



Joint statement by UNICEF Executive Director and WHO Director-General on the occasion of World Breastfeeding Week

1 August 2023 - Geneva/New York - In the last 10 years, many countries have made significant progress to increase exclusive breastfeeding rates. Yet even greater progress is possible when breastfeeding is protected and supported, particularly in the workplace.

This World Breastfeeding Week, under its theme, “Let’s make breastfeeding at work, work” - UNICEF and WHO are emphasizing the need for greater breastfeeding support across all workplaces to sustain and improve progress on breastfeeding rates globally.

In the last decade, the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding has increased by a remarkable 10 percentage points, to 48 per cent globally. Countries as diverse as Cote d’Ivoire, Marshall Islands, the Philippines, Somalia and Viet Nam have achieved large increases in breastfeeding rates, showing that progress is possible when breastfeeding is protected, promoted, and supported.

However, to reach the global 2030 target of 70 percent, the barriers women and families face to achieve their breastfeeding goals must be addressed.

Supportive workplaces are key. Evidence shows that while breastfeeding rates drop significantly for women when they return to work, that negative impact can be reversed when workplaces facilitate mothers to continue to breastfeed their babies.

Family-friendly workplace policies - such as paid maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, and a room where mothers can breastfeed or express milk - create an environment that benefits not only working women and their families but also employers. These policies generate economic returns by reducing maternity-related absenteeism, increasing the retention of female workers, and reducing the costs of hiring and training new staff.

From the earliest moments of a child’s life, breastfeeding is the ultimate child survival and development intervention. Breastfeeding protects babies from common infectious diseases and boosts children’s immune systems, providing the key nutrients children need to grow and develop to their full potential. Babies who are not breastfed are 14 times more likely to die before they reach their first birthday than babies who are exclusively breastfed.

Supporting breastfeeding in the workplace is good for mothers, babies, and businesses, and that is why UNICEF and WHO are calling on governments, donors, civil society, and the private sector to step up efforts to:

- ensure a supportive breastfeeding environment for all working mothers - including those in the informal sector or on temporary contracts - by having access to regular breastfeeding breaks and facilities that enable mothers to continue breastfeeding their children once they return to work.
- Provide sufficient paid leave to all working parents and caregivers to meet the needs of their young children. This includes paid maternity leave for a minimum of 18 weeks, preferably for a period of six months or more after birth.
- Increase investments in breastfeeding support policies and programmes in all settings, including a national policy and programme that regulates and promotes public and private sector support to breastfeeding women in the workplace.

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Afghanistan's health system suffers critical underfunding, calls for donor support

18 August 2023 - Launched today by the World Health Organization (WHO), a new Alert underscores the crucial importance of ramping up investment in healthcare services provision in Afghanistan, particularly in the underserved areas where the healthcare infrastructure is severely under-resourced and remain vulnerable due to the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

After decades of instability, exacerbated by severe drought and natural disasters, Afghanistan is currently facing a prolonged humanitarian crisis, with millions of people living with poor or no access to health and food, putting them at a severe risk of malnutrition and disease outbreaks. The vulnerability of women and girls has further intensified, as they face increased obstacles in accessing healthcare due to the ban on education and workforce participation.

The revised Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan for 2023 reveals an alarming increase in the number of people in urgent need of humanitarian aid. As per the plan, 28.8 million people in Afghanistan require immediate assistance, up from 18.4 million prior to August 2021. To address the health emergency, 14 million people, including 7.5 million children and 3.1 million women, are currently targeted for health assistance, out of which 8.4 million have already been reached in the first six months of 2023. The healthcare response has been commendable, with a total of 25.7 million healthcare services provided between 2022 and 2023.

However, despite these efforts and without sufficient funding, 8 million people in Afghanistan will lose access to essential and potentially lifesaving health assistance, and 450,000 patients will have little to no access to life-saving trauma care services, including blood transfusions and referrals. In addition, an estimated 1.6 million people with mental health conditions will have little to no access to mental health consultation and psychosocial support.

The WHO Alert highlights the dire consequences that will result if underfunding continues in Afghanistan's healthcare system. The health sector is facing significant barriers to delivering holistic services to the Afghan people, especially women and children, resulting in fragmentation and increased vulnerability, particularly in underserved areas.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, stated: "The situation in Afghanistan is grave, and the lack of resources and funding to support health workers and facilities is putting countless lives at risk. Women and children are suffering the most. I call on donors to give generously so that we can continue our life-saving work".

Dr Ahmed Al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, urged the international community to unite with WHO to help tackle the ongoing humanitarian health crisis in Afghanistan. He said, "It is our collective responsibility to act now to support the Afghan healthcare system. The consequences of inaction are catastrophic and may leave a lasting impact on the health and well-being of the Afghan people."

Dr Luo Dapeng, WHO Representative to Afghanistan, expressed concern about the underfunding of the health