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Breastfeeding support in the workplace

A GLOBAL GUIDE
FOR EMPLOYERS



Breastfeeding
is key to the
comprehensive
development of
children, their
mothers and
society.

This document builds on material developed by UNICEF Uruguay Country Office and provides recommendations that aim to help employers establish breastfeeding rooms and supportive workplace environments for workers and their families.

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BREASTFEEDING IS KEY TO THE COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN, FOR MOTHERS AND SOCIETY.

Breastfeeding is key to the comprehensive development of children, for mothers and society.

Family-friendly policies enable parents and caregivers to provide the best start in life for their children; they pay off in healthier, better-educated children, a better-equipped workforce and lead to sustainable growth. Family-friendly policies help workers to reconcile work and family responsibilities and advance the well-being and development of their children. UNICEF has identified four major policy areas to children's well-being, women's empowerment and the provision of decent work for caregivers:

- Sufficient paid leave to all parents and caregivers, in both the formal and informal economies, to meet the needs of their young children (this includes paid maternity, paternity, and parental leave, and leave to care for sick young children).
- Support for mothers to breastfeed exclusively for the first six months of life, as per World Health Organisation and UNICEF recommendations, and to continue breastfeeding for as long as they choose.
- Ensuring that all children have access to affordable, good quality childcare and early education.
- Providing child benefits and adequate wages to help families provide for young children.

These policies provide parents and caregivers with the essential time, resources and services needed to recover from giving birth and to ensure secure bonding and attachment with their newborns, creating a foundation for lifelong health.

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Why is breastfeeding support in the workplace important?

Breastfeeding support is crucial as breastfeeding nourishes and provides all children with the best start in life. Breast milk acts as a baby's first vaccine, providing critical protection from diseases and even death. Breastfeeding also allows for secure attachment, cognitive development and reduces the burden of childhood and maternal illness, lowering health care costs, creating healthier families and strengthening the development of societies. Through the adequate scaling-up of breastfeeding to recommended levels, the lives of more than 820,000 children younger than 5 years old could be saved and 20,000 cases of breast cancer could be prevented annually.

Despite these clear benefits, research has found that returning to work without adequate support mechanisms can hamper optimal breastfeeding practices. Breastfeeding support is therefore essential for the health and development of children, for mothers and society. The provision of workplace breastfeeding rooms, paid nursing breaks and an enabling breastfeeding environment and culture are low-cost interventions that can contribute to improve breastfeeding, job productivity and employee retention.

Governments, businesses, civil society and families can work together to protect and facilitate this practice to protect women's health and ensure that children are able to survive and thrive. In this guide for employers we share technical recommendations and good practices to facilitate the implementation of breastfeeding rooms and the creation of support structures within the workplace. It is advised that measures aimed at providing breastfeeding support (and other family-friendly policies) in the workplace should go beyond simple infrastructure changes to include, for example, awareness raising and employment protection and non-discrimination.

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Breastfeeding is the natural, and healthiest, way to feed a baby from birth. No milk substitute can compete with breast milk in terms of nutrients, antibodies, attachment prospects bonding and stimulation.

The advantages of breastfeeding manifest themselves right from the baby's first contact with the mother's breast and benefit the baby, its mother and the relationship between the two. Ideally, babies need six months of exclusive breastfeeding, that is, without other liquid foods, and should thereafter continue breastfeeding, with the addition of other foods, until the age of 2 or older.

Employers play a critical role in supporting families and enabling women to continue breastfeeding for as long as they choose.

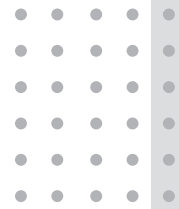


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1 **BENEFITS** of breastfeeding

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1.1



Benefits for the company



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Supporting breastfeeding in the workplace has significant human and economic benefits.

- Improving the corporate image of businesses, showing that they care about the health and well-being of working women and their families,
- Reducing the amount of leave requests made to attend doctors' appointments, for both mother and child, as well as the amount of sick leave,
- Reducing maternity-related absenteeism, which can translate into 30–70 per cent fewer absences,
- Increasing the retention of female workers, as they feel more supported by the company,
- Reducing the employee turnover rates, and saving the company money by eliminating the need to hire and train new staff.

Breastfeeding strengthens the bond between a mother and child.



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The implementation of a breastfeeding room or space creates greater job satisfaction because it:

Facilitates greater balance between breastfeeding and work.

Helps breastfeeding women feel more at ease during working hours and in their lives generally.

Increases breastfeeding women's sense of belonging and commitment to the company.

Increases working women's performance as they feel more motivated and content to carry out their duties.

Helps employees to return to work after maternity leave and reduces leave for childcare .

Allows women to combine work with motherhood, in the form of continued breastfeeding.

Shows that staff are recognized, respected and supported as mothers and fathers.

1.2

Benefits for the mother and child

- **Breastfeeding substantially improves the health of a mother and her child.**
- **Breast milk protects the child from infectious diseases such as diarrhoea and respiratory infections,** thereby reducing the frequency or severity of common childhood illnesses.
- **Studies have proven the fundamental role of breastfeeding in preventing non-communicable diseases such as obesity,** being overweight, hypercholesterolemia, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. It is one of the practices that help prevent sudden infant death syndrome.

From breast milk, the child receives all the nutrients needed at just the right quantity and temperature, as it adapts to the needs of the child throughout his or her growth and development.

Breast milk has bioactive components which cannot be reproduced so baby formulas, or other milks which have significantly different compositions, cannot be used as a substitute. It is therefore very important that, once a mother returns to work, her child continues to be breastfed.

► If, in its first six months, a baby is fed some other form of food, it may adversely impact its health and growth, as well as reduce the amount of breast milk consumed.

For the mother

- **Encourages a speedy recovery** after delivery as it prevents heavy bleeding.
- **It reduces risk of chronic diseases** such as breast and ovarian cancers, heart disease and diabetes.
- **It also improves birth spacing.**



Benefits for society and the environment

1.3

- **Breast milk is always available and within the reach of any economy.** It offers advantages that cannot be replicated by any other food. However, breastfeeding practices are often adversely affected by variables such as the inappropriate marketing and promotion of breast-milk substitutes and a lack of support systems in the workplace.
- **Breastfeeding encourages family savings,** as there is no need to spend money on purchasing formula, as well as savings on medical costs, as children get sick less.
- **Breast milk is a natural,** renewable and sustainable resource, which does not generate waste nor pollution.



An **exclusive and equipped area** for mothers to breastfeed their children, express milk and store it properly.



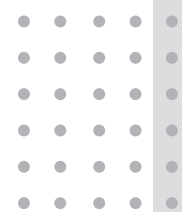
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2.1



Breastfeeding rooms: rights and obligations



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Employers have a responsibility to ensure safety for women in the workplace free from environmental hazards. They should also prohibit discrimination in the workplace on the basis of pregnancy, breastfeeding or family status. Businesses should ensure the monitoring of workplace discrimination.

What is a breastfeeding room?

It is an exclusive and properly equipped area for mothers to breastfeed their children, express milk and store it.

Rights and obligations

As a minimum, employers need to comply with any existing legislation on maternity leave and workplace breastfeeding support. UNICEF recommends at least 18 weeks' maternity leave, striving for at least six months of paid maternity, paternity and parental leave after the birth of the child that is available for both parents to promote and support exclusive breastfeeding.

Workplaces should be in accordance with ILO Maternity Protection Convention 2000 (no. 183) article 9:

1. A woman shall be provided with the right to one or more daily breaks or a daily reduction of hours of work to breastfeed her child.
2. The period during which nursing breaks or the reduction of daily hours of work are allowed, their number, the duration of nursing breaks and the procedures for the reduction of daily hours of work shall be determined by national law and practice. These breaks or the reduction of daily hours of work shall be counted as working time and remunerated accordingly.

> Employers should arrange training for managers on the benefits of breastfeeding in terms of higher employee retention, lower turnover costs, health benefits to the child and mother, and lower absenteeism due to a child's illness.



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Breastfeeding rooms must provide:



ADEQUATE SPACE AND PRIVACY



ACCESSIBILITY



FURNITURE



SUPPLIES



LIGHTING



VENTILATION



HYGIENE

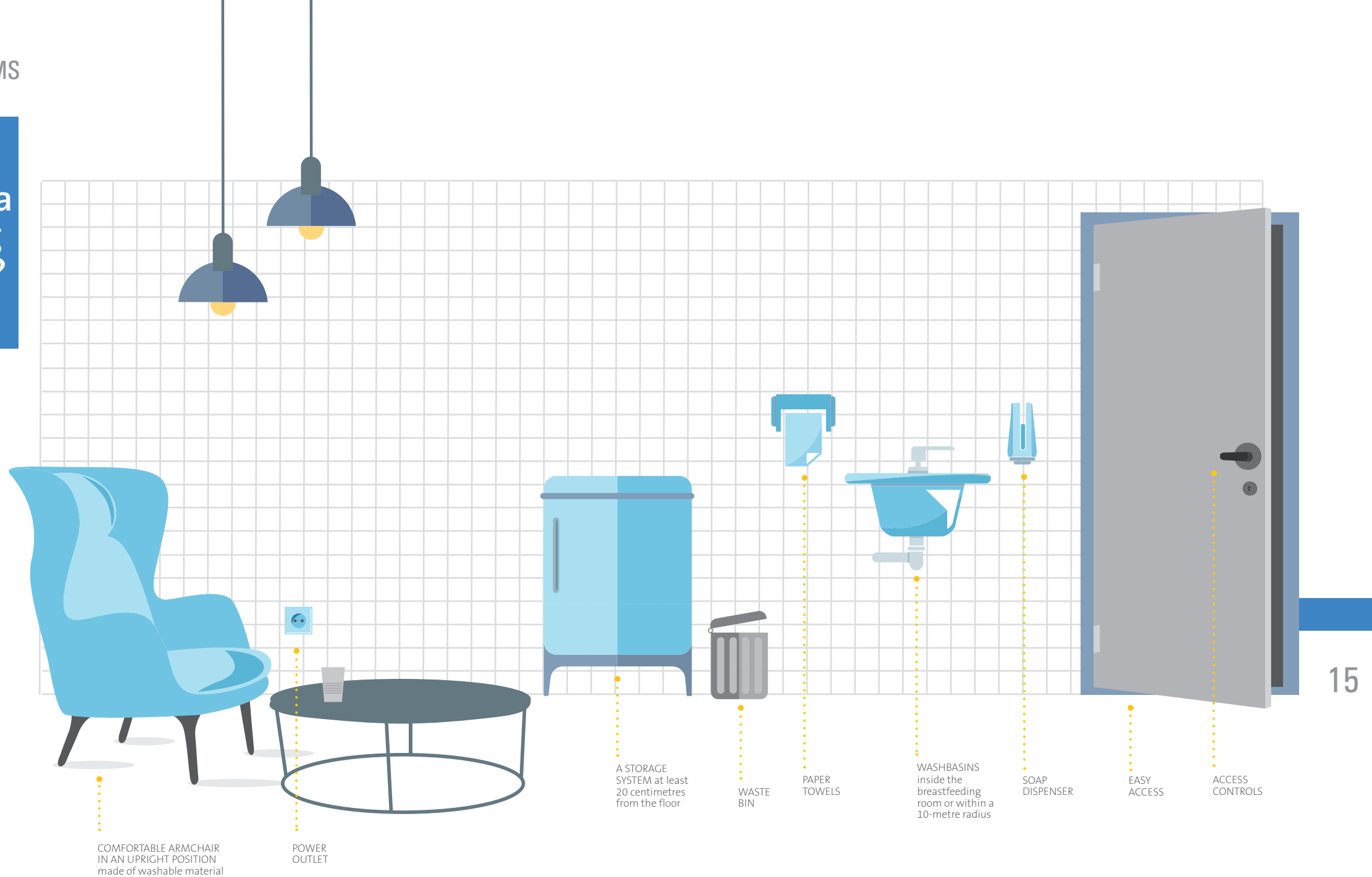
Business leaders and their networks should act jointly with governments and civil society actors to raise awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding and family-friendly policies for children's health and development.

2.2

What should a breastfeeding room include?

A breastfeeding room should be a clean, comfortable, safe and a private space for women. The main function is for mothers to effectively express and store milk during working hours.

It should also offer comprehensive and culturally appropriate breastfeeding support to employees, which includes breaks, private space, and lactation counselling support and education services with an assigned coordinator to help with access, planning and oversight.



2.3

Location, accessibility and privacy



A breastfeeding room should be located in a physically separate area, with direct access, away from the restrooms, but close to the workspace.

It must also ensure privacy, so entrances must therefore be closed properly, and the facilities must be designed to ensure that mothers using the room are not visible from the outside.

- It is suggested that the space should be fully available during the workday and that clear signage be placed inside and outside the room.
- It is necessary to take into account the location of the space, to maintain its distance from areas where toxic substances are handled, or waste is deposited. How much time to get to the room and other observations that are considered pertinent can be applied.
- The lactation room should have exclusive access control for breastfeeding women and cleaning staff. This can be done by putting a manual lock on the door or installing an electronic access control system and using an “occupied”.

Breastfeeding support during COVID-19



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Additional hygiene measures should be taken into consideration during COVID-19, when it is vital for employers to provide guidance and training on occupational safety, health measures and hygiene practices (for more information see [UNICEF, ILO, UN Women key steps employers can take](#)).

More information on encouraging and supporting working mothers to continue breastfeeding can be obtained from [UNICEF guidance](#) and [WHO FAQs](#).¹

- Mother and infant, while breastfeeding, should maintain a distance of at least one metre from other people and the mother should avoid touching her eyes, nose and mouth.
- Women should be advised to wear a mask while breastfeeding, wash their hands with soap before touching the baby; wash breast milk pumps and milk storage containers after every use; and routinely clean and disinfect the surfaces they touch.
- Where possible, Breastfeeding rooms, where women can express milk should be kept clean and equipped with disinfecting wipes, a trash bin with a lid, hand sanitizer, and hand-washing facilities.
- Common areas, including breastfeeding rooms, should be cleaned more often, as should repeatedly touched surfaces (e.g. door handles and elevator buttons).
- Educational leaflets should be distributed, and training, where necessary, should be given to workers to support occupational safety and health measures, hygiene practices and other measures to protect themselves, their families and communities. Posters can be displayed on walls with prevention and protection advice. (Messaging should follow [WHO advice for the public](#)).
- Employers should adhere to the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent WHA resolutions **including WHA 69.9 and the associated WHO Guidance on ending the inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children** (see the information below under Furniture and supplies and also the [UNICEF, Global Nutrition Cluster and GTAM Infant & Young Child Feeding brief](#)).

¹ In particular, symptomatic mothers should be encouraged to seek early medical care. Mothers with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 should be isolated at home.

2.4 Furniture and supplies

- Ideally, the breastfeeding room should have hand-washing facilities and necessary supplies such as drinking water, liquid soap, dispenser, hand sanitizer, cleaner for surfaces, and paper towels. The taps should also be able to dispense water hands-free, i.e. automatically.
- In order to preserve the breast milk until the mother takes it and feeds it to the child, it is necessary to have a cold storage system available which should preferably be a freezer or fridge for the exclusive use of the breastfeeding room. This equipment must be at least 20 centimetres from the floor to ensure that it is hygienic.
- The room must have a comfortable chair, such as an armchair, preferably an individual seat rather than a sofa with adjustable height and good back support. This must be made of a material that allows it to be easily washed and disinfected.
- Direct or indirect advertising or promotion (posters, objects, gifts, infant formula sample, information addressed to women and families) of companies manufacturing, distributing or marketing breast-milk substitutes in any way is prohibited, in compliance with the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes.



There should also be:

A countertop or table for holding the breast pump (if a mother is using such pump) and other supplies.

A pedal-operated waste bin, preferably plain and made of stainless steel (to enable better disinfection).

Routine daily maintenance to ensure a hygienic, safe environment.

Outlets for all electronic devices, with those intended for electric breast pumps, located close to the armchairs.

A clock, coat rack/hooks and a full-length mirror to help check and readjust clothing before returning to work.

2.5 Lighting, ventilation and hygiene

Lighting and ventilation are important elements in creating a warm and comfortable environment. Hygiene is essential for the management of breast milk.

Efforts should be made to ensure that all breastfeeding activities can be carried out in a normal and safe manner.

- Natural light is preferred, but if this is not possible due to the constraints of the space, suitable artificial lighting, ventilation and heating must be provided. The use of air-conditioning is recommended to maintain suitable temperatures.
- Cleaning should be done with odourless, food-safe products used exclusively in the breastfeeding room. If necessary, a cleaning protocol prepared by the Ministry of Health is available.
- Furniture in the breastfeeding room should preferably have smooth surfaces, and any material that cannot be washed (carpets, fabric curtains or other elements that attract dust) should be avoided.
- Ceilings, walls, room dividers and floors should ideally be smooth without dirt accumulation points, and easily washed and disinfected.



A BREASTFEEDING ROOMS

2.6 Optional facilities

Some aspects of breastfeeding rooms are not required by law, but they help to encourage and support mothers at this very important stage of their lives. These include:

- A library with books, guides, brochures and posters containing information on pregnancy, early childhood and breastfeeding, among other related topics. For hygiene reasons, this library should be private and enclosed.
- Artwork, soft lighting, and bulletin board.
- Second chair and footrest to ensure comfort while breastfeeding.
- Consider inviting mothers to help design the breastfeeding room or provide a comment box to allow mothers to offer suggestions on modalities of improving the room.
- Providing a breast pump, even if it is not a formal requirement.
- Supplying nursing pads, breastfeeding gel packs, as well as glass containers or bottles with plastic lids into which to transfer the expressed milk.



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3 CASE STUDIES and testimonies about breastfeeding rooms in workplaces



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Uruguay

In Uruguay, 35 per cent of companies have a breastfeeding room on their premises and 76 per cent allow their employees to leave their workplace to breastfeed or express milk whenever they need to.²

² According to companies that responded to the survey in the publication *¿Qué están haciendo las empresas por los niños en Uruguay 2017? [What are companies doing for children in Uruguay 2017?]*, conducted by UNICEF together with Deloitte.

The headquarters of one company opened a breastfeeding room as a result of the joint initiative of union representatives and the company. In addition to this, it provides temporary breastfeeding spaces in its medical facilities when required. Being able to provide mothers with support, space and peace and quiet at this stage of their lives and helping to make their return to work as easy as possible has been a positive change for the company. In the words of its Social Responsibility Coordinator, “for women [breastfeeding at work] implies harmonization of their personal and professional lives, having that support space in the company ensures that those using the room feel more content in their return to work”.



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Bangladesh

Mothers@Work is a national programme, developed to ensure maternity protection and breastfeeding support in the workplace. The UNICEF Bangladesh Country Office is facilitating the national initiative by promoting breastfeeding practices among mothers working in the ready-made garment sector, in partnership with public, private and civil society organizations. The Mothers@Work programme has now reached 92 factories and around 160,000 workers and their young children.

This has led to improved:

- environments to support working women
- knowledge on the benefits of breastfeeding among pregnant working mothers
- breastfeeding practices among working mothers
- productivity in the workplace



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In a private tea plantation in Kericho, Kenya, an innovative baby-friendly workplace initiative is supporting mothers as they return to work. Workplace interventions in the tea plantation focus on disseminating baby-friendly workplace policies, sensitizing managers, supervisors and employees to the issue, and equipping the social welfare team to facilitate access to workplace support. Day care centres were also established, promoting safety, hygiene and play and providing breastfeeding rooms for mothers.



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Kenya

In 2017 the Kenyan Parliament passed a Health Act which requires all employers to establish breastfeeding stations with the necessary equipment and facilities; to take strict measures to prevent any direct or indirect promotion, marketing or selling of infant formula and/or breast milk substitutes in breastfeeding stations; and to grant all breastfeeding employees paid breaks, in addition to regular time-off for meals, breastfeeding, or breast milk expression, for up to one hour of every eight-hour work period. UNICEF played a key role in advocating for this Act, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Kenyan Private Sector Alliance.



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Viet Nam

Clothing and footwear is one of the largest export sectors in Viet Nam. The majority of this sector's 3.5 million workforce are women of reproductive age, of whom an estimated 60 per cent have children. Here, exclusive breastfeeding rates among working women are especially low, due to the challenge of continuing breastfeeding while working (as well as active misinformation campaigns by formula companies targeting working mothers). The Viet Nam Chamber of Commerce, the Ho Chi Minh city authorities and the clothing sector coordinated a programme for migrant families and breastfeeding mothers which has reached 74,000 workers so far, increasing breastfeeding awareness and support, and implementing childcare measures in 11 workplaces.

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Note: The Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to all persons under the age of 18 years, that is boys, girls and adolescent boys and girls. For the purposes of ease of drafting the document and of readability, in some cases, the general terms "the baby" or "the child" have been used, without implying gender discrimination.

COMMITTED COMPANIES

In addition to installing a suitable breastfeeding room, how else can the company help?

→ **COMMIT**
Commit to an enabling breastfeeding environment at work supported by the highest level of company management.

→ **RAISE AWARENESS**
of staff on the importance of breastfeeding, through training and information policies.

→ **HELP**
mothers to continue breastfeeding by offering options such as flexible schedules, part-time work or working from home.





How long will a woman need at work to express her milk?

Expression time varies for each woman, although it is possible to determine an average of between 15 and 20 minutes. Particularly during the first six months of the baby's life, expressions are necessary every two to three hours, depending on an individual woman's body and physiology.

Why should a mother frequently express milk?

A breastfeeding woman needs to express milk as often as she would breastfeed the baby; that is, every two to four hours, depending on the child's age. At this frequency, the woman feels comfortable, relieved and content, and can perform better at work, without feeling tired or in pain, optimizing her productivity.

Frequent expression also encourages a mother's production of milk as, from a physiological point of view, her amount of milk basically depends on stimulation, with a reduction in expression therefore having a negative effect on this production.

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For more information, please visit: www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development/family-friendly-policies

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