

**Address by the Minister of Health Dr Joe Phaahla, in Celebrating
Women's Month with a Focus on Breastfeeding**

The Lake hotel and Conference Centre, Benoni

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MEC of Gauteng Health, Ms Nkomo-Ralehoko

The UNICEF Country Representative, Ms Muhigana

The WHO country representative, Dr Kaluwa,

Chairperson of South African Civil Society for Women's, Adolescent and Child
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Senior officials

Members of the community

Members of the media

Good morning!

We have just come from the month of August where we celebrated Women as our mothers, our sisters and our heroes under the theme "Accelerating Socio-economic Opportunities for Women's Empowerment". The 9th of August is historical in South Africa. The whole world witnessed 20 000 South African women on 9 August 1956 who demonstrated bravery when they were able without any technology, to mobilise women irrespective of racial line to march to the Union building to protest against apartheid government's pass laws over the movement of black women in urban areas.

To accelerate Socio-economic Opportunities for Women's Empowerment, women need support from government, businesses, families, and society

which contributes to addressing the socioeconomic determinants of health. Indeed, August is an important month in the Department of Health calendar every year, as we observe and commemorate three very important celebrations including:

- the 1st week of August, which we commemorated the World Breastfeeding Week.
- the second week of August which was Polio awareness week and;
- Women's day on 9 August.

Whilst we are now in September month wherein the country celebrates our heritage; Breastfeeding remains relevant as one area of work we need to do more to normalise in South Africa. As families, communities and society, we all have a responsibility to inculcate the culture of breastfeeding in South Africa

Globally and in South Africa, we use the Breastfeeding Week every year to reaffirm our commitment to protect, promote and support breastfeeding to improve the health, nutrition, and development of babies in South Africa. I want to agree that, as we advance Socio-economic Opportunities for Women's Empowerment, we must also promote supportive workplace policies, since workplace environment as shown as an impediment for women to successfully breastfeed. Successful breastfeeding is the whole of society responsibility, from the health facility where information and early support is provided, to the household, community, and workplace.

I take note that a lot remains to be done by various sectors including government and the private sector to achieve full realization of comprehensive maternity protection. To list some of the critical areas and to remind us of the

commitments of the 2011 Tshwane Declaration to protect, promote and support breastfeeding:

- **a call for 6 months paid maternity leave** and an increase in paternity leave;
- cash and medical benefits during maternity leave;
- health protection at the workplace;
- employment protection (job security) and non-discrimination;
- breastfeeding_break/s and flexible schedules within_the_workplace for breastfeeding_mothers.
- subsidised childcare facilities support.
- support for breastfeeding mothers in informal employment

Access to all of these components of maternity protection will enable and improve breastfeeding for working women and yield direct benefits for children, mothers, employers, and businesses. These benefits will translate into long breastfeeding duration, improve immunization rates, lowers infant mortality, improve workplace productivity and decreased absenteeism.

South Africa's recommendation of optimal infant feeding is in line with the global recommendation for infant feeding. Breastfeeding should begin within the first hour after birth, and all babies should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life. Safe, nutritious, adequate, and appropriate complementary feeding should be started after six months, and breastfeeding continued for two years or longer.

We continue to invest in breastfeeding due to the many benefits it confers, from reducing common childhood illness like diarrhoea and pneumonia to its

important contribution in addressing hunger, food insecurity and ending all forms of malnutrition in children. Breastfeeding also confers health benefits to the mother, namely, protection against postpartum haemorrhaging, including breast, ovarian and endometrial cancers. We are aware that, despite the support received in health facilities, majority of mothers' initiate breastfeeding after giving birth, however the rate rapidly declines soon after they leave the health facility.

Our collective efforts are required to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding so as to ensure that every baby has the best possible start in life. The Department remains committed to ensuring sustained implementation of key strategies and policies to promote, protect and support breastfeeding. This includes among others:

- The kangaroo mother care.
- The ten steps to successful breastfeeding as a standard of care in all health facilities.
- Scaling up human milk banking for survival of babies born to mothers who are unable to breastfeed.
- Compliance to regulations relating to foodstuffs for infants and young children.
- Social mobilization through our side-by-side campaign to influence mothers, communities and workplaces to be supportive of breastfeeding.

There are various initiatives that are led by Government and supported by partners to improve Maternal, Child, Adolescents, Women's, Reproductive Health and Breastfeeding like the Side-By-Side Campaign, which is a caregiver support platform that uses technology and emerging communications sciences. The campaign is able to provide information about breastfeeding, nutrition, malnutrition, immunisations and other aspects of early childhood

development to mothers and caregivers in their native languages, 24 hours a day. This is delivered through the dedicated Facebook page and shows on 11 SABC African language radio stations.

In addition, we also have the Side-by-Side ECD edutainment radio programmes, which is now on the third season, reaching 5.7 million households weekly with information through a radio drama series. The show is led by Department of Health experts, the messages are appropriate for all caregivers. Working together as a government, civil society, communities, and parents, we can raise a healthy nation, just as the old African proverb goes, "It takes a village to raise a child."

We have committed ourselves to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of reducing maternal and neonatal deaths to below 70/100 000 and below 12/1000 live by 2030. The journey for good breastfeeding practice starts early in pregnancy and is one of the key ingredients in the achievement of this SDG objective. Despite policy changes such as Basic Antenatal Care Plus (BANC Plus) of eight antenatal contacts, pregnant women still do not attend ANC optimally.

This year during the Align International Maternal and Newborn Health Conference in May, the country made a commitment to scale up ante-natal and post-natal care to reach 90% coverage to achieve healthy lives and promoting well-being for all ages. This is a call to all women who intend and those pregnant already to attend antenatal clinic early in pregnancy to secure healthy feeding for their newborn infants.

The other key challenge that we observe as the country is babies who die before they can reach their 28 days of life emanating from poor antenatal care, from being born too soon as premature babies and others due to poor/ sub optimal feeding from birth. In response to these latter challenges the department has embarked on several key actions such as finalizing the Maternal, Perinatal and Neonatal Health (MPNH) Policy, in 2021, and revision of key clinical guidelines to support implementation of this policy.

I would like to also speak about MomConnect, which is one of the NDoH flagship mHealth project, that has proven to be useful in educating and encouraging women to take care of themselves and utilise available ante and post-natal services including breastfeeding and infant and young child feeding. Launched in 2014, the initiative uses mobile technology to improve the health of pregnant women, newborns, and infants at national scale. Today, this programme is celebrating its 9th anniversary.

Through the programme, every pregnant woman in South Africa can register to receive stage-based messaging during pregnancy up to the first two years of her baby's life. I am happy to announce that to date the programme has registered over 4, 5 million women. The programme serves as a resilient agile, reliable platform to empower women and mothers and to reach out to communities during emergency responses such as Listeriosis, COVID-19, measles outbreak and most importantly breastfeeding.

Programme Director,

While we celebrate, I would also like to highlight the issue of gender-based violence, which continues to pose a greater risk to the health and safety of women and children. I therefore like to call upon men from all walks of life

including traditional leaders to take responsibility and protect women. This also goes in particular to young men as they embark on the journey of traditional male circumcision, to be aware of issues relating gender-based violence and femicide.

Lastly, I would like to make this call for action for all of us to spread information and create an enabling breastfeeding environment to improve South Africa's breastfeeding rate. This applies to government, workplaces, communities, families, and fathers.

- All workplaces should adopt a workplace breastfeeding policy to ensure that the work place is conducive for mothers to breastfeed their babies.
- I wish to make a special appeal to employers to provide a supportive environment for mothers to breastfeed or express breastmilk while at work.

I thank you!