**Step up for breastfeeding**

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It is no secret that women have had to fight for their basic human rights across centuries. Healthcare discriminates against women – from discounting their pain, the entire birth control inequality saga, right up to nearly not enough investment in medical research aimed at women.

Breastfeeding is no different. Not only is there indifference around the difficulties in the process, even in this day and age it is rather a blind spot for those who have not actually had a child. Can we say the same about birth control, prostate issues or appendicitis? Basically anything that is either oppressing women or affecting men too, makes the cut.

The reality however is, as natural as it may be, the skill is to be learned and mastered over time by mother and child. This elicits skilled support at birth and antenatal education for a new / pregnant mother.

The continued apathy across all governments towards this matter is heartbreaking. I’ve had women and women-led organizations decline talking about breastfeeding because it may attract the ‘wrong type’ of attention.

Human rights organizations based on safeguarding women’s rights consider it a non-issue – for unless a woman is facing physical abuse she doesn’t need saving?

It’s a choice, they say, but is it really a fair one? You’re neither educated about the whys and hows of breastfeeding, nor are provided skilled support at birth while formula is pushed at every possible stage of parenthood. Starting from baby shops to the birth facility where you deliver leading right up to your primary care providing paediatrician and newly mushrooming fake lactation professionals harming mothers’ physical as well as mental health in the name of support.

In the name of breastfeeding support, new mothers face perhaps the worst kind of abuse possible to be ladled out.

A mother who is at the most vulnerable stage of her life is exposed to the cruelest criticism. Where hormones sensitize her to even a moving leaf, naturally so she can ensure survival of her newborn, she is bombarded with berating behaviour, normalizing her pain and then damning her for her ‘incompetence’ to breastfeed.

I have had a dentist mother whose child had a tethered oral tissue, pushed into depression by her paediatrician because they kept saying “you’re not trying hard enough”. I had to remind her about her qualification in oral health that far surpassed mine or her paediatrician’s.

I have had an internal medicine specialist end up with a nearly dying child that we saved just in the nick of time because no one would listen to her when she would say ‘something feels wrong’.

These don’t even scratch the surface on what all goes on with mothers without any medical or professional qualifications. Teen and early marriages already have you at a disadvantage when elders of the house or even your own partner continue to normalize your pain, disregard your need for skilled support and ridicule you for not being able to breastfeed.

Where the rest of the world focuses on implementation of legal rights of a breastfeeding mother whether it’s pumping breaks at work or breastfeeding in a public place, we don’t even have the basic legal framework to support lactation education for medical care providers and professionals, let alone the mother’s rights.

The abuse of a mother that goes on in the name of breastfeeding is often also hidden in the sham of care. We care for you so we are telling you let your nipples hurt or bleed, this happens in the beginning (no amount of pain is normal at any stage of breastfeeding). We care for you so give the child a bottle (it weakens their latch and systemically ends supply or they reject the breast completely). We care for your child so we want the best formula for him, your body is not capable of providing the best (at its worst, in most cases a woman’s body is capable of producing far more suitable milk for a baby than formula), the list goes on.

The solution is education – across-the-board public education on how to support a breastfeeding mother. To identify the oppression of a new mother and actively work towards alleviating it. Breastfeeding is not just the job of a mother; the entire society supports her to make it happen.

Medical care providers at all levels need to be educated on how to support breastfeeding mothers. Health ministries, federal and provincial as well as the PMC need to actively support skilled breastfeeding nationwide instead of a statement and a webinar once a year.

Women’s rights organizations need to bring this to the table as part of their agenda, demanding bills to be passed supporting new mothers with their breastfeeding journey postpartum and at their workplace.

The theme of World Breastfeeding week this year is Step up for Breastfeeding. Before we claim to do that by our customary once a year surge of activity, perhaps make some solid changes to the way we view breastfeeding support as a gaping void to be filled.

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