the breast) by hand or with a breast pump and store it for feeding the baby later.

Expressing breastmilk, even if it is not quite the same as the act of breastfeeding, ensures the baby always gets the very best in nutritional feeding while giving the mother more flexibility. The mother may be going back to work, her partner might like to be more involved in feeding their little one and whoever is left with the baby, can feed the baby breastmilk.

ANASTAZIA’s Story

One example is Anastasia Bimbiga, who is a working mother living in Dodoma, Chamba DC. Despite being a nutritionist who is well-informed on breastfeeding, she had to work out how to balance between work and choosing to exclusively breastfeed her baby. Anastasia has three children - two boys and a girl. She exclusively breastfed the boys for the first 6 months without any
difficulty because she used to work at home then. However, for her daughter, who is now 8 months old, the situation was different. Anastazia had to cope with balancing office work, home responsibilities and breastfeeding. She managed all her responsibilities and at same time she ensured that her daughter was fed breastmilk even when she was away. She explains how she managed this in the testimony below, which she also shared publicly during the World Breastfeeding Week, 2019.

The Testimony

“I want to share with you how I succeeded to feed my daughter, Dorothy, with my breastmilk for the first six months, despite being at work and outside the home full time.

It is true that we have all heard many times that breastmilk is the only food and drink that is best for our infants during the period of zero to six months. And we have also heard that for us to be successful, sometimes it may be necessary to express our breastmilk and leave it behind so that the baby continues to be fed breastmilk using a cup even when we are away to attend other issues.

I breastfed Dorothy with my breastmilk for 6 months without giving her any other food not even water because I could express my breastmilk and leave it behind while I was at work. Dorothy is now 8 months old. She is a healthy baby and has not had any health problem since she was born. I believe this is because breastmilk protects her against diseases such as diarrhea and allergies.

I have two other children, Danny and Derick. I breastfed both of them exclusively up to six months without giving them any other food or drink; I was able to do so at that time because I was working at home. At the time, I did not have a paid demanding job like now. I feel lucky because I have been able to feed my children my breastmilk as recommended. Exclusively breastfed children do not get sick often; they seem to grow fast, keep more active than others at their age, and have sharper minds. I hope to see them doing very well in school and doing better later in life.

Expressing breastmilk is possible for most mothers. All my children were delivered through caesarian section. I, was determined to breastfeed my children exclusively, and every time, I always requested the medical staff not to feed my child any other milk even when I was still in pain from the surgery. Luckily for Dorothy, I awoke within one hour and was able to breastfeed her immediately.

I continued to breastfeed my baby and started expressing my milk when the baby was two months old in preparation to go back to work. I am privileged to live in a house connected to electricity and have a refrigerator. I was able to store my expressed breastmilk in plastic storage bags in the freezer part of my refrigerator. By the time my official maternity leave was over, I had stocked about 20 litres of breastmilk in my freezer. Breastmilk can be stored in a freezer for up to 6 months. Even though the baby was breastfeeding, there were days when I could express up to 800mls to one liter a day. After the maternity leave was over and I went back to work, I continued to express my breastmilk using a hand-pump to keep up the stock of milk.

My work place is an hour away from where I live. I leave for office very early in the morning and return back home late in the afternoon. However, knowing that my baby was being fed my breastmilk motivated me so the distance was not an obstacle for expressing my breastmilk. My baby used to take on average of about 1 liter of expressed breastmilk a day during the time I was away. To maintain the stock, I continued expressing milk daily after work and I ensured the baby is fully breastfeed at night.
When Dorothy completed six months, I started giving her complementary food of various foods we normally eat at home, starting with starchy foods, later animal source foods, adding small amounts at a time and making them soft by cooking them well and mashing them. At the same time together with solid food, she will continue breast-feeding early in the morning, during night hours or any time I am at home until she is two years.

The biggest secret is expressing and storing breastmilk in a freezer of a refrigerator as early as when the baby was two months old and continue to express daily after I was back from work. As a nutritionist, I knew that the more the baby breastfeeds or the breast is emptied, the more milk is produced. Breastmilk can be left at room temperature for up to seven hours. So, if the mother is working near home or leaves the baby for a few hours only, she could still express her milk and leave it behind for some time even if she does not have a refrigerator. With a refrigerator (without a freezer), breastmilk can stay for up to 4 days, while in a freezer compartment of the fridge the milk can be stored for up to 6 months. I had to measure each lot of milk and mark the container with the amount and date so that the first produced is used first. Before feeding the baby, the expressed breastmilk is defrosted by sinking it in warm water and fed to a baby using a cup.

I started breast-feeding immediately after birth and practiced to position and attach the baby to the breast properly. Remember having delivered through caesarian section, I was able to do this, because I was determined to succeed. I breastfed very often especially in the first two weeks to establish milk production. A delay in breast-feeding in the early days can cause a syndrome known as “not enough milk” because if the breasts are not emptied, more milk will not be produced.

Thinking about your baby as often as possible also prompts milk let-down throughout the day. This means that you can also express the milk while at work but I was not able to do this because of distance to work place and the inadequate means of transport/facilities.

For my health, I ate 3 normal meals a day but I also had two snacks in-between because I got hungry after breast-feeding. I also drank enough liquid/water and had time to rest during the 3 months maternity leave. The leave gave me enough rest and allowed me to begin expressing my milk as early as possible. Family support was another key factor; I could rest because I received support from my family as all of them were excited and happy to see me succeed.

My husband, children, even though very young, they got involved; together with other family members. This helped me get a few naps even during the day and sleep part of the night hours during the early weeks when the baby was not sleeping throughout the night.

As a mother, employee and nutrition professional, I am motivated to support other mothers who are facing similar situations, working but failing to exclusively breastfeed their babies because they have to go back to work after three months of maternity leave or they have other work that takes them outside home. Once you know the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months, for sure you will learn how to cope with working outside the home and still exclusively breastfeed your baby. We must remember that a mother is a milk factory for her baby and if the mother is not there, there is shortage of food for the baby. Expressing breastmilk for mothers working outside home is very important both for the baby and for the mother.

The more the baby breastfeeds, the more the mother gets the benefits of breast-feeding, such as losing the weight that was gained during pregnancy and also reducing the risk of breast and ovarian cancer. For the
baby, breastmilk is the best food. It is full of nutrients that the baby needs and protects the baby against childhood diseases. It is also obvious that every parent wants the best for their baby and would do everything to make sure their children are healthy, happy and successful in future.

As a nutrition professional, I had to practice it myself so that as I encourage mothers. I know it can be done, although there are some challenges; but these challenges can be overcome.

I therefore call upon families and communities to support breastfeeding mothers to succeed to exclusively breastfeed for 6 months, and thereafter to continue breastfeeding together with complementary food up to two years and beyond. This is because breastfeeding has many benefits for the mother and the child beyond childhood.

For mothers who have to be outside of the home, I encourage them to express breast milk and store it in a freezer if for longer period but if separated only for a few hours express daily then store your milk in a container in a cool place in your home; and this can stay safe for up to seven hours at room temperature and someone can feed the baby while you are away.

This will keep your baby free from illnesses especially in the early months when the baby depends on the mother for immunity”.

I call upon my fellow working mothers to remember the basic rights such as 84 days maternity leave plus the annual leave and 2 hours break every day for 6 months after maternity leave. Employers should also be supportive by granting maternity benefits for working women.

Anastazia shared her testimony of how she was able to exclusively breastfeed even after returning to work with the Chemba Council staff during commemoration of the World Breastfeeding Week, 2019. Participants had many questions as to how this was possible and why this information was never communicated to them. “We are also parents who have children but not once did we receive information on expression and storing of breastmilk.”

This testimony was purposely shared with the audience to excite and encourage employed mothers and parents in general to exclusively breastfeed their children for 6 months even when a mother is employed, has travelled or is working outside the home for part of the day. The testimony also shed light on the myth that breastmilk may not be enough for the first 6 months of life and confirmed that by far breastmilk is the best milk for the baby compared to milk substitutes.

Altogether over 2,000 parents (men and women) were sensitized during the World Breastfeeding Week 2019, in Chemba District, thanks to Irish Aid funding support and good cooperation from the Local Government Authorities in Chemba.

The participants became motivated and promised to be ambassadors in their communities, to raise awareness on the important message about Expressing and Storing breastmilk to promote exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months.

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