

## ■ IMPLEMENTATION OF BREASTFEEDING LAWS

# Ministry earns flak at follow-up meeting of media alliance

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Islamabad

Bitter realizations about the manner in which the infant milk formula industry continues to manoeuvre the actions of the Ministry of Health in Pakistan—a country with the highest under-5 mortality ranking in South Asia—set the tone and tenor of a follow-up meeting convened to up scale media advocacy for the protection of breastfeeding here on Wednesday.

Convened by TheNetwork for Consumer Protection, which is the secretariat of the National Alliance for Promotion and Protection of Breastfeeding, this was only the second meeting of the 'media alliance' constituted in July 2009 to promote wider dissemination of Breastfeeding Rules and to motivate the media to play its watchdog function in monitoring the implementation of and industry's compliance with the Breastfeeding Ordinance 2002.

The meeting had a painfully late start because of the delayed arrival of the Advisor to the Prime Minister on Women's Development Yasmin Rehman, who chaired the session, but concluded on a positive note, with the media better empowered to shake the corridors of the Ministry of Health and the conscience of its stewards.

Even though Pakistan promulgated the Breastfeeding Ordinance in October 2002, it was after eight years of advocacy, in February 2010, that the rules and regulations of the law were eventually notified. Again, the formulation of the National Infant Feeding Board (NIFB) on July 15 has now been eclipsed by postponement of the board's first meeting, which had been scheduled on July 29. "Will we have to wait for another 8 years before this meeting is convened," members of the alliance questioned.

The Ministry of Health's tilt in favour of the infant milk formula industry became more apparent with the knowledge that while the industry's representative has been included as a member of NIFB, the representation of a consumer rights organization has conveniently been omitted. "We see this as a major defeat in our struggle," an alliance member representing Unicef remarked.

The meeting urged the Ministry of Health to hold the NIFB meeting without further delay so that the process for designation of provincial bodies and deployment of inspectors can roll off.

Addressing the gathering,

Yasmin Rehman promised to have the protection of breastfeeding included as an agenda item in the next meeting of the Standing Committee on Health, and to raise the issue on all platforms where she is performing a leadership role. She termed breastfeeding as an issue that cuts across human rights, child rights, and women's right, and underscored the need for coordinated, rather than isolated action to lend impetus to implementation of the Ordinance. "The media should play a greater role in highlighting social issues. It is media pressure that sets the agenda of standing committees," she remarked.

Sheeba Afghani from Unicef expressed concern over continuing off-the-counter availability of breast milk substitutes despite prohibition, and provision of free formula milk to women residing in IDP camps. "We cannot stand like bystanders, and allow the government to take another eight years before laws are implemented," she remarked. Sheeba also called for constitution of provincial committees with authority for implementation of the Ordinance. "We don't want toothless committees," she demanded.

Earlier, Dr. Aisha Zafar, programme coordinator-nutrition, made an insightful presentation. She informed that according to WHO, 60 percent of all deaths occurring among children less than 5 years in the developing countries are attributable to mal-nutrition, diarrhoea being the leading cause of death and breastfeeding being the guarantor of health and longevity. Pakistan has the worst child mortality indicators in South Asia, she said, substantiating the statement with data.

Dr. Aisha was frank enough to point a finger at the media for its failure to engage in 'proactive advocacy' to save mother and child health. She advised them not to promote sensationalism and political news at the cost of development issues. She urged the media to exert sustained pressure for implementation of breastfeeding law in true spirit; to spread awareness about the World Breastfeeding Week being observed from August 1-7; and to aggressively counter the marketing tactics of formula milk companies.

Dr. Anwar Rafey, national advocacy and research coordinator of TheNetwork, Dr. Shahid Awan from Unicef and Dr. Iqbal Kahut from WHO also contributed to the discussions.