

PARLIAMENT MUST REGULATE PROMOTION OF BREAST-MILK SUBSTITUTES

Aggressive Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes Threatens Sierra Leone:

The aggressive marketing of formula milk substitutes by companies is threatening the nutritional status of Sierra Leone's children, and undermining the progress made by Government and partners in the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding.

Breast milk is the natural first food for babies, it provides all the energy and nutrients that the infant needs for the first months of life, and it continues to provide up to half or more of a child's nutritional needs during the second half of the first year, and up to one-third during the second year of life.

In a recent survey by Save the Children International, 80% of facilities surveyed in Western Area had been visited by representatives of formula milk companies at least once per week in the last 6 months. Of the facilities surveyed in Makeni, Bo and Kenema, 75% reported visits from company representatives in the last 6 months. It is clear, that formula milk companies are rapidly expanding their presence in Sierra Leone, putting significant pressure on healthworkers to use and promote their products.

While there has not yet been any direct contact at the health facilities between mothers and formula milk companies because of the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI), use of formula milk is on the rise. Of all the mothers surveyed, 62.5% had started using infant formula from 4 weeks, with it as high as 90% in the Western Area. Most mothers choose to use infant formula as a result of promotions seen on TV and heard on radio. Of the mothers in Western Area who reported using infant

formula, 60% had heard promotions on both radio and TV. Outside of Western Area, 35% of women using formula were doing so as a result of TV and radio promotions. While respondents cited numerous reasons for choosing to breastmilk substitutes, 21% said that they felt compelled to use substitutes as they had to return to work and the work environment was not conducive to breastfeeding.

Promotions on the Rise....

80% of health facilities in Western Area visited on a weekly basis by company reps.

62.5% of mothers surveyed, using breast-milk substitutes.

60% of mothers using formula in Western Area influenced by breast-milk promotions on TV & radio.

International Code of Marketing

It is imperative that Parliament adopt the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes into national legislation to protect and promote breastfeeding. The code stipulates that there should be absolutely no promotion of breastmilk substitutes, bottles and teats to the general public; that neither health facilities nor health professionals should have a role in promoting breastmilk substitutes; and that free samples should not be provided to pregnant women, new mothers or families.