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Mehtab Lalwani
Aga Khan University

Kiran Nawaz Ali
Aga Khan University

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Because Breastfeeding is Never Done Alone

Mehtab Lalwani*¹, Kiran Nawaz Ali¹

The analysis of the new tool “the cost of not breastfeeding” shows the high costs of not breastfeeding in Pakistan around five billion US dollars per year. This is call for more breastfeeding support nationwide through expanding the role of Lactation Consultants.

Breastfeeding is a crucial aspect of a child’s development and promoting it can have significant benefits for the health and well-being of infants and their mothers. In Pakistan, where breastfeeding rates remain low, lactation-specific healthcare providers, as experts, must take collaborative actions to encourage breastfeeding (1).

Dr. Dylan Walters and Alive & Thrive first developed The Cost of Not Breastfeeding Tool between 2017 and 2019. The Cost of Not Breastfeeding is an open-access tool in collaboration with Alive & Thrive, Limestone Analytics, and funding from the Government of Canada. Nutrition International revised and created the second version of the tool in 2022 (2). This version includes updated statistics, new indicators, and the capability to generate results for various breastfeeding occurrences or targets, and virtual access to the outcomes for more than 100 nations worldwide. The tool reveals that breastfeeding rates in Pakistan rank among the lowest globally, with only 19.6% of infants experiencing early initiation of breastfeeding. Furthermore, merely 47.8% of infants are exclusively breastfed during the first five months of their lives. Consequently, the expense of breast-milk substitutes is a whopping US \$918.9 million each year in Pakistan. Health concerns cases per year for not breastfeeding include child diarrhea with 6,920,264 cases, child acute respiratory illness - 123,847 cases, child obesity - 83,004 cases, Breast cancer with 2379, ovarian cancer – 911 cases, and Type II diabetes - 190,319 cases (2).

These are concerning statistics, as breastfeeding provides numerous benefits for both mother and baby, including improved nutrition, immune protection, and bonding. However, there are many challenges to breastfeeding in Pakistan, including a lack of support, misinformation, and societal norms that discourage breastfeeding in public places. There are some more challenges listed below that contribute to diminished rates of breastfeeding (1) (3).

*¹BScN, IBCLC, MScN scholar, Aga Khan University School of Nursing and Midwifery, Karachi, Pakistan. Email addresses: mehtablalwani@gmail.com, mehtab.lalwani@scholar.aku.edu

- mixed-feeding practices are encouraged by society and careers (for example: thinking that a baby requires more liquids or meals before the age of six months because the mother's milk alone is insufficient);
- a lack of support for breastfeeding in hospitals and healthcare procedures and policies;
- inadequate availability of trained personnel in the community and in healthcare facilities;
- aggressive marketing of milk powder, formula, and other breast-milk alternatives;
- insufficient maternity leave laws, as well as other workplace regulations that support a woman's right to breastfeed once she resumes work;
- lack of understanding among mothers, families, healthcare professionals, and policymakers regarding the risks of not exclusively breastfeeding as well as correct feeding techniques.

One group of leaders in promoting nationwide breastfeeding in Pakistan is lactation consultants. Lactation consultants are experts in lactation and breastfeeding, providing education, support, and advocacy for breastfeeding mothers and their families. Through their work, they are helping to create a supportive environment for breastfeeding in Pakistan and improving the health and well-being of mothers and babies.

To ensure a successful breastfeeding journey, for both the mother and her child it is crucial for a mother to receive support from available sources around her. This includes professionals like lactation consultants, her family, other breastfeeding mothers and the entire community. Lactation experts can play a role in educating healthcare providers, policymakers, employers and communities about the benefits of breastfeeding and the best ways to support breastfeeding mothers. They also can advocate for policies that promote breastfeeding workplaces maternity leave provisions and protection for nursing mothers in spaces. Additionally, they can offer personalized guidance and counseling to help mothers overcome any challenges they may face while achieving their breastfeeding goals.

Although there may be a shortage of lactation specialists in Pakistan, those who are dedicated to this field work tirelessly to promote and support breastfeeding. It is essential to raise awareness about this role in order to improve breastfeeding rates across the country and subsequently enhance the healthcare of newborns. The Global Breastfeeding Collectives Investment Case provides tools like the cost of not breastfeeding assessment that actively supports initiatives by advocating for policy changes and increased funding for maternal and child nutrition in various countries. Similarly, the Ministry of National Health Services of the Government of Pakistan can also utilize tools to plan budgets effectively while raising

awareness, about this important issue. Furthermore, it remains essential to incorporate lactation care experts within the healthcare system as a strategy, in achieving breastfeeding goals across the population.

To conclude, the invaluable efforts of lactation experts play a role in promoting breastfeeding practices in Pakistan. Their dedication to education, advocacy and support assists in fostering a nurturing environment, for breastfeeding while tackling the obstacles and hurdles that mothers may encounter. By championing breastfeeding initiatives, a community or a nation can enhance the well-being of both future generations contributing to prosperous Pakistan.

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