

## BREASTFEEDING AS A FEMINIST ISSUE

Many feminists are lukewarm to breastfeeding. Some feminists say that reinforces women's traditional roles as caregivers and nurturers.

Yet, breastfeeding advocates like Penny also claim that breastfeeding is a feminist issue precisely because "it's about women's control over their bodies." She adds that breastfeeding challenges media's image of women as consumers and as sex objects with firm breasts. "I'd like women to fully understand the health benefits of breastfeeding for them and not just for their babies. I'd like them to revalue motherhood without romanticising it. I think breastfeeding requires us to rethink the relation be-

tween women's productive and reproductive roles."

## BREASTFEEDING CHALLENGES MEDIA'S IMAGE OF WOMEN AS CONSUMERS AND AS SEX OBJECTS WITH FIRM BREASTS.

Penny says women's groups have to make choices about issues on which to concentrate but underscores that breastfeeding conforms to the women's movement's long-term goals, which is to improve the position and condition of women.

In the issue of breastfeeding, Penny says women rely

first and foremost on other women. "Most conventional doctors are likely to succumb to the aggressive marketing strategies of infant formula manufacturers and are therefore not good allies. Women's unity on the issue of breastfeeding demonstrates in the clearest of terms the solidarity among women," she notes. "The best indicator of success would be when there are no more breastfeeding advocacy groups because all women's groups have become supportive of the practice. What I want is for the women's movement to work on biological and cultural explanations together, and that would require the power of linking together productive and reproductive lives."

# Breastfeeding and Food Security

by Penny Van Esterik

**T**he World Food Summit took place in Rome, November 1996. Organized through the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) of the United Nations, the Summit focused attention on the problems of malnutrition and hunger. More than twenty years after the First World Food Conference, the world's food supply is anything but secure.



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The World Food Summit is behind us. Why return to old news? Because hunger and food insecurity are still with us and women's groups in particular have reason to keep issues of food security high on their agenda. The goal of the Summit was to achieve "universal food security" by the year 2010. The World Food Summit will be "over" when hunger and food insecurity end.

Food security means hav-

Elaborating on the basis of solidarity, Penny points out that breastfeeding intersects with the issues of sexuality, AIDS and women's health. It intersects with globalisation, which makes it harder for parents to spend time with their children because of the changes in working conditions. It intersects with the issue of processed food that adults and babies consume. The breastfeeding movement interacts with the consumer movement. Penny says that breastfeeding helps clarify issues. "However, most books about the women's movement do not mention breastfeeding as if women don't have breasts. The women's health movement concentrates more on issues

around menstruation, childbirth, and menopause. I think they skipped breastfeeding



because it's a complicated issue of choice. I hope women will soon re-examine it as a

model for many of the struggles we are engaged in."

Penny was in Quezon City, Philippines last 1-5 June 1998 for the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) international conference. The event led to the "Quezon City Declaration on Breastfeeding, Women and Work." The declaration, Penny says, is remarkable given the tremendous cultural differences amongst the participants. The event also came out with a concrete plan of action on how the participants can accomplish the goals spelled out in the declaration. Penny says the declaration then "becomes a tool for participants and it is up to them to transform the declaration into a set of guidelines that they can

ing enough food to maintain a healthy and productive life today—and in the future. Communities enjoy food security when all individuals in all households have access to food—adequate in quantity and quality, affordable, acceptable, appropriate and readily available from local sources on a continuing basis.

Breastfeeding provides total food security for infants. There is no more readily available, affordable and nutritious food source than breastmilk, a complete food for infants up to six months of age. Breastfeeding continues to provide the growing child with essential nutrients and energy, helping to prevent malnutrition and micronutri-

ent deficiencies in the second year of life and beyond, along with other foods. Breastmilk

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is the first food for babies, but breastfeeding also benefits women, families, communities, and our planet.

WABA (World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action) is a global network of organisations and individuals working to protect, support and promote breastfeeding. WABA participated in the NGO Forum of the World Food Summit, lob-

bying for breastfeeding to be included in discussions of household food security.

As I searched for a place to unload WABA's boxes of folders and posters for display at the NGO Forum, I saw an empty table beside a Latin American women's group promoting local, sustainable, affordable food. When I asked if I could set up the WABA display beside them, they sent me down the hall to a display on contraception and natural family planning, saying that that was where breastfeeding belonged. I told them that if they could think of a more local, sustainable, affordable food than breastmilk, then I would move. They could not. We stayed, and they agreed that in the future, they would

take to their organisations in order to accomplish their national goals.”

### **A QUESTION OF CHOICE AND HUMAN RIGHT**

Penny is aware that women’s groups object to the bracketing of women and children together because this reinforces the notion that women’s rights come from their role as mothers. But Penny believes that breastfeeding is where the woman’s and the child’s right converge. She frames the issue as “a woman’s right to breastfeed” and questions the idea of separating a woman’s rights from a child’s right. “So you have to make a special consideration. It sounds awkward but I call it the woman-child right. You

cannot separate them.”

On the question of whether it is a woman’s choice to breastfeed or not, Penny expounds: “I think it’s better to think of it as a woman’s choice to have children or not. If she chooses to have children she must have all the possible information about the options, and that’s not enough. She has to have all the support from the community and family. In my opinion, if she has support and knowledge, she would probably breastfeed. But I don’t like it when women tell other women about politically correct breastfeeding: that women have to do it this way, for this number of months. Women do the best they can under difficult circumstances.” But

what if despite all the information and support, a woman still chooses not to breastfeed? Penny remarks, “I would feel sadness for her missing a very important experience of being female and would think that she may be living in a community where she didn’t get a lot of support. I would hope though that she’s not made to feel guilty and less of a mother.”

Penny dislikes coercion and believes that the promotion of breastfeeding may result in the insensitivity of some health workers who force women to breastfeed. “I think that’s absolutely terrible,” she adds. Penny cites programs in Scandinavian countries where breastfeeding support groups welcome

include breastfeeding on their agenda for food security.

### **BEYOND COST-BENEFIT**

Beginning with our Food Summit efforts to have breastmilk included in food balance sheets, WABA has been asked to demonstrate the cost/benefit advantages of breastfeeding. Our most recent efforts can be seen in the 1998 World Breastfeeding Week action folder, Breastfeeding: The Best Investment, where the most current economic data on this topic has been assembled. Cost-benefit analyses are understandable to food economists and policymakers, but they are grounded in a different reality than most of us live in. They depend on what is ulti-

mately measurable, and convertible, cost to benefit, benefit to cost.

## **BREASTFEEDING IS THE FIRST AND FORMATIVE EXPERIENCE OF INDIVIDUALITY IN A WORLD THAT MUST PRESERVE DIVERSITY TO SURVIVE.**

Breastfeeding is of a different order. Both the costs and the benefits are infinite, and immanent (inherent or fundamental). Lack of breastfeeding denies nutrition to a child, but it also denies the unfolding of individuality, including the adjustment of the infant to the biological rhythms of its mother through co-sleeping, to

the tastes of the household cuisine transferred through breastmilk, and to the bacteria and germs in the child’s locality. Breast-feeding is the first and formative experience of individuality in a world that must preserve diversity to survive.

Consider the destruction of forests. Environmentalists have done cost-benefit analysis of deforestation. Trees provide wood for fuel, shade, medicines and food. Sensitive cost-benefit analysis might also include the aesthetic value of trees and the value of trees to future generations. But the equation changes when we destroy the last member of a particular species of tree, a tree that might have a function as yet

bottlefeeding mothers in the hope that they will learn and be encouraged by breastfeeding mothers in the centres.

### **MALE SUPPORT**

Lately, some sections of the women's movement are talking of male support and male involvement in women's causes and Penny sees how this is also significant in breastfeeding. "Some women's groups I know prefer renegotiating the sexual division of labour. One common arrangement is for women to take on the feeding responsibility during the breastfeeding period. When the time for complementary feeding comes, the male partner takes charge. Male support also concerns the attempt to



change the attitude of other men around and educating their sons that women are not sex objects made up of breasts. Particularly for women survivors of domestic violence, it is absolutely critical to have a strong partner support."

### **GAINS AND BACKLASH**

The worldwide breastfeeding movement has made many gains. Foremost among these are international instruments including human rights instruments supporting breastfeeding. Examples are the Innocenti Declaration and the Declaration on the Rights of the Child. But perhaps the most important has been the Code for the Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes.

unknown or known only to a few individuals who know how to process the bark to provide food to survive a famine. That tree and the knowledge of how to process it are resources that cannot be factored in to cost-benefit analysis. Unique and irreplaceable, they fit into other equations of life. When the species disappear, they cannot be conjured up again. In the same way, breastmilk cannot magically reappear after a mother has been lured onto breastmilk substitutes for three months and then discovers her child's allergies, and recognises the cause of her own yearning for closeness, a recognition that a unique magic moment has been lost.

### **BREASTFEEDING AND GLOBALIZATION**

Monsanto, Cargill and Nestle are among the largest food corporations in the world. How do they affect food security? The boycott protesting Nestle's unethical promotion of breastmilk substitutes is a constant reminder of the vigilance necessary to protect breastfeeding, and the power of consumers to change corporate policy. Today, a few chemical, seed and food corporations control the world's food supply. Free trade is free for agribusiness and the chemical industries but not for women and the poor.

Threats to breastfeeding include the increasing power of transnational corporations to control not just what we eat and feed our children, but

even the governments we elect. These corporations threaten the two most important interaction cycles that support human existence:

- 1) the production and delivery of breastmilk to a newborn and the transfer of knowledge about breastfeeding from grandmother to mother to daughter.
- 2) the production of food from seed to plant and the transfer of knowledge about how to grow and prepare food in different locations and circumstances.

Just as farm women know how to preserve their own seeds for future harvests, so breastfeeding women preserve and transmit knowledge of breastfeeding. North American women came close

Sponsored by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the code, which took effect in 1981, instructs infant formula companies not to promote their products as substitutes for breast milk. This led to the inclusion in infant formula labels of the message: Breastmilk is still best for babies up to two years. We need to make a very careful analysis and, ideally, a feminist analysis of food marketing," says Penny.

But all is not smooth sailing as breastfeeding experiences a backlash "from people who don't understand the issue very thoroughly and from people who have a vested interest in talking about women's right to choose

between breastfeeding or bottlefeeding." Penny reiter-

**CONCERN FOR FOOD SECURITY SHOULD BEGIN FROM THE MOMENT OF CONCEPTION. IT STARTS WITH ENSURING PREGNANT WOMEN WITH AN ADEQUATE DIET AND CONTINUES TO PROPER FEEDING OF INFANTS, CHILDREN, AND CERTAINLY ADULTS.**

ates that this is where the danger in politically correct breastfeeding comes in, when bottlefeeding mothers don't get as much support in other aspects of child rearing. "You

have to support women where they are and I don't like the idea of coercion or making a woman feel guilty." Penny also notes that women should be vigilant all the time especially since fence sitters are wont to say, "oh, the boycott was so successful. Now Nestle and all these companies have changed their practices so why don't you just let up. It's all over." It's far from over, Penny declares. "Milk companies have only become more sophisticated in their marketing strategies. There are also trade agreements amongst countries that in fact gives corporations so much power that they wouldn't even have to listen to governments," Penny stresses.

**BREASTFEEDING AND FOOD SECURITY**

to losing knowledge about breastfeeding, to deskilling women so that there was nearly a lost generation who did not value breastfeeding or know how to manage lactation. Seeds and children both have to be nurtured to grow and reproduce. Nothing should break these self-reliant cycles of nurture. Yet both cycles are under threat by some of the same processes—even the same corporations.

Consider the research on genetically engineered human proteins which were bred into Herman, the first transgenic dairy bull, bioengineered to carry a human gene for producing milk with a human protein. After protests from breastfeeding groups, the product was redefined as con-

**A FEMINIST ANALYSIS MIGHT EXPLORE THE INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN BREASTFEEDING, PHARMACEUTICALS, CONTRACEPTION, FOOD AND AGROTOXINS, AND ASK HOW THESE LINKAGES RELATE TO THE INCREASING POWER OF TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS.**

taining "modified lactoferrin to cure AIDS." Infant formula made from human protein bioengineered in the milk of transgenic dairy cattle is certainly not human milk, and using it is far removed from breastfeeding.

In March 1998, the Delta

and Pine Company patented the terminator technology, a biotechnology invention that will permit its owners to create and market sterile seeds by programming plant DNA to kill its own embryos, irretrievably breaking the plant-to-seed-to-plant cycle on which human life depends. The purpose of this technology is to increase the value of seed owned by American companies and open up new markets in Third World countries. Monsanto bought the company that developed and patented this terminator technology in May 1998 and in June American Home Products (AHP), home of Wyeth along with many agrochemical products, bought Monsanto. AHP will become the largest agro/

Food security may be a complex issue but Penny is convinced that food security and breastfeeding are tightly linked. “For the 140 million babies born every year, breastfeeding is food security for them for the first six months. And it is probably the most important item of their first two years and beyond. Breastfeeding is a very simple, straightforward situation where the total nutritional needs of 140 million human beings are met. We should note that at households, particularly of poor families, money that infant formula would otherwise drain from the budget can go to other food items for the family.”

Penny adds that the myth that milk is necessary in a

healthy diet should be debunked. Humans, she says, need milk until our fourth or fifth year. Beyond that age, milk is not really necessary because there are other sources of its nutrients. “When I did my field work in Thailand, fresh milk was hardly available. There was only instant formula and this awful milk powder. Soon there was a huge marketing push for the dairy products from Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. And now Thai children get milk at school even though a large portion of the population is lactose intolerant,” says Penny.

“Concern for food security should begin from the moment of conception. It starts with ensuring pregnant

women with an adequate diet and continues to proper feeding of infants, children, and certainly adults. We, breastfeeding advocates, want to see breastfeeding considered part of a national food security plan. We want to explore the idea of including breast milk in the calculation of a country’s food supply and the food balance sheet. We expect a lot of resistance but at least we’re beginning to discuss the issue.”

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chemical/pharmaceutical/“Life Industries” company in the world. And as those agrotoxins begin to appear in mother’s milk, we will be full circle, as Wyeth also produces infant formula.

Imagine a world where everyone was dependent on multinational corporations—or worse, one giant corporation—for their seeds, medicine and food including infant formula. And imagine that our governments permitted it because of their close relations with corporate power. Consider the inducements that companies would offer to end such self-sufficient practices as planting a garden with your own seeds or breastfeeding your baby. To share food and seed is normal

practice for women; now it is a crime to share ideas or seeds according to the new regimes run by companies like Cargill and Monsanto.

A feminist analysis might explore the interconnections between breastfeeding, pharmaceuticals, contraception, food and agrotoxins, and ask how these linkages relate to the increasing power of transnational corporations. Breastfeeding advocacy is not a trade-off for environmental rights, food rights, children’s rights or women’s rights; it is a means of acquiring those rights. Breastfeeding is one window for examining globalization, and may well be the clearest possible example of the indivisibility of all human rights.

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