

# The overall **OBJECTIVE:**

To protect breastfeeding and optimal feeding practices as a key natural resource for food security and safety and as a basic women's right

## **gBICS CONTRIBUTION TO THE** *Economic participation of women*

**g b i c s** the global breastfeeding  
initiative for child survival

*gBICS is supported by Norad*

## *gBICS contribution to the* **ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN**

gBICS Partners' work is also centred on the protection of labour rights and working conditions of women, particularly pregnant and nursing women from all economic sectors, who are, in their majority, young women incorporated into the labour force, mostly into the informal sector.

According to the WBTi report on 51 countries, maternity protection obtained the second lowest average score, highlighting the relative neglect of this area of support to women. Of the 51 countries assessed, 37 provide maternity leave of less than 14 weeks. It also showed that only 8 countries offer women in the informal or un-organised sector the same level of protection as those in the formal sector. According to ILO the rate of female labour force participation increased to 51.7% in 2008; in the world's poorest regions, over 50% of the women work in vulnerable employment, characterized by low pay, long hours of work and informal working arrangements.

Support for breastfeeding in the workplace becomes crucial as more and more women take on paid employment in addition to their care and nurturing responsibilities at home; protection for nursing mothers in the workplace becomes even more important. Such protection includes paid maternity leave (or leave with social security benefits), as well as support in the workplace for expressing or breastfeeding (paid breaks, a location with adequate conditions), and protection from discrimination. Vulnerability to discrimination, dismissal, and lack of maternity leave are compounded by factors of race and class and by women's employment in the informal sector, where they receive no benefits.

gBICS works to sensitize key actors on the rights and needs of working pregnant and breastfeeding women, as well on the fundamental contribution of women to the welfare of the family and to the development of society; to raise awareness of women on their rights to maternity protection and breastfeeding; to strengthen capacity of civil society organisations to advocate for improved maternity protection; to build political commitment and mobilization of a broad political consensus that maternity protection is necessary for the well-being of society; to strengthen legal and social support systems to promote breastfeeding among working women; to ensure that working places are mother-friendly places. gBICS partners have also developed training instruments on women's labour rights and work in a broad coalition with other allies in such capacity-building at the international level (with the ILO, for example) as well as in the definition of norms and policies at governmental levels and with community and civil society organizations.



## Maternity Protection

All women have the right to enjoy a safe and healthy maternity and to make informed decisions about their infants' and young children's feeding – including full support to exclusively breastfeed for the first 6 months and to continue breastfeeding until their child is 2 years or more. While maternity and breastfeeding are natural processes, they are particularly threatened by afflicting circumstances such as poverty and gender-based discrimination, as well as by work situations. The world over, women face institutional and societal discrimination that often result in fear or coercion – impacting directly upon their health, nutritional and educational status, their reproductive rights to decide freely and responsibly of the number and spacing of their children, as well as the means and ways of feeding them. This is particularly manifest among poor women who are, in general, the most vulnerable of all women.

Breastfeeding is a collective right of both women and children; it falls within the framework of women's "reproductive rights" developed at the United Nations International Conference on Human Rights (1968) and re-endorsed over the years in several other international instruments. From a human rights perspective, this means that the State – the primary duty bearer – is under the obligation of enabling all women to enjoy their reproductive rights to safe maternity and optimal breastfeeding. The State thus bears the responsibility to ensure that all women, whatever their economic or educational status, their age or marital status, have adequate and affordable access to information concerning reproduction and contraception, to quality nutrition, to health care services during pregnancy and lactation, to safe birthing practices, as well as to infant feeding counselling and assistance.

Working women face specific challenges – and even more so if they are breastfeeding –, and that maternity protection at work also needs to be translated at national level into strong protective labour-specific legislation.

Maternity protection at work means securing the rights of all working women (the rights holders), through the obligations of the State – as the duty bearer – to respect, protect, and fulfill these workers' rights. At the same time, employers too have the responsibility to respect their workers' rights by complying with national legislation or other regulations and agreements.

Concretely, this means that the State must make sure that working women enjoy, over and beyond the reproductive rights mentioned above, a period of rest before and after birth (maternity leave), income security and the guarantee of reintegrating their job after the period of leave, protection from all forms of discrimination related to their reproductive role, sound breastfeeding counselling for breastfeeding initiation and continuation, a supportive environment enabling to follow World Health Assembly (WHA) recommendations regarding optimal infant and young child feeding practices, as well as flexible working time.

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “MATERNITY PROTECTION AT WORK”?

Maternity protection measures at work promote gender equality and contribute to dismantling barriers which prevent women from obtaining economic autonomy on an equal footing with men. It means defending women's rights to work, to choose their job and to keep it. It also means that women are entitled to work in dignity, and to benefit from decent work conditions that bar out discrimination and discriminatory practices based on their sex and their reproductive role. It signifies fair salaries that meet their basic needs as well as those of their family – including when they are temporarily not producing goods or services because they are procreating children and caring for them.

Maternity protection also means that mothers – and their babies – are entitled to safety at work and to healthy surroundings at the workplace. It stands for allowing

new mothers to take an adequately paid maternity leave from work that is long enough to ensure their own health and rest and the healthy beginnings of their child – at least enough time to bond with him or her, to establish a sound breastfeeding routine and to follow WHA recommendations concerning 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding. Women also have the right to work in an environment that facilitates breastfeeding when they return to work and thus are entitled to breastfeeding breaks and to breastfeeding facilities at the place of work.



global Coordination Office for the gBICS Programme – CEFEMINA  
P.O. Box 5355-100, San José, Costa Rica • Tel/fax: (506) 2224-3986 / (506) 8882-6936  
E-mail: [globalcoordinationgbics@gmail.com](mailto:globalcoordinationgbics@gmail.com) • [www.worldbreastfeedingtrends.org](http://www.worldbreastfeedingtrends.org)  
[www.ibfan.org](http://www.ibfan.org) • [www.waba.org.my](http://www.waba.org.my)