

Short communication

Breastfeeding Week as a Catalyst: Understanding Workplace Attitudes Toward Lactation Support

Mitasha Singh¹, Gita Prasad Kaushal², Vikas Kumar³, Renu Sheoren⁴, Monika⁵, Tripti Sankla⁶

^{1,3}Assistant Professor, ^{4,5}Nursing Officer, ⁶Medical Social Worker, Community Medicine, Dr BSA MCH, Rohini GNCT Delhi, India.

²Assistant Professor, Paediatrics, Dr BSA MCH, Rohini GNCT Delhi, India.

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Corresponding Author:

Mitasha Singh, Community Medicine, Dr BSA MCH, GNCT, Delhi, India.

E-mail Id:

dr.mitasha.community.medicine@bsamch.in

Orcid Id:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1402-2222>

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A B S T R A C T

Observance of health days and weeks are the best ways to trigger and motivate even the professionals on the need of IEC in improving the access and awareness even for general population. Breast feeding week observed in a tertiary care centre in first week of August 2024 started with well baby shows, quiz for medical students, e-poster presentations, health talks in community, awards distribution to IYCF counsellors, nursing officers and dieticians. This was supplemented by a discussion among health professions on the theme of supporting BF at workplace.

keywords: Information, education communication, Health days, Qualitative analysis

Introduction

In 2024, World Breastfeeding Week, under its theme, "Closing the gap: Breastfeeding support for all" emphasised the need for greater support across vulnerable groups and at informal sector workplaces to sustain and improve progress on breastfeeding rates globally.¹ In Delhi, the Department of Paediatrics and Community Medicine from a medical college echoed the goals of WHO and observed the week (August 1–7, 2024) with full enthusiasm. Various activities were conducted to create an enabling environment for the female workforce so that they could feel empowered and safe against discrimination in the workplace. These activities are listed in Table 1.

In addition to the above events, an online survey was conducted among doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff of the medical college on their attitude towards breastfeeding at the workplace.

This survey was aimed to know whether the staff was aware of the problems faced by working women at workplaces and to understand their attitude towards them. A semi-structured Google form was prepared and sent to all staff members by their email. Consent from each participant was also obtained at starting of the survey in the Google Form itself. Convenience sampling was used to send the Google Forms at the beginning of breastfeeding week. The findings of the survey were presented in the closing ceremony of the breastfeeding week. The attitude part of the questionnaire was adopted from Bridges et al. to measure the employer attitudes towards breastfeeding in the workplace.²

Sixty responses were received. The age range of the respondents was 29 to 57 years (mean 40.47 ± 7.37); 83.3% were females. The majority of the respondents were nurses (73.3%, 44/60), 16.7% (40/60) were doctors and 10% were other paramedical staff (6/60). 95% (57/60) were married.

The majority (66.7%, 40/60) had two or more children, and 25% had one (15/60).

The attitude of respondents was recorded for 9 questions on a five-point Likert scale shown in Table 2. Around 71.6% were of the opinion that it is appropriate or highly appropriate

to feed their baby at any time without being shy. Quality of work being hampered due to employees feeding their babies at the workplace was agreed by 20% of the staff. However, 63% agreed that if a working mother is allowed to feed at the workplace and bring her baby to the workplace, it will decrease attrition of women from jobs (Table 2).

Table 1. Breastfeeding Week 2024 Events

S. No.	Events	Audience
1	Inauguration and #WBW2024 Pledge of World Breast Feeding (BF) week	Doctors and nursing officers
2	Well baby shows and crawl race in the outpatient department	6–12 month infants, mothers, nursing officers, interns
3	Health education sessions in the community	Medical undergraduates and medical social workers
4	E-poster presentation on the theme	Medical undergraduates and faculty
5	World Breast Feeding (BF) week quiz	Medical undergraduates, interns, nursing officers, and faculty
6	Appreciation awards to best-performing staff in NICU/ PICU/ IYCF/ counselling	Doctors and nursing officers

Table 2. Attitude toward Support of Breastfeeding at Workplace

Statement	Responses				
	Very Inappropriate n (%)	Inappropriate n (%)	Do Not Have Any Opinion n (%)	Appropriate n (%)	Very Appropriate n (%)
It is appropriate for a mother to breastfeed her baby anywhere without being shy.	8 (13.3)	4 (6.7)	5 (8.3)	11 (18.3)	32 (53.3)
-	Highly Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Do Not Have Any Opinion n (%)	Agree n (%)	Highly Agree n (%)
Formula-fed babies are as healthy as babies who receive human milk.	37 (61.7)	8 (13.3)	6 (10.0)	0 (0.0)	9 (15.0)
Allowing women to breastfeed in the workplace will interfere with the quality of work.	40 (66.7)	2 (3.3)	6 (10.0)	4 (6.7)	8 (13.3)
Allowing women to breastfeed in the workplace will decrease the number of female employees leaving the job.	14 (23.3)	5 (8.3)	3 (5.0)	3 (5.0)	35 (58.3)
Allowing women to breastfeed in the workplace will decrease absenteeism.	9 (15.0)	3 (5.0)	1 (1.7)	6 (10.0)	41 (68.3)
If a co-worker wanted to breastfeed her infant or express milk in the workplace, I would support it.	1 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	2 (3.3)	7 (11.7)	50 (83.3)

There should be a written policy of the institute to support breastfeeding.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (5.0)	4 (6.7)	53 (88.3)
There are many females in my unit/ department and there is a time when two of them will be on childcare leave. My workload will increase. I will be supportive of them in taking leave to breastfeed the child.	1 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	8 (13.3)	13 (21.7)	38 (63.3)
It is my responsibility to support working mothers who are breastfeeding their children.	0 (0.0)	1 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	9 (15.0)	50 (83.3)

The respondents were provided with two scenarios and their opinions were asked about how would they act in an open-ended response question. In the first scenario, the respondents were given the role of supervisor of a unit. His/ her subordinates ask for frequent leaves or early leave from the office for breastfeeding and taking care of the child. Her other colleagues are opposing as they must do her job also. They were asked about how they would act in this situation given their role as supervisor. In response to this, the responses received were coded and categorized under the theme of supervisor dilemma at the workplace in supporting Breastfeeding in the workplace. The categories are represented in Figure 1.

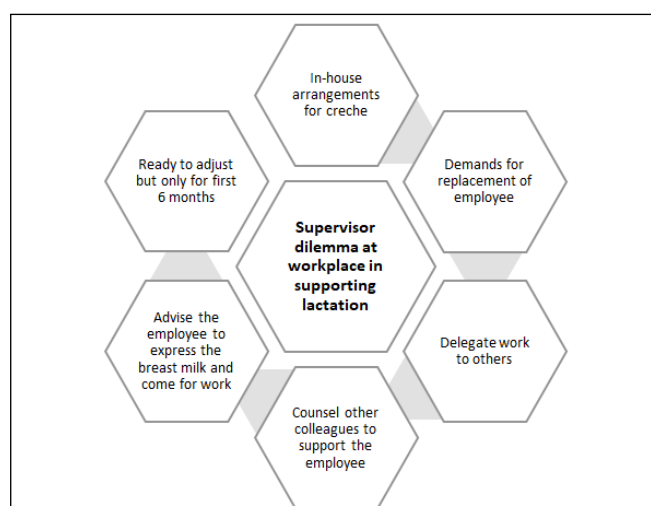


Figure 1.Categories of Responses of the Theme: Supervisor's Dilemma at the Workplace in Supporting Lactating Women

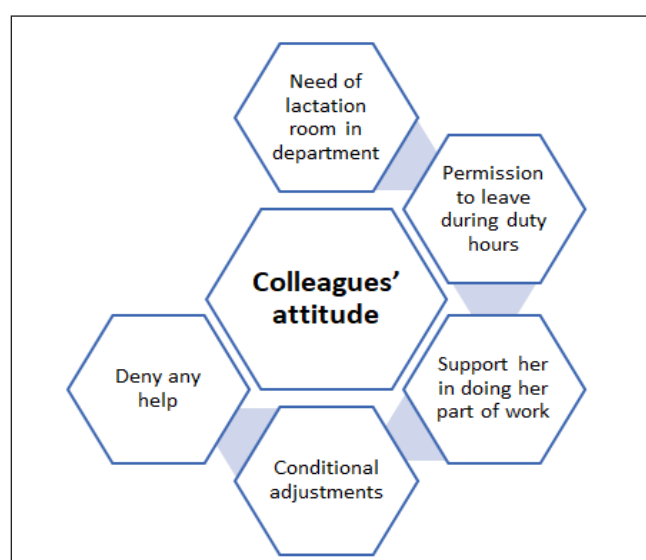


Figure 2.Categories of Responses of the Theme: Colleagues' Attitude Supporting Breastfeeding at the Workplace

The second scenario identified the respondents as a colleague wherein a staff his/ her department is a nursing mother. She does not get paid leave for child care. She needs to feed her baby during duty hours and asks you to allow her to leave early for home on many occasions. As her colleague will they help and if yes how can they help? In response to this, the responses received were coded and categorised under the theme of colleagues' attitudes in supporting breastfeeding at the workplace (Figure 2).

Some of the respondents shared their experiences related to support during lactation either for themselves or for colleagues. The response was coded into positive,

negative experience, and general opinion categories. There were 5 negative and 11 positive responses. Being in a government set-up, females are eligible for childcare leave after maternity leave. One of those who had a negative experience reported leaving the job due to non-provision of leave or creche facility due to her temporary nature of the job. Some respondents were of the opinion that the support may be provided but with strictness, as it is misused by many (a female nursing officer wrote), or one female medical officer wrote that “they should compensate for the “privilege” given to them”. A male doctor wrote about the experience of his junior colleague who “managed duties and lactation very efficiently”.

Discussion and Conclusion

The online survey conducted among doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff at tertiary care centres highlighted key attitudes and experiences towards breastfeeding support in the workplace. Most respondents, especially women, acknowledged the importance of providing breastfeeding support and recognized its potential to reduce job attrition among female employees. Similar findings were observed by Libbus & Bullock.³ While a number of respondents felt it was appropriate for women to breastfeed at work, concerns were raised about the impact on work quality and potential misuse of breastfeeding-related accommodations. Many respondents expressed their concerns over breastfeeding the baby at the workplace according to the present study. Similar findings were observed by Horwood et al.⁴ The scenarios presented in the survey revealed a mix of positive and negative experiences regarding breastfeeding support at work, with some participants emphasizing the need for stricter oversight to prevent misuse, while others stressed the importance of flexibility and understanding.

Overall, the survey results underscore the need for enhanced policies and support systems for breastfeeding mothers in the workplace, particularly in ensuring access to facilities and leave provisions. While some challenges and reservations exist, fostering an enabling environment for breastfeeding can contribute to better job retention, workplace equality, and the well-being of working mothers. This initiative aligns with global efforts to empower women and promote zero discrimination in the workplace, and continued dialogue and improvements in workplace breastfeeding support will be crucial in achieving these goals.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process:

As part of a commitment to transparency and integrity in writing, I hereby declare that there was no use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the creation, editing, or refinement of this work.

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