

Men Can Breastfeed, Too **By Ines Avellana**

If you think breastfeeding infants is solely a woman's responsibility, then think again. Arugaan, a non-government service organisation for women with young children, challenges this myth in breastfeeding through an innovative programme that involves men in the role of breastfeeding their children.

Promoting shared responsibility in child care, Arugaan, provides free training and counselling services for couples mainly from rural and urban communities in Metro Manila and Eastern Visayas who want to breastfeed their children. It also conducts training on indigenous healing, on therapeutic traditional massage, and herbal medicines.

The following is a documentation of the many ways by which men can take part in breastfeeding responsibilities. They are gleaned from actual cases, from a roster of Arugaan's clientele. Arugaan believes that although many factors have contributed to the success of each case, harnessing men's potentials for child care and involving them in breastfeeding children on an equal and shared basis with women stands out as an important element in its overall success.

The word arugaan is a Filipino word meaning to nurture fully and with commitment.

Erwin was a university student when he first caught a glimpse of the deeper issues involved in breastfeeding. A resource person had come to his class in Community Development to speak on the topic of Breastfeeding and Food Security. Before that, he had thought of it as simply a woman's concern, not realising that he was very much a part of it. Later, Erwin understood what breastfeeding implies for the empowerment of women, the nurturing of family life, conservation of the country's resources, and how it is affected by the globalisation of trade.

To his regret, Erwin found out that if he had been breastfed, he could have acquired multi-intelligences. Since he had been bottle-fed, he was 25 times at risk of getting sick often and hospitalised. And if his mum had chosen breastfeeding over a longer period of time, her risk of having breast and ovarian cancer would have been reduced by 50 percent. Importantly, she would not be still living in fear of getting pregnant if only she breastfed each of her babies exclusively for six months.

What struck Erwin even more was the cynical manipulation behind the marketing of artificial infant formula that targets vulnerable women and profits from their fears and labour. As mothers, women are most vulnerable during pregnancy and birthing—crucial moments of life-bearing and life-giving, powerful acts that sustain humanity and that society ought to celebrate, value and revere. Instead, men have turned this stage of the women's reproductive cycle into an opportunity to make enormous profits.

How? Available figures on the milk industry in the Philippines show that it sells US\$416 million worth of products annually. The infant formula market aims to capture the three babies born every minute in the country alone. Globally, four babies are born every second in the world—all potential consumers of industrial products manufactured by U.S. and European (male-dominated) corporations. Conservative estimates place milk industry profits at US\$6 billion annually. Contrast this with the 1.5 million babies that UNICEF says could die if not breastfed, and many more who suffer malnutrition.

What disgusted Erwin was the discovery that Nestle, the global milk monopolist,

employed and exploited the youth as sales agents, leading them to believe that the artificial milk products they were pushing were really breast milk substitutes. Hard-sell advertising campaigns mislead and confuse women, making them doubt their ability to nurture their own babies and depriving them of their innate resources. In the Philippines, 1/4 of a worker's daily wage is needed to purchase the daily milk consumption of her baby (about 3/4 litre).

The milk industry has institutionalised unethical marketing practices that include giving attractive gifts

to doctors, making donations to hospitals, sponsoring attendance at medical conferences, offering scholarships, as well as bribing government officials.

Acting on his newfound conviction, Erwin convinced his mother Paz to facilitate a breastfeeding seminar in her workplace. As a result, Malou and Beng became successful breastfeeding working employees of a big Philippine firm. Today, Erwin himself and his wife Jing are the happy parents of EJ and Joaquin, both breastfed.

In 1996, Erwin was invited to speak at a workshop on the topic Youth Involved in Children's Health at the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) conference on Children's Rights, Children's Health held in Bangkok, Thailand.

Despite the odds, many young couples are making a conscious choice to breastfeed their babies. The Manila press recently took notice of the efforts made by flight at-

tendants Joanna, Beth and Cris who are able to personally breastfeed only three days a week, being on the job on international flights the rest of the time. What they have been doing has been to express their milk and store them in special icebox containers, which are then flown back to Manila by Northwest Airlines. Their husbands then fetch the milk from the airport.

Then there's the story of Albert and Nancy and Wilson and Julie, two couples who attended classes in natural childbirth as well as breastfeeding in St. Luke's Hospital. Nancy and Julie both gave birth to twins, who are now one year old. They are successful breastfeeding working mothers to their one-year-old babies. Albert and Wilson helped in expressing breast milk manually from their wives. After two months, when Nancy had to go back to her work outside the home, she had so much milk that the couple donated 25 6-ounce bags of it to the Arugaan creche centre. The centre maintains a 10-hour day-care facility in Quezon City, in an area where many offices are located.

It was the milk from Nancy that Fe and Rommel used to feed their baby who



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had been born prematurely weighing 1.5 kilos. While their infant was being cared for at the Manila Doctors Hospital, Rommel would accompany Fe to hospital nurseries nearby so that Fe could breastfeed other babies who had been orphaned. This enhanced Fe's milk supply while waiting for their own baby to be well enough.

Robert, on the other hand, is one father who's a familiar voice at the other end of Arugaan's counselling hotline for child care. Manager of a store in the commercial district of Binondo, he has convinced many mothers to breastfeed and referred them to Arugaan.

Another breastfeeding family is that of Mitzy and Al and their children DanDan, 6, and Nadine, 1. It was with Al's encouragement that Mitzy went into tandem nursing. He would massage her to assure a steady supply of milk, a technique he learnt massage from the more experienced mothers of Arugaan. Through their persistence, the couple convinced Al's parents, both medical doctors who trusted only the baby bottle for their grandchildren, that breastfeeding was a good option.

Another supportive husband is Jay, a mechanical engineer who helped his wife Gina to initiate breastfeeding even if the hospital did not encourage it and their baby's paediatrician had already prescribed infant formula. He would cook for her himself, whipping up healthy dishes that helped keep their baby free from colic and allergies. At Arugaan, Gina learned how to breastfeed and the young parents now feel that they are empowered as nurturers.

Trade-union leader Vic and his wife Sol are expecting their second child, and he hopes that this time she will be able to avail of a longer period of paid maternity leave than the eight weeks now prescribed by Philippine law. Last June 2001, the International Labour Organisation passed Convention 183 which provides for a minimum of 14 weeks paid maternity leave and paid breastfeeding breaks at the workplace. Vic is very much involved in the Maternity Protection Campaign that seeks implementation in the Philippines of the newly passed international standards on maternity protection. Aside from Convention 183, the World Health Organisation has in fact urged that working mothers be

given four months leave, saying that early resumption of their previous work load would result in long-term consequences on their health. These include uterine prolapse, urinary tract infections, anaemia and malnutrition.

Vic and Sol, who are breastfeeding advocates, want to mobilise all working people to support the campaign and push for the creation of a maternity protection fund.

These men—Erwin, Robert, Vic, Al, Jay, Albert, Wilson—have demonstrated that they value the significant roles of women as food producers and managers of family income, as healers and teachers, and as partners in life. They know that because of mothers, humanity lives on. We value the resolve of these men to take part in the struggle to recapture the power of nurturing, from the global milk industry that has taken it away from the world's parents. ♪

Ines Avellana is the mother of Chum and Iggy Fernandez, breastfed children. Ines guided all the men above to be partners in breastfeeding, the first step in producing loving sons, boyfriends and husbands for the future.