



THE SCOTTISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION

A BLETHER ON...

Breastfeeding



August 2023

World Breastfeeding Week 2023:

World Breastfeeding Week is held between the 1st and 7th of August each year, with the aim of highlighting the benefits of breastfeeding, as well as the structural inequalities which make breastfeeding difficult for women across the world. In order to understand whether these inequalities impacted the women of Scotland, we held an online discussion on the 1st of August, with multiple themes arising: **a lack of information and support, employment, sexualisation and poverty**. The following report contains a summary of each theme, alongside multiple recommendations which focus on the ways policymakers can better support new mothers.

6 Recommendations:

1. Continue to develop peer support programmes across Scotland, to provide improved assistance to new mothers.
2. Improve information for expectant and new mothers surrounding feeding options, while being mindful of cultural differences.
3. Provide further economic support for mothers in poverty, to ensure they are free to make their own choices around feeding.
4. Alter social education to urge young women to feel confident in their bodies to combat increasing media pressure.
5. Create a universal breastfeeding policy, which includes paid breaks to express/feed.
6. Encourage partners to assist with domestic chores throughout pregnancy to alleviate pressure on mothers.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK, and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.

Women's Views:

Lack of Support and Information

“Most women can breastfeed, and there are some things that impact that, if they get the right support, and that’s what’s failing. It’s not individuals, it’s the society, the culture, the set-up...it’s all of these things...Women are being failed; women are not failing.”

Throughout our conversation, attendees made it clear that breastfeeding is made more difficult due to poor information and a lack of all-round support for new parents. Women explained that prenatal classes are more focused on the birthing process and that due to remaining stigma surrounding breastfeeding, women can find it difficult to access information. It was explained that social pressures can cause women to feel shame around breastfeeding and this can result in women choosing bottle feeding instead. This can be further complicated by differences in culture, resulting in different feeding norms. Attendees also stated that the lack of information contributes to women feeling unsupported, as they are unaware of the different peer support networks on offer in Scotland. Peer support was seen as a particularly valuable way to reduce feelings of isolation felt by new parents, improving mental health. It is therefore vital that increased awareness campaigns are carried out with expectant mothers, so they are fully informed before making feeding choices.

- “You know, you’ll be like ‘what on earth am I doing?’...and the networks that we try and build, it’s so people have someone there to turn round and ask what’s normal.”
- “I think one of the biggest helps is that if...the people around you, if they all breastfed, you’re more likely to follow that because you see that as the natural thing to do. And they’re that supporting and nurturing network”

Poverty

“...it’s sad that women feel that they have to breastfeed because they can’t afford formula. We’re seeing that more from our volunteers, it’s so much pressure if you’ve got a mum who says that they need it to work, because if it doesn’t, they can’t afford to feed their baby”

Sadly, women engaged in supporting new mothers explained that the rising costs in living have caused hardship for those financially struggling. They stated that volunteers are experiencing increased pressure to ensure breastfeeding is successful, as some women cannot afford formula to feed their babies. Poverty also impacts breastfeeding rates, with those in precarious situations being less likely to have the time and resources to carry it out. Women felt that this ultimately reinforces health inequalities, as those living in more deprived areas are less likely to experience the benefits of breastmilk as a child and breastfeeding as a mother, and therefore are more likely to experience negative health outcomes. Despite breastfeeding potentially not being a viable option for all mothers, women explained that increased support for women, financial and social, could contribute to reducing health inequalities in Scotland.

- “If you have unstable housing, or you don’t know where your next meal is coming from, trying to make breastfeeding work is not going to be on your priority list”
- “There’s still so much to do; the children born into the more affluent families are more likely to get breast milk, they will be more likely to be healthier, and that widens those health inequalities.”

Sexualisation

“It’s the sexualisation of women’s breasts isn’t it. They’re for another partner’s pleasure, rather than the mammary gland that feeds a newborn.”

Women who had breastfed their children explained that they often felt sexualised while feeding. They stated that the overt objectification of women across media has resulted in feelings of self-consciousness and a lack of body confidence. One woman suggested that social media in particular has added to a feeling of being constantly observed by the male gaze, creating a hostile environment in which women no longer feel that they can openly breastfeed. Attendees stated that more had to be done from a younger age to encourage women’s body confidence, and that, therefore, education should be altered to include full explanations of the value of breastmilk to babies, as well as the birth process, to empower young women.

- “We seem to have went back the way, rather than progressing. I don’t know if that’s perhaps to do with social media, and women are feeling threatened”
- “I think that’s something that we’re losing...Is that women have pride in their bodies and know how unique their bodies are. From conceiving, to growing babies and feeding”

Women ‘Doing it All’

“...a lot of my friends have started having babies...and from listening to them...they feel the pressure that if they breastfeed, they can’t get back to work or...they can’t maintain their lifestyle.”

A further barrier to women feeling free to breastfeed, was poor employment structures and policies. Some women expressed that there was a pressure to return to work quickly after birth in an effort to avoid “missing out” or have their career diverted. It was clear that this contributes to a feeling of guilt, with mothers pressured to “do it all”, but with little help from partners or employers. As a result, women hoped to see better implemented breastfeeding policies across workplaces, as well as paid breaks to express/feed.

This idea of ‘doing it all’ could be further evidenced within the home; as domestic chores begin to mount after the birth of a baby, women will have an increased workload, which can be worsened by bottle feeding. One woman suggested that bottle feeding was a way in which fathers could be more involved in the feeding process, while avoiding other domestic duties, such as washing up, which non-breastfeeding women were then free to carry out. It can therefore be said that new mothers are under enormous stress to perform within the domestic sphere, and continue pursuing careers, despite a lack of workplace infrastructure to assist them.

- “I think it comes down to making sure that it’s in your maternity policies, and that there is a breastfeeding policy.”
- “...people used to get cigarette breaks...and so therefore, something that you get a break for, that’s paid, that harms and kills you...let’s have a break for something that nurtures the future generation and helps your health.”
- “There’s something as well about this perception that it’s easier to bottle feed because it helps mum, but really what they mean is that they can come in and feed your baby while you go and make them a cup of tea”

Thank You!

Thank you to the women who shared their experiences with us. We will continue to strive to advocate for women across Scotland so that their views are included in the policy-making process.



SWC CONTACT DETAILS

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