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8. Breastfeeding. A Feminist Issue.
WABA Activity Sheet 4

WABA's Gender Programme formally emerged as a response to the unanimous call made by participants to Global Forum II, in Arusha in 2000. Discussions at Arusha around breastfeeding and related issues, such as Human Rights, Food Security, Women's Rights (Ten Links, 1998), though sometimes mired in controversy, brought to light the links between breastfeeding and the reality of women's lives. These discussions highlighted the need for understanding the challenges women faced in breastfeeding through the lens of gender.

The programme started with gender training workshops for breastfeeding advocates, but soon expanded to include gender training for men. The Gender Programme examined and analysed various situations in which women breastfeed and the challenges posed, and shared these through its 2005 publications such as *Reproductive Health & Rights*; *Grinding Realities*; and *Against All Odds*. As the programme continued to expand, special efforts were made to bring in feminist groups to create a bridge between the breastfeeding movement and the feminist movement. As a result, WABA was invited to participate in several international women's meetings e.g. Association for Women's Rights and Development (AWID), International Women's Health Movement (WHM), and human rights meetings of groups like the Right to Food Network.

The Programme also responded to the threats that globalisation poses to breastfeeding. While on one hand the labour market for women exploded, on the other hand, labour laws in many Asian countries were being dismantled to attract FDI. These posed special challenges which the trainings examined, such as maternity entitlements. Another noteworthy outcome of the programme is the Men's Initiative. This initiative has grown to take on such key issues as violence against women, and the sharing of housework and child care.

– Lakshmi Menon, former Consultant to WABA on gender and women's issues



WABA places breastfeeding in a gender equality framework. The early works of Penny van Esterik, a founding member of WABA and the first Coordinator of WABA's Women and Work Task Force, helped WABA to position breastfeeding within this framework. In such a framework, "gender-equitable division of labour, for example, would recognise the unique care work done by lactating women and would accommodate it by assuring that enabling conditions are available to women in order that they can combine breastfeeding and work."

"Conditions supportive to successful nurturing, are conditions which reduce gender subordination generally by contradicting negative images of women and emphasising the value of women's reproductive work."⁸

– Penny van Esterik, Founding SC member, and former Women and Work Task Force Coordinator