The marketing of commercial milk formula for use in the first 3 years of life has negatively altered the infant and young child feeding ecosystem

Presented by Rafael Pérez-Escamilla, PhD and Katheryn Russ, PhD on behalf of the Lancet Breastfeeding Series Group
Authors:
Phillip Baker (Australia), Aluisio Barros (Brazil), France Begin (Equitorial Guinea), Donna Chapman (USA), Amandine Garde (UK), Laurence Grummer-Strawn (Switzerland), Gerard Hastings (UK), Sonia Hernández-Cordero (Mexico), Gillian Kingston (Ireland), Chee Yoke Ling (Malaysia), Kopano Matlwa Mabaso (South Africa), David McCoy (Malaysia), Purnima Menon (India), Paulo Augusto Ribeiro Neves (Brazil), Rafael Pérez-Escamilla (USA), Ellen Piwoz (USA), Linda Richter (South Africa), Nigel Rollins (Switzerland), Katheryn Russ (USA), Gita Sen (India), Julie Smith (Australia), Cecilia Tomori (USA), Cesar Victora (Brazil), Benjamin Wood (Australia), Paul Zambrano (Philippines)

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INFANT FEEDING MATTERS...
AND BREASTFEEDING IS CRUCIALLY IMPORTANT

For those who don’t know...

- Human biology
- Lifelong health and development
- Maternal health
- Child survival

800,000 child deaths prevented each year

Lancet 2016

Breastfeeding 1
Breastfeeding in the 21st century: epidemiology, mechanisms, and lifelong effect

Breastfeeding 2
Why invest, and what it will take to improve breastfeeding practices?

World Health Organization

THE LANCET
INFANT FEEDING MATTERS... AND BREASTFEEDING IS CRUCIALLY IMPORTANT

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800,000 child deaths prevented each year

But, over the past 20 years, practices have changed and, globally, fewer than half of all infants are fed according to WHO recommendations.
TERMINOLOGY

Commercial Milk Formula instead of breast milk substitute
• To highlight the artificial and ultra-processed nature of formula products
• ‘Substitute’ conveys the notion of equivalence

Marketing
• Any form of commercial communication or activity that is “designed to, or has the effect of, increasing recognition, appeal and [or] consumption of particular products and services”
• Includes advertising, distribution, promotion, lobbying, and sponsorship, but excludes transportation and sales of the product itself
SERIES MESSAGES

• Breastfeeding success is a collective responsibility that depends on multifaceted policy and societal responses – it is not the sole responsibility of women.

• Infant behaviours e.g., sleep and crying, have normal trajectories – same as learning to walk or to speak – and can be misinterpreted as hunger etc. or re-framed as ‘abnormal’ to promote artificial solutions.

• Commercial milk formula marketing influences our beliefs, values and practices – it has changed the infant feeding ecosystem – and its extent and power has not been fully appreciated by most in health, civil society and government.

• There are many constraints if a woman decides she wants to breastfeed. It is the responsibility of governments to implement structural interventions/policies to support breastfeeding and mitigate negative, undermining influences.
BREASTFEEDING 1

Breastfeeding: crucially important, but increasingly challenged in a market-driven world

OBJECTIVES

- Examine how mother and infant characteristics interact with breastfeeding determinants at all levels
- Document how these interactions drive breastfeeding outcomes, and
- Identify what policies and interventions are necessary to support optimal breastfeeding
METHODS

- Analyses of nationally representative surveys of children under two years of age
- Systematic reviews
- Case studies
Less than half of newborns are put to the breast within the first hour of life in LMICs

Pre-lacteals are strongly associated with delayed initiation of breastfeeding, shorter duration of breastfeeding and increased consumption of formula products
UNDERSTANDING NORMAL INFANT BEHAVIOUR

• Human babies are born in an immature state
• Post-birth adjustment and maturation
• Takes time and support to learn to feed, settle and sleep
• Normal sleep patterns of infants don’t align with adult sleep patterns
• Newborns express their discomfort through crying, signalling the need for help and care
• Crying is adaptive and communicates many needs
Systematic review: reports from 22 countries and different income levels

• Distressing for parents
  - 50% of healthy infants 0-3 months have at least one episode of regurgitation/day
  - Mean time fussing or crying 2hrs/day
• Consistently undermines parental self-efficacy

... MISREADING THE CUES
MISREADING CUES LEADS TO...
SELF-REPORTED INSUFFICIENT MILK (SRIM)

• Perceived infant satiety & satisfaction shape self-assessment of milk supply
• Crying, fussiness and short sleep duration undermine confidence
• Partners, family members and health staff also misinterpret cues
• **SRIM is the reason given by**
  - 45% of mothers globally for introducing CMFs before 6 months
  - Third of mothers for stopping breastfeeding
• Yet, effective counselling and support helps parents understand infant cues and improve effective breastfeeding and breastmilk production
REFRAMING ‘NORMAL’ AS A MARKETING OPPORTUNITY

• New parents may be concerned about maturing baby behaviours
• CMF marketing frames normal maturing behaviours as ‘something is wrong’ – pathological – or mothers are inadequate
  - “If you are not sure whether you have enough milk…”
  - “If your infant has a rash or cries or possets or is unsettled... maybe they have an allergy”
  and offer products as solutions
• “Selling peace of mind”... certainty of quantity of milk consumed
• Without skilled support and reassurance, parents change from breastfeeding to CMF – or from one CMF to another
MULTILEVEL AND MULTISECTORAL INTERVENTIONS IMPROVE BREASTFEEDING AT SCALE

Case studies from 4 countries describe INVESTMENTS over the past decade that improved EBF rates

**Burkina Faso**
BF training and multilevel programme delivery, including
1. Training of traditional leaders
2. Creation of mother-to-mother support groups
3. Evidence-based social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) programmes through partnerships between government, UNICEF, and ALIVE & THRIVE

**Mexico**
A comprehensive national strategy to coordinate BF actions building on
1. **Landscape analysis** with the Becoming BF Friendly policy toolbox,
2. **Strong position statement** from the Mexican National Academy of Medicine
3. BF monitoring

**The Philippines**
1. Incorporated BF into early essential newborn care
2. Train health providers on baby behaviours and BF
3. Extended paid maternity leave
4. Implemented an official database of Code violations

**USA**
1. Expanded BFHI and WIC BF counselling
2. Monitoring, surveillance, and programme evaluation
3. Expanding the number of people with health insurance and requiring health insurers to cover lactation support services
Marketing of commercial milk formula: a system to capture parents, communities, science, and policy

Nigel Rollins, Ellen Piwoz, Phillip Baker, Gilian Kingston, Kopano Matlwa Mabaso, David McCoy, Paulo Augusto Ribeiro Neves, Rafael Pérez-Escamilla, Linda Richter, Katheryn Russ, Gita Sen, Cecília Tomori, Cesar G Victora, Paul Zambrano, Gerard Hastings, on behalf of the 2023 Lancet Breastfeeding Series Group*

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Artwork is used to illustrate actual packaging that make or imply certain claims about improved health or development. Any resemblance to actual product packaging is coincidental.
OBJECTIVE AND METHODS

Objective: to describe the CMF marketing playbook and its influence on families, health professionals, science, and policy processes

Multiple methods:

• Systematic and scoping reviews of public health and CMF industry literature and business reports
• Analyses of national CMF sales and infant feeding survey data
• Examination of marketing expenditures

• Two multi-country studies documenting women’s experiences of marketing and scope of digital marketing
• Case studies describing CMF industry interference of national and international regulatory processes
KEY FINDINGS

- CMF marketing practices are **multi-faceted, sophisticated, well-resourced** and are therefore a **powerful system of influence** made even more influential through digital systems.

- CMF marketing playbook is similar to marketing of other products **but** there are important differences:
  
  -- impacts **lifelong health, development and rights** of children and their mothers, and

  -- violates a **Code of Marketing** agreed by the UN World Health Assembly.

- CMF marketing has been very **successful** over the decades in reshaping individual, societal and medical norms and values.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- Advertising and promotion
- Funding professionals and science
- Networks and lobbying
- Industry front groups
- Individuals and civil society
- Health professionals and scientists
- Other businesses
- Government and politicians
- Altered decisions by civil society and individuals, health professionals, academia, business, and government authorities and politicians
- Shareholders benefit but at a cost to breastfeeding, health and climate, objective evidence and information, and consumer rights

Increased sales creating greater material power and influence
CMF Marketing System is Powerful & Profitable
- $55.6 bn sales in 2019

Many reasons for these changes:
- Preference, work constraints, perceived insufficient milk, poor support
- Central role of marketing
  - 4.3-6.8% annual sales spent on marketing
  - **US$ 2.6-3.5 billion per year**
  - *Underestimate* – does not include lobbying, social media, sponsorship of health workers

*Figure 2: Rate of national breastfeeding at 12 months vs per capita sales of standard CMF by country income category and the sales of CMF per capita, 2005-19*
Marketing of Commercial Milk Formula: a system to capture parents and communities, science and policy and... shape societal and professional norms, values and beliefs to alter decisions

All those scientific acronyms like DHA. You don’t know what it is, but it sounds cool. It is supposed to be a nutrient that goes directly to the baby’s brain for stimulation.

- Mother, Guadalajara, Mexico

The benefits my baby will get... if I want to promote brain development, height, or digestive system, I will find respective formulas.

- Mother, Hanoi, Viet Nam

I actually like that premium brand, I love the colour, I love that expensive look...the gold gives it that expensive taste as if it’s procured the best quality and it’s something unique and different.

- Mother, Johannesburg, South Africa

We were looking online and that little [advert for] brand Z milk popped up. With these cookies, they must know we’re looking at baby stuff, and it’s popped up out of nowhere.

- Mother, London, United Kingdom
Marketing of Commercial Milk Formula: a system to capture parents and communities, science and policy and... shape societal and professional norms, values and beliefs to alter decisions

2017, Vitafoods. CEO
“...infant nutrition wasn’t necessarily about the ingredients or innovation”.

“What we are selling is actually sleep...If the baby doesn’t sleep for three nights and the mother is exhausted ...”

“selling peace of mind”
Marketing of Commercial Milk Formula: a system to capture parents, communities, science and health workers and policy and... shape societal and professional norms, values and beliefs and to alter decisions

Why are health workers and their associations so important? Category Entry Points
• Sponsorship
• Research
• Guideline groups

Conflicts of Interest
Marketing of Commercial Milk Formula: a system to capture parents, communities, science and policy and international recommendations and... shape societal and professional norms, values and beliefs and to alter decisions

- International policy frameworks are being manipulated to decrease their effectiveness

Systematic reviews, case studies and analyses of public access information demonstrate:

- The Code is blocked, reinterpreted, circumvented and ignored
- Codex Alimentarius is manipulated to establish weak standards that become a ceiling for regulation of CMF marketing
Marketing of Commercial Milk Formula: a system to capture parents, communities, science and policy and international recommendations and... shape societal and professional norms, values and beliefs and to alter decisions

- International policy frameworks are being manipulated to decrease their effectiveness

Systematic reviews, case studies and analyses of public access information demonstrate:

- Industry capitalizes on the lack of implementation of maternity leave conventions protecting breastfeeding
- Industry lobby groups are numerous and influence policy environments in favour of CMF industry and their shareholders
KEY LESSONS

• Criticism of industry and marketing is not criticism of women, their decisions or circumstances
• CMF industry deploys a system that turns the birth of an infant and the care of parents into a business opportunity
• This system undermines breastfeeding and human rights

A systems approach is needed to address the CMF playbook
The political economy of infant and young child feeding: confronting corporate power, overcoming structural barriers, and accelerating progress

Philip Baker, Julie P Smith, Amandine Garde, Laurence M Grummer-Strawn, Benjamin Wood, Gita Sen, Gerard Hastings, Rafael Pérez-Escamilla, Chee Yoke Ling, Nigel Rollins, David McCoy, on behalf of the 2023 Lancet Breastfeeding Series Group*
Maternal, newborn, infant and young child health outcomes
Other social, economic and environmental outcomes that indirectly impact health

Breastfeeding
(Early initiation, exclusivity and continued breastfeeding duration)

Commercial feeding
(Feeding of infant, follow-up, toddler, specialised CMFs and other ultra-processed foods)

Degree of breastfeeding protection, promotion & support / capabilities / normalisation

Commerce
(Financial, production, trade, marketing & related activities)

Care & work
(Gender roles at home and work, time-use & women's agency)

Health
(Maternal, infant & young child care; professional education; research)

Institutions
(Governance arrangements, policies, regulations, social norms and other 'rules' that structure behaviour)

Ideas
(Worldviews, forms of knowledge, frames & evidence that influence thinking and shape beliefs)

Resources
(Access and control over economic, technological & natural resources that determine capacities)

Political, economic, socio-cultural & technological contexts

Actors with collective and/or competing interests
Families, women, infants and young children; national governments and their agencies; multi-lateral development organizations; civil society organizations & social movements; financial institutions, corporations & lobby groups; health professionals; research institutions & experts; journalists & the media
METHODS AND ASSOCIATED RESEARCH

The CMF industry, markets and food systems

Trade policy, regulation and Corporate lobbying

Environmental impacts

Economic impacts
THE DOMAIN OF COMMERCE

CMF markets are concentrated and highly profitable

- Abbott, Danone, Feihe, Friesland Campina, Nestlé and Reckitt (including Mead Johnson) in 2021 collectively controlled 60% of CMF sales
THE DOMAIN OF COMMERCE

CMF companies are large and powerful

Abbott, Danone, Nestlé and Reckitt (including Mead Johnson) together...

- Generated US$187 billion in revenue (2022) equivalent to 62nd largest country by GDP
- Owned US$316 billion in assets (2022) > private wealth held in every African country bar South Africa
- Employed >535,000 people globally (2018) > health workforce of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Lesotho combined
Economic power permits a powerful and sophisticated political strategy

Two faces of corporate power:

• Public facing

• Hidden: co-opt opposition, undermine the Code and curtail public-interest regulation
THE DOMAIN OF COMMERCE

Sources of corporate power

• Deregulation at the expense of public health
• More parts of life commodified and marketised
• Tax avoidance and ineffective anti-trust measures
• Externalisation of costs
An analysis shows an increasing share of profits accompanied by declining tax contributions.

Profits mostly end up in HICs while harms may disproportionately burden people in LMICs.
THE DOMAIN OF WOMEN, CARE AND WORK

Economic value of care work unrecognized

• Unpaid care work equivalent to 20 - 40% of GDP

• Breastfeeding not counted in GDP, but CMF sales are
THE DOMAIN OF WOMEN, CARE AND WORK

Inadequate maternity rights protection and poor working conditions make it difficult or impossible for vast numbers of mothers to be able to breastfeed.

This is compounded by the rising amount of precarious and underpaid work in both the formal and informal sectors.
THE HEALTH DOMAIN

• Patriarchal and biomedical cultures
• Normalisation of public-private-partnerships and healthcare commercialisation and privatisation that fosters an acceptance of industry sponsorship and influence
• Economic policies that unnecessarily constrain public finance and investment
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Governments must provide accurate and timely information about breastfeeding and infant behaviours, better support, and skills development for health professionals, parents and communities.

2. A legal global treaty to end the marketing of CMF while continuing to strengthen national Code legislation.

3. Civil society, health professionals and politicians must have a better understanding of the CMF industry’s marketing and political strategies and how they perform economically with respect to tax and externalities.

4. Health systems must deliver women-centered maternity care = investment and an empowered health force plus end undue formula milk industry influence over research, training and other professional activities.

5. Governments and society must recognize and value care work – incorporating it into economic accounting systems and policy – and properly invest in maternity protection.

6. Unless the imbalance in power between private commercial interests and those with a duty and mandate to protect the rights and needs of children and mothers is corrected, then nothing will change = Stronger defences against corporate capture of regulation, policy, health providers and systems, and communities.
It’s not just about infant and young child feeding – it’s about the impact of commercial interests on child development and society more generally. It’s about the economic power used by the formula industry and the detriment to health and rights.

**Our vision:** a world where parents and families are supported in the care of their infants, and for breastfeeding to be robustly promoted and supported, and protected at all levels.