

The Breastfeeding Transition
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This paper proposes a conceptualization of “The Breastfeeding Transition” as a way of describing changes in global breastfeeding rates related to large-scale demographic changes shaping the status of women. There are four phases to The Breastfeeding Transition:

1. Phase 1: Lower status of women is associated with higher rates of breastfeeding: this is the historical norm in most societies –most women live in societies where their economic and social status is low and most women breastfed.
2. Phase 2: Higher status of women is associated with lower rates of breastfeeding: alongside urbanization, women's educational rates increase and more women become employed and breastfeeding declines among women with higher status, while remaining constant for lower status women.
3. Phase 3: Higher status of women is associated with higher breastfeeding: women's status continues to rise and women of higher status return to breastfeeding while breastfeeding declines among women of lower status.
4. Phase 4: In this *projected (desirable) phase* breastfeeding increases among low wage, low education, minority women and is sustained/increasing among working women with higher education and income

What is meant by the status of women?

Of some importance is the definition of the status of women that I am using when describing this transition. Because this articulation is based on a limited literature I am primarily defining the status of women by the key demographic factors discussed in most of the relevant studies: residence (urban or rural); educational attainment; income; and employment. Underlying these critical demographic factors are broader considerations. The International Food Policy Research Institute defined the status of women as “women's power relative to men's in the households, communities and nations in which they live.” Taken as a whole, the conceptualization of the status of women that is imbedded in this transition relies heavily on the idea that with increasing education, and secondarily with more income, reproductive control, and urban residence women gain more power and control over their own lives.

Why is the breastfeeding transition important?

1. It is global. It seems to occur all over the world and it seems to be predictable.
2. Phase 3 leads to significant disparities in breastfeeding rates by race, income, educational attainment and other factors that shape women's status within and between countries.
3. Understanding may lead to improvement. By increasing our understanding of the factors that shape this transition we can enter into a 4th phase whereby there are high rates of breastfeeding across all populations of women while still seeing an increase in the status of all women.
4. Helps shape a macro understanding of the relationship between breastfeeding and the status of women.