

Breastfeeding for a Sustainable Start in Life: Strengthen What Works

Objectives of World Breastfeeding Week 2026



To inform families and communities about breastfeeding as a sustainable way to Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF).



To advocate for stronger policies and programmes to protect, promote and support breastfeeding.



To strengthen collaboration among governments, professional organisations, communities and individuals to create an enabling environment for breastfeeding.



Introduction

This year's **World Breastfeeding Week** theme, **"Breastfeeding for a Sustainable Start in Life: Strengthen What Works,"** recognises breastfeeding as one of the most effective interventions for improving child survival, nutrition and development while promoting maternal health and environmental sustainability. Breastfeeding provides infants with safe, nutritious and climate-friendly food without the need for manufacturing, packaging or transport, thereby reducing environmental impact.

However, breastfeeding does not succeed through a mother's efforts alone. It requires an enabling

environment where families, communities, workplaces, health systems and governments work together to protect, promote and support breastfeeding. Skilled counselling, maternity protection, breastfeeding-friendly hospitals, effective implementation of the Infant Milk Substitutes (IMS) Act, and strong community support are essential to enable every mother to breastfeed successfully.

World Breastfeeding Week 2026 is an opportunity to strengthen these systems and renew our commitment to ensuring that every child receives the healthiest and most sustainable start in life.

Status of Breastfeeding Practices in India

Global and national recommendations call for initiation of breastfeeding within one hour of birth, exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, and continued breastfeeding along with appropriate complementary feeding up to two years of age and beyond.

The findings of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6, 2023–24) indicate that India has made encouraging progress in institutional deliveries and several maternal and child health indicators. However, key Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) indicators continue to require urgent attention.

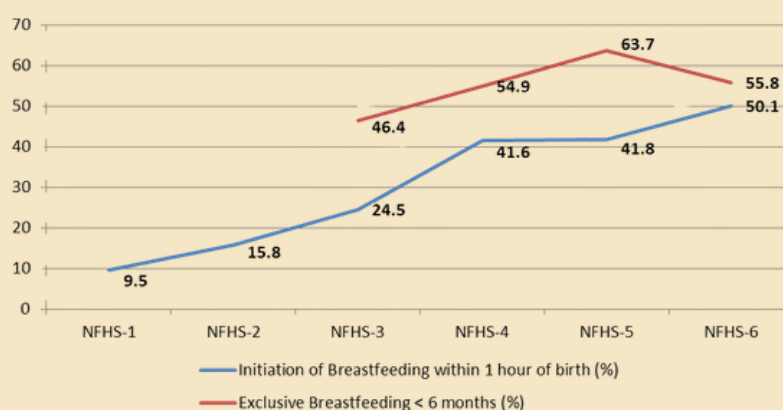
Nationally, early initiation of breastfeeding has improved to 50.1%, yet one in every two newborns still misses breastfeeding within the first hour of birth. More concerning is the decline in exclusive breastfeeding among infants below six months, from 63.7% in NFHS-5 to 55.8% in NFHS-6.

Furthermore, only 15.3% of children aged 6–23 months receive a minimum acceptable diet, highlighting persistent gaps in complementary feeding.

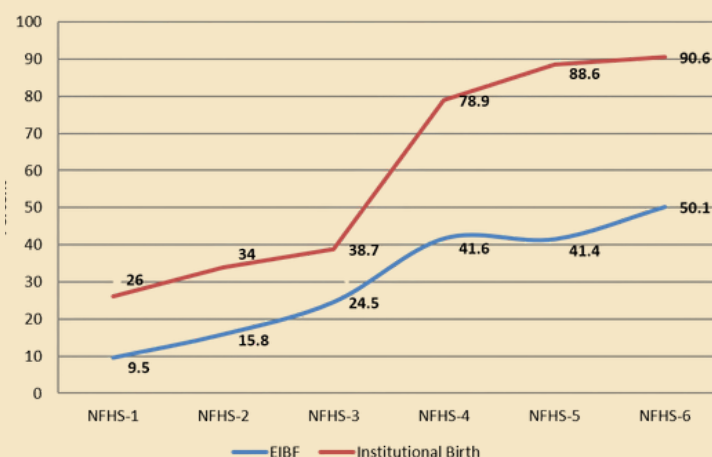
Several states have reported decline in early initiation e.g. Delhi and Odisha, while exclusive breastfeeding has declined in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Odisha.

These findings highlight the need to strengthen breastfeeding counselling, improve hospital practices, protect families from commercial promotion of baby foods, expand maternity protection and build stronger community support systems so that every mother receives the support needed to breastfeed successfully.

Trends in Exclusive Breastfeeding Rates in India (%)



Trends in Early Initiation of Breastfeeding Vs Institutional Birth (%)



Key Findings from the WBTi India 2025 Report

The World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative (WBTi) India 2025 Report provides a comprehensive assessment of India's policies and programmes for protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding and Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) on 10 indicators. Coordinated by the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) through a transparent, multi-partner and evidence-based assessment, the report identifies strengths, implementation gaps and priority recommendation for improving breastfeeding policies and outcomes.



The assessment highlights three priority indicators that require immediate attention:

- Strengthen breastfeeding support in health facilities to ensure every mother receives skilled assistance from birth.
- Protect breastfeeding through effective implementation of the IMS Act to prevent inappropriate commercial promotion of breastmilk substitutes, feeding bottles and infant foods.
- Strengthen maternity protection so that every working mother has adequate time, income security and workplace support to continue breastfeeding.

These priority actions provide a roadmap for accelerating progress towards optimal breastfeeding practices and improving maternal and child health in India.

Strengthen Breastfeeding Policies and Programmes for Optimal Breastfeeding Practices

Improving Hospital Practices to Support Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is a natural process, but it is also a learned skill that often requires timely support. The first hours and days after birth are critical for establishing breastfeeding. Mothers need skilled counselling, encouragement and practical assistance to initiate breastfeeding early and continue exclusive breastfeeding.

Despite high institutional delivery rates, many health facilities continue to face challenges that undermine breastfeeding. These include inadequate hospital policies, limited availability of trained lactation counsellors, insufficient staff training, delayed initiation of breastfeeding following birth, unnecessary separation of mothers and babies, inappropriate use of infant formula, inadequate breastfeeding counselling spaces, and continued commercial influence from baby food companies.



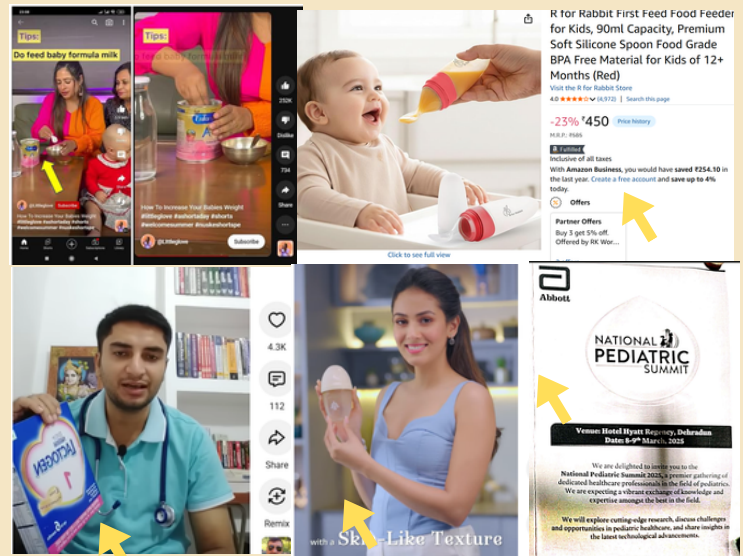
Implementing the IMS Act as a Policy to Protect Breastfeeding

Commercial promotion of infant formula, feeding bottles and infant foods continues to undermine optimal breastfeeding practices. Although India has one of the world's strongest legal frameworks to protect breastfeeding from commercial influence through the Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 1992 (amended in 2003), its implementation remains inconsistent.

IMS Act prohibits promotion of infant formula, follow on food and feeding equipments for upto 2 years of age through any kind of media and also has rules for labelling the infant formula and food.

But unfortunately, violations of the IMS Act continue to be reported through healthcare facilities, digital and social media platforms, online marketing, influencer endorsements, discounts and other promotional activities that influence infant feeding decisions. The WBTi India 2025 Report also highlights that weak monitoring, limited enforcement and inadequate accountability remain major barriers to effective implementation.

Protecting breastfeeding requires coordinated action by governments, healthcare institutions, professional bodies and civil society to ensure that mothers receive unbiased information free from inappropriate commercial influence.



Protecting breastfeeding begins with protecting families from inappropriate commercial promotion. Effective implementation of the IMS Act is essential to ensure that parents receive accurate, unbiased information on infant and young child feeding.

Implementing Maternity Protection for All Mothers

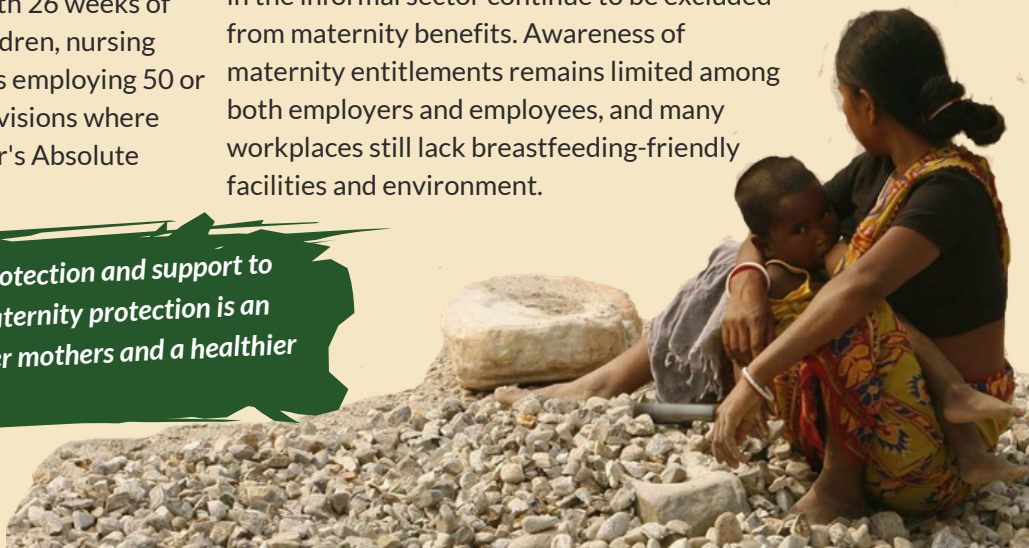
The Constitution of India, under Article 42, directs the State to make provisions for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Maternity protection is essential for enabling mothers to initiate and continue breastfeeding, particularly during the first six months of life.

India has taken important steps to support breastfeeding through the Maternity Benefit Act (1961, amended in 2017), which provides eligible women with 26 weeks of paid maternity leave for the first two children, nursing breaks, crèche facilities in establishments employing 50 or more workers, and work-from-home provisions where feasible. Complementing this, the Mother's Absolute

Affection (MAA) Programme promotes breastfeeding through counselling and skilled support within the health system, while the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) provides partial wage compensation to eligible pregnant and lactating women.

Despite these initiatives, significant gaps remain. A large proportion of women employed in the informal sector continue to be excluded from maternity benefits. Awareness of maternity entitlements remains limited among both employers and employees, and many workplaces still lack breastfeeding-friendly facilities and environment.

Every working mother deserves time, protection and support to breastfeed successfully. Investing in maternity protection is an investment in healthier children, healthier mothers and a healthier workforce.





World Breastfeeding Week 2026

Action Ideas

Government Departments



The Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW) may conduct state- and district-level awareness sessions on the IMS Act and implementation of MAA programme for public and private hospitals, with a focus on states showing declines in early initiation of breastfeeding in NFHS-6.



FSSAI may conduct workshops for food safety officers at state level on IMS Act provisions, penalties and their role in implementation and enforce the IMS Act strongly.



Ministry of Labour & Employment (MoLE) may strengthen awareness and implementation of maternity protection policies, provisions and breastfeeding support at both informal and formal workplaces and review the complaints filed at the redressal portal.

Health Facilities



Develop a breastfeeding policy and establish a committee for monitoring the breastfeeding practices. Start breastfeeding counselling in ANC period and sensitise pregnant women and their families.



All hospitals both public and private with maternity services must conduct breastfeeding friendly hospital assessment and get accreditation as a standard of care for pregnant and lactating women. Check bfhi-india.in portal for more information.

Civil Society and Communities



Report inappropriate promotion of infant formula, feeding bottles and infant foods to the District Food Safety Officer copied to CEO, FSSAI and BPNI at bpni@bpni.org



Families planning a pregnancy should choose and demand breastfeeding-friendly maternity hospitals to ensure the best start for their babies. Start asking for breastfeeding counselling during pregnancy.



Raise awareness about the Maternity Benefit Act and other maternity entitlements within your networks and communities. Encourage pregnant and lactating working women to report any violations or denial of their maternity rights at samadhan.labour.gov.in portal.

ABOUT BPNI

The Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) is a 34 years old registered, independent, non-profit, national organisation that works towards protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding of infants and young children. BPNI works through policy analysis, advocacy, social mobilization, information sharing, education, research, training and monitoring the company compliance with the IMS Act. BPNI serves as the global secretariat for World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative (WBTI) programme, that analyses policy & programmes and galvanises action at country level in different regions of the world. BPNI is part of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN)

BPNI's ETHICAL POLICY

BPNI does not accept funds or any support from the companies manufacturing baby foods, feeding bottles or infant feeding related equipments. BPNI does not associate with organizations having conflicts of interest. BPNI request everyone to follow this ethical stance while celebrating World Breastfeeding Week.

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