

EO Files (August 2015)

"THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief"

Support Hong Kong mums so they don't give up on breastfeeding

York Chow says good policies and open mind are needed to keep our babies breastfed for a longer time

August 1 marks the beginning of World Breastfeeding Week, observed annually to promote and support breastfeeding and the health of infants. This year's theme of working women and breastfeeding provides us with an opportunity to consider how Hong Kong is faring here.

The benefits of breastfeeding, both immediate and long-term, are well-recognised. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), which recommends that mums breastfeed exclusively until a child is six months old, this is the "best way" to provide infants with the nutrients they need for healthy growth, and also gives them protection from illnesses. In turn, this has positive impact on the family and society, including improvements in children's physical and cognitive wellbeing, as well as lower public spending on healthcare.

In Hong Kong, these benefits are increasingly recognised by mothers and families. According to an annual survey conducted by UNICEF's Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative, the breastfeeding rate upon discharge from maternity units in our city has risen from 19 percent in 1992 to 84 percent in 2013.

Nevertheless, exclusive breastfeeding is often not sustained. According to Department of Health statistics, only 22 percent of Hong Kong babies born in 2012 were exclusively breastfed at the age of one month, with the figure dropping to a mere 2 percent at the age of six months. A 2010 study by scholars at The University of Hong Kong found that because mothers were returning to work, they were among those more likely to wean the child from breastfeeding before the age of one month.

We all want what to give our children the best possible start in life. Many working mothers wish to breastfeed, but may be unable to do so because of long working hours, a lack of supportive policies, and limited public facilities available for this purpose. As a society, we must do better to enable mothers who wish to breastfeed, especially working women, to do so at any time and in any place. We need stronger policies and infrastructure, including friendly workplace policies, as well as wider

acceptance from the community at large.

The Equal Opportunities Commission handles complaints related to breastfeeding under the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance, which makes it unlawful for any employer or provider of goods, facilities or services to the public to discriminate against a person who has family care responsibility in the course of employment or the provision of goods or services. As part of our comprehensive review of the discrimination laws launched last year, the Commission consulted the public on expanding the definition of “family status” to expressly include breastfeeding women.

It is our belief that this would provide clarity to the existing protection of a woman’s right to breastfeed in Hong Kong. We are currently compiling the responses received through this exercise, and will make recommendations to the Government in due course.

Another issue is maternity leave. Currently, women are entitled to 10 weeks of statutory maternity leave in Hong Kong. The Commission believes the Government should consider the policy with reference to the International Labour Organisation. Suitably extending the maternity leave period would enable women to breastfeed for a longer duration, as well as help to retain the talents of working mothers and facilitate women’s equal access to employment.

More promotion is also needed about the benefits of breastfeeding. In fact, many mothers continue to face negative attitudes about breastfeeding, particularly at work and in public. Last year, a photo of a woman breastfeeding her child on a bus, taken without her consent, went viral and sparked a heated discussion about public decency. The Commission reiterated at that time our stance that it is a mother’s right to breastfeed her baby anywhere and at any time, and urged for wider public acceptance. The incident illustrated the need for greater awareness and public education.

The Government can certainly lead the charge by being a positive role model to the private sector. In 2013, the Food and Health Bureau issued a public health advice to all Government bureaus and departments urging them to implement Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace Policy. Suggested supportive measures include permitting lactation breaks during the workday and providing appropriate space and refrigeration facilities. This was a positive step.

To communicate a stronger message, the Government should ensure that all

bureaus and departments have adopted these recommendations, and provide more resources to promote breastfeeding in hospitals to new mothers. It should also make certain that all Government and other public premises have breastfeeding and baby-care facilities and rooms. This would help to set a good example for private property owners and employers.

Indeed, it is in the interest of employers to offer facilities to assist breastfeeding employees. In 2013, women made up 48 percent of our city's economically active population, and the majority of women of child-bearing age are participating in the labour force. By taking steps that allow new mothers returning to work to breastfeed or express and store breast milk, employers can help retain female talent and foster staff loyalty.

Aside from providing accommodation measures such as hygienic storage options and private location for milk expression, employers and managers should also visibly communicate their support for breastfeeding mothers and ensure that workplace policies relating to breastfeeding are clearly laid out and made known to all employees. This can go a long way towards changing any negative misconceptions about breastfeeding at work and in public generally.

Expanding the options for women who would like to breastfeed longer or exclusively would help to provide our children with a healthy beginning to the rest of their lives. For our collective future, we must all work together towards this goal.

Dr. York Y.N. Chow
Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission

(Note: A version of this article was originally published in the South China Morning Post on 1 August 2015.)