

Wet nurses suckle flood-swamped babies



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Contributor

WHEN MARGI, 25, FLED HER house in San Juan during the heavy rains last week, her 6-month-old baby was cold and crying. Having escaped with only the clothes on her back, she did the most natural thing she could think of to comfort and calm her baby—she breastfed him.

As a group of expat and Filipino mothers told families taking shelter in an evacuation camp in San Juan, breastfeeding in times of crisis is not only necessary, it is imperative.

Oct. 2 was Global Simultaneous Breastfeeding Day, an annual event with three objectives: To work against discrimination toward breastfeeding in public,

WET NURSES/ A6

BREAST IS BEST A breastfeeding team of expat and Filipino mothers goes to the San Juan Elementary School evacuation center to bring the message to 54 families that mother's milk is best especially in times of disaster. Colombian Gladys Morales-Guevara (left) nurses a 10-day-old infant whose mother was too tired to feed him as did Susann Roth of Germany and Nancy Baitel of the US. Second from left is Dr. Elvira Henares-Esguerra, director of Children for Breastfeeding.

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call attention to deaths that can be prevented through breastfeeding and fight against the use of milk formula which has become widespread in the Philippines.

When Nona D. Andaya-Castillo and Dr. Elvira L. Henares-Esguerra heard that mothers were lining up for milk donations at evacuation centers, too stressed to breastfeed, they decided to pay them a visit.

Andaya-Castillo is an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) and a member of Nurturers of the Earth (NOE) while Henares-Esguerra is also an IBCLC and a director of Children for Breastfeeding (CFB).

Breastfeeding team

With the help of San Juan city mayor's office and the Department of Education (DepEd), they formed an 11-person "breastfeeding team" and spoke to 54 families taking refuge at San Juan Elementary School on Friday.

Their message was simple: Breastfeeding is important in safeguarding a child's health and emotional relationship with the mother, particularly during times of disaster. Not only does it ensure a constant supply of food, it is also a source of natural medicine. It can also prevent illnesses such as diarrhea and respiratory infections.

Believing that family support for a breastfeeding mother is essential, Henares-Esguerra and Andaya-Castillo led a "psycho social intervention," where children were taught songs and games to encourage their mothers to breastfeed.

In support of Simultaneous Breastfeeding Day, at exactly 10 a.m., nine women (three expat mothers and six nursing mothers living at the center), breastfed their children. The expat mothers were asked to participate in

order to show the "universality of breast feeding."

Significant 9

Although there were only nine women compared to over 7,000 Filipinos who participated in last year's Breastfeeding Day, their efforts were no less significant.

For mothers unable to breastfeed their own children, a "wet nurse" (a mother who breastfeeds a child not necessarily her own) is the next best option.

One example is Gladys Morales-Guevarra, a Colombian member of Mothers and Darlings, who volunteered to nurse a 10-day-old infant whose mother was too tired to feed him herself.

Bridget Penales, a mother who had breastfed all five of her children, also volunteered in the event: "A lot of children are sick and dehydrated. Breastfeeding [gives the child a] complete meal and helps prevent sickness. Besides, these people have lost everything and have no money to pay for milk."

Although she has been helping with relief efforts, when Penales heard about CFB and NOE's efforts, she realized she could do more.

"I am a St. Scho girl and we were taught to give time, talent and treasure," she says. "My milk is my treasure and helping to promote breastfeeding is my talent. Doing this makes me feel like my efforts to help are more successful because we are targeting babies who are helpless."

'Foreigners do it'

Mothers waiting for government relief goods felt empowered when they were reminded that they can help their children simply by breastfeeding them. The event also reaffirmed what they had been taught in barangay health clinics.

Mabel, mother of two, says she

learned that breastfeeding has more advantages than disadvantages and that the baby gets vitamins from her milk.

She has more than enough milk for her own child and volunteered to be a wet nurse to other children in the evacuation center. She holds up her healthy 3-month-old son and says: "I feel very proud that I can help my child. When I see foreign women breastfeeding, I also do it. I know it's right."

Margi, mother of a 3-year-old and a 6-month-old, describes the stigma often attached to breastfeeding: "I used to feel that breastfeeding mothers don't have class because they can't afford to buy milk. Or they were [too stingy] to buy formula milk for their kids. Now I see foreign women breastfeeding and they have money so it shows this is not true."

No to formula milk donation

Margi quit her job at Jollibee six months ago to stay home and nurse her baby. She says breastfeeding is cheaper than buying formula milk and paying for a nanny. "I am proud to breastfeed and feel we mothers are very important to this community."

While Executive Order No. 51 disallows donations of formula milk during disaster situations, Margi says one box of formula for infants and children was given to each child last week. "But I will not use it. And even if I wanted to, I have no bottle!"

Explaining why the Department of Health (DOH) is calling on donors to abstain from donating non-human milk and other milk products to calamity victims, Health Undersecretary Alexander Padilla explains: "It has been proven that formula milk fed to infants and other milk products during emergency situations can cause adverse effects to children's

health. It lowers breastfeeding rates and triggers more illnesses."

Out-of-the-box goodies

Wanting to also emphasize the importance of eating healthy, inexpensive and indigenous foods during times of crisis, the groups CFB and NOE also gave samples of "out-of-the-box" relief supplies such as pili and peanuts, bananas, brown rice, dried fish, white beans, green mongo, kasubha, sesame seeds, danggit, kamote, gabe, sabah and tanglad.

The NGOs point out that canned goods should only be given for an initial three days after disaster strikes. After such time, the community should be given the means to cook their own food.

As "Breastfeeding Queen of the Philippines" Susann Roth says: "The cans, plastic bottles and bags we are using are going to create their own problem in the future."

Roth is a German doctor who opted to live in the Philippines with her family to promote breastfeeding in the battle against malnutrition and hunger.

Are you ready?

The CFB and NOE plan to spread their message to other evacuation sites and call on mothers to help those who can't breastfeed or to encourage them in their efforts.

This is in keeping with the theme of this year's World Breastfeeding Week: "Breastfeeding, a vital emergency response, are you ready?"

CFB Director Henares-Esguerra hopes events such as this will show that the Philippines can and will be ready.

"Breastfeeding is the least costly and most far-reaching way to alleviate poverty in the Philippines," she says. "Like [Tropical Storm] 'Ondoy,' breastfeeding is the great equalizer—no rich, poor or colors exist—they are just all mothers."