

Can the Food Industry Impact my Decision to Breastfeed?

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Rocío Caicedo Borrás*

MD. MB. Food and Nutrition. IBFAN Coordinator in Ecuador. FUNBBASIC Executive Director. Practicing Physician at Hospital Docente de Calderón. Quito

***Corresponding Author:** Rocío Caicedo Borrás, MD. MB. Food and Nutrition. IBFAN Coordinator in Ecuador. FUNBBASIC Executive Director. Practicing Physician at Hospital Docente de Calderón. Quito.



“Less than half of the world’s infants and young children (aged 0–36 months) are breastfed as recommended; a third of all neonates received pre lacteal feeds during the first 3 days after birth and only one in two neonates are put to the breast within the first hour of life”.

These reduced figures in breastfeeding commonly respond to the extended promotion of infant formula and infant milk. There are many ways that advertisement for breast milk substitutes impact mothers’ choice to breastfeed their babies and to continue breastfeeding during the first two years of the child’s life.

The recommendation issued by the World Health Organization in 1981 and the resolutions regulating the subsequent merchandising code for breast milk substitutes aim at standardizing the rules for advertising and inappropriate promotion of these products, including: infant formula, baby bottles, pacifiers, and supplementary food products.

Despite the efforts to bring forward these regulations at national levels, it has been very difficult for most countries to create legal bodies enabling actions to be taken in defense of the rights of mothers, fathers, and families to access reliable information about infant nutrition. This information must be free from the influence of aggressive marketing campaigns and merchandising for these substitute products. These campaign strategies continue to influence the decisions on food and nutrition of babies, reducing or even causing an early halt of breastfeeding, which would otherwise widely benefit babies and their mothers' health and nutrition in the short and long term.

Commercial influence in decisions about infants' nutrition

In contrast to the aforementioned breastfeeding figures, the state of the baby formula industry shows its increasing profit worldwide. In 2019, this market achieved a total worldwide income of 70.6 billion USD.

The 2023 Lancet series on the topic of breastfeeding, describe the multilayered and highly effective strategies of baby formula manufacturers to address the parents, health professionals, and policymakers. These include:

- Presenting their products – with little or no supporting evidence – as answers to common infant health and developmental challenges in ways that systematically undermine breastfeeding;
- Using digital platforms to substantially extend the reach and influence of marketing; and
- Lobbying governments in an effort to prevent the strengthening of breastfeeding protection laws and to challenge food standard regulations.

Code dissemination and further action

After more than 40 years since the promulgation of the international code for commercialization of breast milk substitutes, the WHO with the support of civil societies like the IBFAN network (International baby food action network), held the first world congress on the code in Geneva in June 2023. They proposed several goals, such as: the creation of policies and strengthening mechanisms to coordinate and manage these policies. Thereof, countries would finally acknowledge the mandatory character of the code making it into legislation. Thereafter, it is possible to subdue the conflicts of interest created by the food industry within the health system through health professionals and the ongoing advertising broadcasted across mass media, social networks, and other communication platforms on the internet.

IBFAN is committed to continue supporting breastfeeding and overseeing the observance of the code as we continue to advocate for the unobstructed advancement of the implementation of the code. Likewise, we seek to promote public policies that favor breastfeeding. We overall seek to work in accordance with the conclusions and recommendations expressed by the countries participating in the Geneva forum which became a milestone in policymaking to support breastfeeding.

To conclude, the way to achieve dissemination and promotion of breastfeeding is still complex. Nevertheless, there are more foreseen actions and awareness by many to get the necessary support of governments, the civil society, and health professionals to gain the needed knowledge on this subject and its successful implementation in the public and private areas.

Similarly, we need to bear in mind that it is also relevant to address individuals, a key factor to foster breastfeeding aiming to overcome the fear and lack of confidence experienced by mothers in their own capacity to breastfeed. These limitations are induced by baby food campaigns that seem to take advantage from their doubts and also attempt to convince mothers of the impossibility to breastfeed bringing forth ideas like an alleged failure in milk production. Actually, such events are absolutely possible to reverse and many of them are merely untrue. These beliefs prevent achieving successful breastfeeding, and totally surmountable and essential to SAVING MORE BREASTFEEDING as well. Therefore, we will continue to support mothers and their babies in this life period of utmost importance for nutrition, both at public and individual levels.