Breastfeeding & Gender Inequality

World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action
Penang, Malaysia, October 2010
Breastfeeding Movement & Gender Inequality

- Since the early days of the breastfeeding movement, breastfeeding quality has been linked to gender roles, gender inequality, and women’s status.

Dr. Cecily William: “Milk and Murder,” 1939

- All women workers, clerks and coolies, teachers, doctors, and domestic servants alike, should have adequate time after confinement in order to feed their own babies.”

- Her words highlight the struggles that women face about how to best allocate their resources – time, money, possession, energy, bodies, – across their multiple roles.
Breastfeeding Movement & Gender Inequality

Ted Greiner, Ideas for Action Programmes for Promoting Breastfeeding

• “an overview of historical and geographic patterns of breastfeeding suggests that one of the major factors associated with a decline in breastfeeding may be the erosion of women’s power in society.”

• “improved working conditions and maternity benefits for working women; help with the burdens of childcare and household tasks, especially during the first weeks after delivery; health care that is more sensitive to the needs of women; the opportunity to space babies as they choose; and freedom from the fear and suffering caused by poverty and malnutrition.”
The 1990 *Innocenti Declaration* declares that the following:

- “efforts should be made to increase women’s confidence in their ability to breastfeed. Such empowerment involves the removal of constraints and influences that manipulate perceptions and behaviour towards breastfeeding.…. obstacles to breastfeeding within the health system, the workplace and the community must be eliminated.…. Measures should be taken to ensure that women are adequately nourished for their optimal health and that of their families…. [ensure] that all women also have access to family planning information and services.”
Breastfeeding Movement & Gender Inequality

UN Commission on the Status of Women for their hearings on women’s human rights and elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls

• “A woman’s right to breastfeed is integral to many human rights….Her right to breastfeed also stands on its own as a feature of her own rights to health, reproductive health, maternity protection in the workplace, gender equity, education and accurate information, and a safe and clean environment”
Sara Amin, co-Director of the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) Secretariat writes, in her history of the breastfeeding movement,

- “Breastfeeding advocacy has realized the need to take into account the social and economic conditions of women which hinder breastfeeding, while highlighting that addressing gender issues remains a challenge for the 21st century.”
Breastfeeding & Gender Inequality: In reality

- Breastfeeding practice and advocacy do not always consider the status of women or gender inequality.

- Very complicated ideas that can seem overwhelming.

- Need to break down these ideas so they seem manageable and controllable.
Breastfeeding & Gender Inequality
Finding our way across time, space and culture

Paige Hall Smith, PhD, MSPH
World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action
Penang, Malaysia, October 2010
A way of understanding gender:

7 Role Framework

- Christine Oppong, formerly w/ the International Labor Organization

- Framework to understand women’s status vis-à-vis men’s (or gender inequality)
  - Roles in society
  - Productive and reproductive
  - Affect on demography (fertility, migration) in developing countries

- Relevant to understanding how women’s status affects breastfeeding
7-Role Framework

Roles shape economic, political & social status by providing:

- Responsibility
- Authority
- Resources
- Constraints
- Stressors
- Joy
- Opportunity
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complicates</th>
<th>Expands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Obligations to kin</td>
<td>• Increases our resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Responsibilities to partner</td>
<td>• Reduce vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Care for children</td>
<td>• Increase joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Contribute to household economy</td>
<td>• Increase opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Contribute to the good life of our community</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
7-roles: True across time and space

- **Constraints**
  - Limited time
  - Limited energy
  - Limited resources
  - One body!

- Life ➔ decisions about how to best allocate our time, our money, our possession, our energy, our bodies, – over the course of our life and across these 7 roles.

- “Although we are living different lives than our ancestors, --both human and nonhuman-- we are still required to resolve the same dilemmas or tradeoff’s as they had to make. The trade-offs we have to make between living, working, resting, reproducing, and caring for young, have always been there. And to some extent, all of these are necessary. But these are increasingly incompatible with each other.

  *Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, Mother Nature*
Women’s productive activities are, first, never-ending and it absorbs far more of their working hours than those of their male counterparts; second women by and large do the work in the home which is unpaid, and third, women's work both outside and inside the home remains to a large extent unremunerated and invisible.

- Christine Oppong

Men’s and women’s labor in these roles varies

Resources, opportunities, obligations, constraints, stressors and joy that accrue to men and women vary

In general, men receive financial and non-financial resources for the work they do & much of the work women do is unpaid.
# How do the roles affect status?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Status</th>
<th>Political Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• the activities she does in the seven roles,</td>
<td>• the power she has over resources, opportunities and decisions in the roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the social norms, values, and perceptions of her work in the roles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• whether and how she acquires the knowledge and skills needed to perform well in the role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acquisition of financial and non-financial resources in the role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relationships she has with others as she fulfills her roles particularly in terms of how she acquires admiration, deference, imitation, and attraction.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Maternal Role: Status & breastfeeding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Concept</th>
<th>Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Bearers, nurses, socializers of next generation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Expectations: norms, values, perceptions | What are the social expectations for mothers?  
What are her personal preferences?  
Are their laws protections mothers & social support for mothering? |
| Time Use              | How much times is required?  
Can she share responsibilities with others, inc., spouse? |
| Knowledge & Skills    | Does she have knowledge & skills on pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, raising children?  
Are knowledge & skills sex segregated? Do women & men know different things? |
| Resource Acquisition  | Does she have access to money and material goods she needs?            |
| Power over resources  | Does she have control over how household money is used?  
Does she have control over how she raises the children?  
Does she have control over what others do with her children? |
| Social position       | How is she perceived by her family, peers as a mother?  
What does she have to do to gain approval, acceptance? |
# Occupational Role: Status & breastfeeding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Concept</th>
<th>Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Productive activities outside the home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Expectations: norms, values, perceptions | What are the social norms & expectations for workers & working mothers  
Do the laws protect women workers and are their social supports for working mothers [pay, sexual harassment, leave, lactation room] |
| Time Use           | How much time is required and is this compatible with mothering?  
How much time doe she have to spent away from work for maternal duties |
| Knowledge & Skills | Does she have knowledge & skills for the work?  
Are critical knowledge & skills “sex segregated”? |
| Resource Acquisition | Does she have receive fair wages or money or material goods for her labor? |
| Power over resources | Does she have control over the resources she earns?  
Does she have control over space, use of her time & body at work? |
| Social position    | How is she perceived by others as a worker, working mother?  
What does she have to do to gain approval, acceptance as a worker, working mother? |
Changing roles without changing structures

- In many places more women are entering the paid labor force.

- Most workplaces & communities are arranged around the needs of men not the needs of women especially the needs of “working” mothers.

- Women who are pregnant, give birth, breastfeed, or care for children are handicapped and left very vulnerable since they then find it very difficult to manage their responsibilities as a paid worker and a mother.

- For women there is a great deal of overlap and spillover between their roles but we live in a world that sees these roles as being separate.
Breastfeeding: Spillover activity

- Activity associated with the mothering role not the occupational role.
- For the “working” mother, breastfeeding involves women’s maternal body and time at work and emotions not generally associated with paid work.
- Mothers need for both mothering and breastfeeding to be more flexible to accommodate their personal and social expectations across multiple roles,
- Need for flexibility butts up against
  - organization of work, values, perceptions, resources and opportunities, and decision-making authority around the lives the men.
  - the biological demands of breastfeeding,
  - the need for mothers to have access to their babies
  - Body work required for exclusive breastfeeding.
  - social norms about women breastfeeding in public spaces.
Conclusion

- The more control women have over
  - Their body
  - Their space
  - Their time
  - Their life
  - Resources

- The higher their status

- And the better able they are to breastfeed