SELFLESS COMMUNITY WORK BY A GROUP OF VOLUNTEER MOTHERS TO CREATE A BREASTFEEDING FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Breastfeeding which is known as the very first motherly gift to the newborn is facing a huge challenge in this new modern society. Long ago breastfeeding was the natural way of parenting but now it has become a secondary choice due to intense “competition” from the artificial substitute called formula milk. Realizing this, a group of mothers in Penang decided to initiate a breastfeeding support group called:- Mother to Mother Peer Support (MMPS). This group was eventually registered as a non-governmental organization (NGO) to provide voluntary support for breastfeeding mothers. They initiate and drive various programs which are targeted to create public awareness on the importance of a breastfeeding friendly environment throughout the state. Hence the group launched a community social campaign called Make Penang Breastfeeding Friendly (MPBF). This paper dives into the underlying problems that hinders breastfeeding, the importance of a mother support group and examines various efforts and impacts created by these volunteer mothers in promoting and supporting breastfeeding in the state of Penang.


1. Introduction

Breastfeeding is a natural way of parenting. It fulfills an infant’s basic need for food, safety and comfort. It is uniquely engineered for human infants and is the biologically ‘natural’ way to feed infants (Allen & Hector, 2005). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life is the recommended way of feeding infants, followed by continued breastfeeding with appropriate complementary foods for up to two years or beyond. In general, it provides a perfect food with perfect nutrition according to the age of the baby at the right temperature, anytime anywhere!

Evidence shows that breastfeeding is protective against infectious diseases such as upper and lower respiratory tract infections, gastrointestinal illnesses and otitis media for infants and toddlers. Breastfeeding does not only benefit the child but protects the mother from a lot of diseases. For mothers, failure to breastfeed is associated with an increased incidence of premenopausal breast cancer, ovarian cancer, retained gestational weight gain, type 2 diabetes and the metabolic syndrome (Stuebe, 2009). It is an essential part of the reproductive process with implications for her health, ensures a speedier recovery from the birthing process and expedites weight loss; it protects mothers from post-partum depression, provides natural family planning process and reduces the risk.

2 Ibid
of breast and ovarian cancer\(^4\) (Dermer, 2001). The hormones released during breastfeeding, mainly oxytocin and prolactin\(^5\) (Palmer, 2002) creates natural bonding between mother and the child. Breastfeeding has economic benefits as well. It helps household by; savings on the purchase of formula milk, medical care through fewer trips to a physician, cost of birth control methods and workdays lost in caring for sick children (WABA, 1998). In total, breastfeeding brings collective benefits to everyone involved, right from the mother who breastfeed, the baby who receives the milk, the family by having healthier members and the society at large.

However, a technology invented some 100 years ago, formula milk seems to challenge the practice of breastfeeding. It is ironic to realize that a perfect and free nutrition product, individually produced and naturally distributed to all families, is not universally used (Koe, Breastfeeding, 2009). It is due to the wide and tactful marketing of formula milk and lack of support for mothers to breastfeed.

Even though breastfeeding is natural but it is a learned behavior and informed knowledge. Mothers need to have the correct information about breastfeeding. Through most of the twentieth century, initiation and duration of breastfeeding declined worldwide as a result of rapid social and economic change, including urbanization and marketing of breast milk substitutes (Fatimah, Siti Saadia, Tahir, Hussain Imam, & Ahmad Faudzi, 2010). Breastfeeding statistics for Malaysia: Third National Morbidity Survey (NHMS III) shows that, the overall prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding below six months was only 14.5\(\%\) even though the overall prevalence of infants initiated breastfeeding within the first one hour of birth was 63.7\(\%\)\(^6\). The same report states that the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding among infants younger than two months is 26.7\(\%\) and dropping dramatically to 11.7\(\%\) for infants’ ages between two to three months. This clearly shows that breastfeeding is not a preferred choice of feeding infants in Malaysia and this makes us to think about the reason behind it. Mothers, who choose to breastfeed, face a lot of challenges in breastfeeding their babies especially in balancing their paid job and fulfilling their motherly duty of breastfeeding. They need support to perform this duty. They need the right information at the right time with the right practice to initiate breastfeeding. A good start immediately after delivery is very vital in having a pleasant breastfeeding journey. She needs support from the people around her and mother support has been always given the privilege of helping them.

2. Mother Support Group for Breastfeeding

Mother Support Group has been identified as an important factor in promoting breastfeeding. Logically analyzing the issue, what a new mother needs after her delivery is practical support from people whom are closer to her which may consists of her partner, neighbors, family members, friends, relatives, other mothers and community. She doesn’t worry whether there is a breastfeeding policy in the country; code that protects formula milk distribution; or there is an advertisement on media about breastfeeding. She needs encouragement. She needs right information from the right people at the right time. This raises the necessity of a community based mother support – which is defined as any form of support that makes it easier for a mother to breastfeed. Centuries ago, no one spoke of the need for mother support group; no one researched how to do it. Women looked to other women, their families for help in raising their child. History of mother support group for breastfeeding might have begun with the first new mother who turned to her mother, sister or a friend looking for help/information and encouragement (Vickers, 2009).


\(^6\) Ibid
Mutual support groups have been formed for women coping with pregnancy, menopause, aging and other shared conditions. They help women transform their attitude towards themselves and their world by offering peer support and the chance for women to learn from other women.

However, mothers, families and our society at large have lost the knowledge on breastfeeding that used to be passed from mothers to daughters and within the community. Many girls grow up now without seeing any other women breastfeed. As a result, mothers need to be advised on infant feeding (Koe, Breastfeeding, 2009). As formula-feeding’s stronghold took over, and marketing campaigns repeated the message that formula is as good as breastfeeding, the woman who still wanted to breastfeed her baby found herself in a curious minority and very much in need of support (Vickers, 2009). Therefore mothers have come together and formed mother support group to counter negative attitudes towards breastfeeding and to provide accurate information. Mother to mother support is described as experienced breastfeeding mothers sharing information, modeling optimal breastfeeding practices and offering support to each other women in an opportune, culturally appropriate manner. Support can be provided by peer support or lay support. Peer support is provided by people who usually have had some breastfeeding experience in breastfeeding and have received a level of specific training to assist in their support whereas lay support is provided by other mothers, family members or friends who may have some experience in breastfeeding but not received any formal training (Australian Government Dept of Health & Ageing, 2009). Similar definition was given by Dr. Cindy Lee Dennis as a specific type of social support that incorporates informational, appraisal (feedback) and emotional assistance.

The lay assistance is provided by volunteers who are not part of the participant's family or immediate social network; instead, they possess experiential knowledge of the targeted behavior (i.e., successful breastfeeding skills) and similar characteristics (e.g., age, socioeconomic status, cultural background, location of residence) (Dennis, Hodnett, Gallop, & Chalmers, 2002). The same research has concluded that mothers who received support from peer groups have higher rate of success in breastfeeding. This is further proved when mother support group have been identified as an important factor and listed as one of the step in the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI). The objective of BFHI is to empower women to make the right choice on feeding and to create conducive conditions in hospitals to breastfeed. The 10th step emphasizes on encouraging the establishment of breastfeeding support groups and refers mothers to them on discharge from the hospital or clinic (UNICEF, 2009). This paper will further explain on, how a local mother support group in Penang, started by a group of volunteers have impacted mothers and the community in large in breastfeeding.

2.1. Mother to Mother Peer Support (MMPS) in Penang

In 2007 a local pediatrician and lactation consultant, Dr. Balkees Abdul Majeed initiated a collaboration with World Alliance of Breastfeeding Action (WABA) to start a breastfeeding support group in Penang. A group of passionate mothers in breastfeeding were gathered and trained in peer counseling. The training was conducted by Ms. Sue Saunders in December 2007 for 3 days. Since

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At the 1995 LLLI 14th International Conference – ‘The Establishment of Mother-to Mother Support in Economically Disadvantaged and Low –Literate Communities in Developing Areas of the World’

Dr. Cindy-lee Dennis is a Senior Scientist, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto.

The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) was launched by WHO and UNICEF in 1991, following the Innocenti Declaration of 1990. The initiative is a global effort to implement practices that protect, promote and support breastfeeding.

Dr. Balkees Abdul Majeed is a Pediatrician based Penang and a Certified Lactation Consultant.

Sue Saunders is the Director of Professional Development in International Lactation Consultant Association. She has a general nursing, midwifery and breastfeeding counseling background and has been as IBCLC and ILCA member for over 20 years

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then, Mother to Mother Peer Support (MMPS) started to serve mothers in Penang voluntarily. Our initial focus is to provide free breastfeeding information, share our knowledge, skills, experience and support other mothers to breastfeed. Our first support group meeting was held in 1st Saturday of March in 2008. After 2 years, some of the mothers attended another peer counseling training called; Malaysian Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Training (MBPC) which is an on-going Malaysian program conducted by Susu ibu, funded by UNICEF and supported by WABA. Over time the group became very experienced in providing support for other mothers to breastfeed.

The uniqueness of this group is the volunteer mothers have firsthand experience in breastfeeding their own baby (or babies). This helps us to understand other mothers very well because we too faced the same challenges. However, we were able to overcome it just because we had support either from; our husbands, family members, gynecologists and pediatricians who believe in breastfeeding, hospitals which supports breastfeeding or friends with breastfeeding experience. The support we received built our determination and confident to breastfeed our children despite all the difficulties we faced as new mothers. Unfortunately not all women are gifted like us and that is the factor which brought us together to support other mothers to breastfeed. We help them by providing professional consultation and valuable information on how to manage and sustain breastfeeding for their babies exclusively in the first six months and to continue with complementary feeding for two years and beyond. We believe that when women are empowered with the correct knowledge, understanding and a breastfeeding supportive environment they will choose to breastfeed and will generally succeed in breastfeeding their babies when they become mothers. Our objectives are:

- Freely offer a supportive, non-judgmental and appropriately confidential voluntary service to expectant mothers, mothers, fathers to be, fathers and family members who seek breastfeeding support, knowledge and guidance.
- Recommend and work towards creative options to establish an enabling breastfeeding friendly environment in public spaces, workplaces and in the home.
- Offer counseling and support to individual mothers who are breastfeeding or planning to breastfeed their babies through various methods e.g. FB, emails, telephone and visitation.
- Increase public awareness of the advantages of breastfeeding through all possible channels and through linking with other BF support groups.

The fundamental of this group is to provide breastfeeding information for free. Breast milk is a free gift of nature meant for a baby’s survival and direct breastfeeding satisfies the baby’s need for bonding with the mother. Therefore we believe the information should also be provided for free without sidelining any mother who can’t afford to pay for it. All our services are provided voluntarily and for no fee. Often we will place a donation box in all our programs which help us to cover some of the costs such as providing refreshment, booking of venue, photocopying and etc. To avoid any conflict of interest we do not engage in any business with the mothers. We do not sell or endorse, accept donations or sponsorship from companies that produce any product that can hinder the direct breastfeeding of mother and baby such as formula milk, bottles, teats and breast pumps. We don’t impose any membership fee and encourage all mothers to be our member just by signing an

years. In 2007, she served as the inaugural ILCA Fellow at WABA in Penang and was appointed the ILCA WABA Liaison in 2009, before commencing the current post of Director of Professional Development.

12Susuibu.com – is a breastfeeding support center that focuses on providing breastfeeding consultation services, education and training to the healthcare workers and the public. www.susuibu.com
endorsement form stating that they will not sell or endorse formula milk, bottles, teats and breast-pumps\textsuperscript{13} at any MMPS gathering.

During our support group meetings we provide group or individual counseling depending on the preference of the mother. We encourage mothers to attend the meeting together with their husbands, mothers, mothers-in-law or any other person who is going to assist the post-delivery phase. We believe, not only the mother need to be equipped with breastfeeding knowledge but also the people around her. We provide help as much as possible in real time through our blog site\textsuperscript{14}, Facebook\textsuperscript{15}, e-mail\textsuperscript{16}, telecommunication both via voice calls and text messages. If necessary we will visit a mother at her home or confinement centers for free of charge. We too engage in giving talks at factories, shopping malls, temples and confinement centers. Despite being busy mothers (doing our own work, raising children and taking care of our families) we invest our time, effort and energy (voluntarily) to help other mothers to breastfeed their babies. We just want them to experience the joy which we enjoyed by breastfeeding our children.

After 4 years operating as a voluntary team, we registered our group as a Non-Governmental Organization in February 2012. Currently we are engaged in a huge campaign called Make Penang Breastfeeding Friendly (MPBF) which was launched in year 2012 which focuses in creating an enabling environment to support mothers to breastfeed.

\subsection*{2.2. Strength and Weakness of the Group}

Even though we have been operating for past 5 years, till today the group has no office. All our activities are coordinated from our homes using our own facilities. Very often, we will have meetings at one of the core mother’s home and her house will be our center of operation. All our things such as banners, printed materials, documents, toys and others will be stored at her place. As for our support group meeting, we have changed our location 3 times in these 5 years. First we had our meetings at Caring Complex of Penang. Later, from 2009 until 2012 we had our meetings at Koala Kids Enrichment Center, Penang – a kindergarten which has an indoor playground. The owner of the kindergarten, Ms.Allison was too generous to allow us to use the facility to conduct our meetings. Usually children’s accompanying their mothers to the meeting will have a great time at the playground. As we started to receive more mothers, we had to look for a bigger place to have the meeting. Since 2013, we are having our support group meetings at another kindergarten – Whyte House, Bukit Jambul. This place is equipped with multiple rooms, bigger playground and a hall where we can conduct talks for more than 60 people. We are blessed to have this facility for free.

Since we do not sell any breastfeeding information, do not take fee and do not sell any products, we face challenges to generate fund for our operation. I would categories this as our strength and weakness because on one side this proves our sincerity in helping the mothers voluntarily and on the other side it becomes a hurdle for us to operate professionally. Operating just based on donation box is not viable at all because as the group is growing, more expenses are occurring and we are not able to bear the cost. This put us in a tough situation when we are planning for any other programs.

We are supported by State Government of Penang on project basis with comprehensive proposal submitted months earlier. Programs such as breastfeeding class (May 2012), World Breastfeeding Week Celebration 2010, 2011 and 2012, printing of breastfeeding information are funded by state

\textsuperscript{13} However, we are knowledgeable on the use of breast-pumps and help mothers regarding its function

\textsuperscript{14} MMPS blog \texttt{http://pgmmps.wordpress.com/}

\textsuperscript{15} MMPS is on the social networking site Facebook as Mother to Mother Peer Support \texttt{http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7797557166}

\textsuperscript{16} MMPS e-mail \texttt{pgmmps@gmail.com}
government. However, we are still not able to give reimbursement or allowance for mothers who are volunteering themselves for MMPS.

The operating mode of a voluntary group is, people who are being benefited from the group will return to help the group. This will bring in ‘new blood’ into the system and keep the group growing. The challenge that we face in our group is, mothers who have benefited from us become very occupied after having babies. They are interested to help us but they become very busy with their children. So, we are unable to bring new group of mothers to help us. This adds on the work load onto the existing mothers who have been helping us for past few years. Their passion to help other mothers is the only factor keeping them with MMPS. We will attend meetings with government officials with our babies and children. Wherever we go for MMPS work, we go with our children and people understand that this is the way MMPS mothers operate. This is a tough way of operating and, we can’t expect all mothers to perform as the core mothers. This reduces the flow of ‘new blood’ into MMPS.

Shortage of funding is also limiting us to provide continuous training for the core mothers. We need sufficient trainings to keep us updated with new breastfeeding interventions, knowledge and counseling skills in order to provide good service to mothers. A team building training is very much needed to build the spirit of team work among the team members. However, we are unable to do that due to funding issue.

Despite all these shortcomings, the team is still operating and succeeding in their objectives just based on their belief and passion in breastfeeding. We hold strong to our value to render service to mothers with no monetary incentives. Hence, mothers trust us and believe that we don’t have an hidden agenda of selling or promoting any products to them. We are motivated by passion and the spirit to help another mother. Each time a mother says “thank you for helping me” we feel motivated and ready to walk to another one. The thanks from mothers and the beautiful smiles of their breastfed babies encourage us to move forward promoting breastfeeding.

3.0 Achievement and Accomplishment

Initially MMPS’s focus was on providing support and peer counseling only. It was a very micro level approach impacting individual mothers. Later we shifted our focus to macro level, creating awareness among public about breastfeeding. We believe, breastfeeding is not only a mother’s task but a collective effort of everyone engaged with her. MMPS have two arms: one on peer counseling and the other on advocacy. However the priority is always on peer counseling. This is also another uniqueness of this group. The group’s achievements and accomplishments in these 5 years are remarkable considering it is a voluntary work.

3.1. Make Penang Breastfeeding Friendly (MPBF)

MPBF is a campaign focusing in creating an enabling environment for mothers to breastfeed. In the perspective of Social Systems Theory (Teater, 2010), a person is considered as a system and influences other systems around them. In reverse those systems will also affect the person. The theory focuses on the development and transformation of systems, the interaction and the relationships between them. In the context of breastfeeding this theory explains that, if a woman is in the middle of a system, there are other multiple systems which encourage or discourage her to

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breastfeed. The element of the systems around her such as her spouse, family members, medical practitioners, hospital in which she seeks treatment (pre-post natal), baby sitter, work place and external system (e.g.: information she gets from the media, community practices and perceptions) affects her decision making and execution of breastfeeding.

The idea of “Make Penang Breastfeeding Friendly” was worked together by WABA, MMPS and Penang State Government. The State Exco for Youth, Sports, Women, Family and Community Development, Yang Berhormat Lydia Ong Kok Fooi supported the idea and called for a proposal. After through discussion and planning, MPBF was endorsed in year 2012. The project is divided into 3 phases beginning from 2012 – 2017 and call for action from 6 key areas consists of: - family and community, health care, workplace and employment, government and legislation, media and public spaces.

3.1.1. Family and Community

Women need support from her family members especially from her husband and the society to breastfeed her child. A mother who has a supportive people around her is able to breastfeed her baby successfully because the family understands the total benefits of breastfeeding and encourage her to do so. They can help her with basis and practical matters such as preparing good meal, giving her rest, taking care of her elder children help her with house chores. Positive and supportive words from her circle of friends will definitely motivate her. Therefore the campaign intends to educate the community about the benefits of the breastfeeding.

3.1.2. Health Care

In this section we focus on creating awareness among health care facilities and staffs in promoting breastfeeding. Hospital is the place where a mother begins to breastfeed and she needs support right after her delivery. A good start will ensure a pleasant breastfeeding journey. Therefore mothers need guidance from health care staffs to initiate breastfeeding. Mothers and babies who begin breastfeeding immediately after birth are more likely to successfully establish and sustain breastfeeding throughout infancy and early childhood\(^\text{18}\)(Infact Canada). We encourage health care facilities to obtain BFHI which clearly indicates 10 steps to be followed by health care systems to promote breastfeeding. Malaysia adopted BFHI policy since 1993. As of 2009, out of 316 hospitals there are 125 BFHI hospitals in Malaysia which is inclusive of 115 government hospitals, 2 army hospitals, 2 university hospitals and 6 private hospitals\(^\text{19}\). The objective of BFHI is to empower women to make the right choice on feeding and to create conducive conditions in hospitals to breastfeed.

3.1.3. Workplace Employment

Returning to work has been always identified as a reason on why women stop breastfeeding. Therefore, support from workplace is very essential for a woman to continue breastfeeding. A sudden drop in breastfeeding rate after 2 months (from 26.7% for infants below 2 months to 11.7% for infants aged between 2 to 3 months)\(^\text{20}\)(Fatimah, Siti Saadiah, Tahir, Hussain Imam, & Ahmad Faudzi, 2010)proves that returning to work has a negative impact on breastfeeding. Facilities such as convenient and comfortable space to express breastmilk and storing spaces are very important. If


possible mothers can be granted with breastfeeding breaks which will further help them to express their milk while they are at their work place.

3.1.4. Government and Legislation

Government sector can promote breastfeeding by enabling a breastfeeding friendly environment at their offices. First of all is to provide a space or room or corner for mother to breastfeed in all government offices. Next is, give impact to International Code of Breastfeeding and Breastmilk Substitutes which provides a guideline for marketing breastmilk substitutes in this country. Government also can recognize and appreciate organization that supports breastfeeding. They can reward workplaces, media, organisations, public spaces through government incentives and other means of recognition. Incorporating breastfeeding into school curriculum is also a great idea of promoting breastfeeding to younger generation. They will have better understanding and will be more prepared to execute it when they become parents in future. In fact, if we are able to convince a government to be pro-breastfeeding, we will be able to create a holistic breastfeeding friendly environment.

3.1.5. Media

Media has a strong power in disseminating and influencing people about certain issue. Hence, media can help promote breastfeeding by providing right information about breastfeeding and encourage mothers to breastfeed. Currently, we seldom watch any breastfeeding promotion on media rather formula feeding is being projected as norm. Therefore, we have to sensitize the media to be sensitive about breastfeeding and always ensure that promotion of commercial baby foods, feeding bottles and teats do not violate the International Code of Marketing Breastmilk Substitute. Engaging celebrities and famous people will be a great way of advertising breastfeeding.

3.1.6. Public Spaces

Public spaces such as malls, eating places, highway stops, places of worships should provide breastfeeding space for mothers to breastfeed their babies. Breastfeeding is a natural way of providing food for a child and a mother should not be chased or punished for breastfeeding in public. We have to educate our community about this. By providing more facilities to breastfeed, breastfeeding will become norm and the whole society will transform to be a pro-breastfeeding society.

3.2. Monthly Support Group Meeting

The group has never failed to have this meeting every first Saturday of the month since March 2008. The peer supporters are very committed, because this is the avenue for other mothers to meet them for breastfeeding information and support. They have an average of 20 mothers attending the group meeting every month. The attendees will be pregnant mothers, breastfeeding mothers, newlywed and also some experienced mothers who join in to share their valuable breastfeeding experiences. Mothers will seek knowledge, clear doubts, share experiences, tips and information regarding breastfeeding. For example, a working mother will share her skills in expressing and storing milk which will help another working mother to breastfeed her child. Some will share some tips to follow

21The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes is an international health policy framework for breastfeeding promotion adopted by the World Health Assembly (WHA) of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1981. The Code was developed as a global public health strategy and recommends restrictions on the marketing of breastmilk substitutes. http://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/code_english.pdf
while they are in hospitals and information about increasing milk. Many misconceptions and myth will be cleared by the peer supporters or by other mothers. These meetings have created a sense of belonging among the mothers that, they are not alone in this effort. They have people to refer to. Knowledge is power, hence the information shared motivates pregnant and young mothers to breastfeed their babies.

3.3. World Breastfeeding Week (WBW) Events

WBW is celebrated worldwide every year in the first week of August. Being a breastfeeding support group, MMPS has been celebrating this every year since 2008. The objective of this event is to bring together all the breastfeeding women inclusive of their supporters and show to the rest of the world that – they are not alone. MMPS’s will also conduct One Minute Simultaneous Breastfeeding, where a group of women will breastfeed their babies for one minute at a stipulated time. The groups have marked more than 1000 mothers participating last year (2012) compared to just 60 mothers in year 2008. The one minute feeding builds a sense of belonging among the mothers that they are from the ‘breastfeeding community’. Often mothers will be very emotional during this session and they are proud to be a breastfeeding mother. This indirectly, empowers them and makes them believe that, they have made the right choice of infant feeding. We are glad that this year’s (2013) theme is Breastfeeding Support: Close To Mothers, which recognizes the importance of mother support group.

3.4. Breastfeeding Talks

Breastfeeding talks are aimed to provide correct information about why and how to breastfeed and also sustaining it once mothers return to work. Often, mothers are influenced by formula milk advertisement and they have to be reminded about breastfeeding. Work as become the biggest challenge for women to breastfeed and they need to be thought of the techniques and skills to sustain breastfeeding whilst being away from their babies. This gives working women the knowledge and skills needed in continuing breastfeeding even after returning to work. This have further empowered them to perform their motherly duty besides doing their paid job. This is also stated by a pioneer of breastfeeding movement, Penny Van Estrik22, “Women are empowered by asserting the value of both their productive and reproductive work.”

MMPS have conducted talks at various places, such as:- Altera Sdn Bhd - a multinational company, Jelutong Sri Veerama Kaliammman Temple, Glugor Kaliammman Temple - places of worship, Sunshine Square, Sunshine Farlim, , Gurney Parogon, Queensbay Mall – hypermarkets, Koala Kids Enrichment Centre - a community centre

3.5. Breastfeeding classes / information booth

Breastfeeding class was conducted by collaborating with Penang state government. The collaboration aided the team to advertise the program, prepare a lot of printed materials and refreshments for the attendees. The class was designed specifically to educate pregnant mothers about breastfeeding and was attended by over 25 couples. The objective of the class is to provide right information to pregnant mothers and prepares the parents on breastfeeding. This knowledge, have helped a lot of mothers to successfully breastfeed. Information booths are were put up at public spaces like malls, with the intention of spreading the breastfeeding knowledge to public. Often, breastfeeding is presumed as mothers issue and public don’t pay attention to it. Whereas the reality is, their support is very essential in helping a mother to breastfeed.

3.6. Breastfeeding flash mobs

Breastfeeding flash mob is where a group of mothers will get together at a public space and feed their babies for a few minutes. This event was conducted at various hypermarkets, the centre of attraction for the public. The aim of this event is to tell a massage to everyone that breastfeeding is normal and it is just an act of a mother to feed her hungry baby. In Malaysia, breastfeeding in public places is viewed as a taboo due to the actual or gesture of exposing the breast. Education and awareness must be imparted to the community regarding breastfeeding to eliminate the hostility among the community on women who need to breastfeed in public places\(^23\)\(^{(Tan, 2009)}\). The more a thing is being seen and heard, the more it will be accepted by the community. MMPS is trying to bring a big change by changing people’s perception about breastfeeding.

3.7. Breastfeeding rooms

Even though the team focused on making breastfeeding as norm, they do educate public on the importance of having a breastfeeding room especially at workplaces. Breastfeeding rooms at malls are to facilitate some mothers who are reluctant to feed in public and sometimes babies too get distracted if they are being fed in common places. Therefore breastfeeding rooms are very much needed. Almost all malls and hypermarkets have nappy change rooms but not breastfeeding rooms. The fact is the nappy change rooms can be easily transformed as breastfeeding rooms. On the other hand breastfeeding rooms are a critical element in workplaces because mothers need a good place to express and store their milk. Through the counseling sessions MMPS mothers’ got to know that some women are expressing their milk in toilets – something that should be totally avoided. With the initiative of MMPS, two breastfeeding rooms were established; one at Penang state government’s office (for the employees) and the other at Jelutong Sri Veera Kaliamanho Temple (for public who comes to the temple). A few more initiatives are in progress and the group is trying to influence schools to have breastfeeding rooms because most of their employees are women teachers. Availability of breastfeeding rooms creates a positive environment in the workplace and increases the confident of the women employees.

3.8. Collaboration with media

Sensitising media have always been a challenging task to execute, especially when media is getting revenue from formula milk companies via advertisement. This is supported by a research conducted by Emma Mirza Wati Mohamad on media’s role in promoting breastfeeding (Mohammad, 2007). According to her, television advertisements and programs are mostly funded by formula milk companies which influence mothers to trust formula milk. MMPS is still not able to influence the main stream media but they have networked with GSC Cinema to play a breastfeeding promotion video produced by UNICEF titled ‘bubbly baby’. This is targeted to spread the breastfeeding message to younger generation who are going to be the future parents.

3.9. Distribution of printed materials

Printed materials are widely distributed to pregnant mothers and public at any occasions that MMPS is taking part. This is also another effort to educate the target group and also the public about the importance of breastfeeding. Materials, such as ‘Risk of Formula Feeding’, ‘Fathers Too Can Support’, ‘Breastfeeding Your Baby’ and ‘Myth and ‘Misconception of Breastfeeding’ have been widely distributed.

\(^{23}\)Tan KL, Knowledge, attitude and practice on breastfeeding in Klang, Malaysia, The International Medical Journal, Volume 8 Number 1, June 2009. \texttt{http://myais.fsktm.um.edu.my/11175/1/8_1_OA3.pdf}
distributed. This material gives in-depth understanding about breastfeeding and sometimes becomes mother’s source of reference when they have doubts about breastfeeding.

3.10. Appreciation Events

Many multinationals companies in Penang have started to provide breastfeeding facilities to their employees. They provide very conducive rooms with refrigerators for mothers to express and store their milk while they are away from their babies. Support from workplace is very important for women to continue breastfeeding because it helps her to combine her reproductive and productive work\(^2^4\) (IBFAN, 2010). Facilities or privilege such as paid maternity leave, non-discrimination, breastfeeding breaks, breastfeeding facilities (space to express milk and storage), crèches and etc. are vital in creating a breastfeeding friendly environment. On the other hand, some hypermarkets also provide breastfeeding rooms for their customers. Therefore, MMPS have appreciated them during 2012 World Breastfeeding Week. The appreciation is meant to thank them for their support and effort. By highlighting these good efforts, we believe it will further motivate other workplaces to follow the same footsteps.

The ‘work’ that this group is doing can be categorised as community development as per the definition given by Keith Popple. Keith Popple defines community development as a model of community work concerned with assisting groups to acquire the skills and confidence to improve the quality of the lives (Popple, 1995). This goes along with the knowledge sharing that the peer supporters are doing. Breastfeeding knowledge and information that they share, enables mothers to learn about breastfeeding and further improve the health of their babies and themselves. Another scholar’s definition about community development also describes MMPS efforts very well. The scholar, David N Thomas describes community development as strategy emphasises self-help, mutual support, building up neighbourhood integration, development of neighbourhood capacities for problem solving (Thomas, 1983). Mutual support and self-support has been always encouraged among mothers who attend the support group meetings. A breastfeeding working mother will get support from other working mother by sharing techniques and knowledge about expressing and storing milk. They motivate each other to continue breastfeeding despite all the challenges that they encounter as a working mum. Based on Jack Rothman’s opinion, a contextual factor in community intervention involves the established approaches of achieving human development and social betterment which consists of 2 paths: providing aid directly to the individuals or changing the social environment (Rothman, Erlich, & Tropman, 1995). Both of these are covered by MMPS by reaching out to mothers during support group meetings and through their recently launched MBFP campaign. The groups’ unexhausted voluntary efforts for past few years have helped mothers in many ways to breastfeed and slowly MMPS has started to create awareness among community.

4. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

Community support groups are essential to tackle any social issues impacting a society such as the decline of breastfeeding in Malaysia. The initiation of the mother to mothers peer support group in Penang is truly a show of strength and perseverance of these volunteer mothers to fight on a common cause. We provide selfless community service with the hope to see more babies being breastfed in future. Currently MMPS is focusing in creating awareness among all level of society and lobbying into enabling breastfeeding friendly environment via a mammoth effort – Make Penang Breastfeeding Friendly (MPBF). Besides embarking on this project, MMPS is also not forgetting to reach out to the mass via direct community service which is to support a breastfeeding mother in need. Their efforts also expanded into various activities that supports, promotes and protects

\(^2^4\) The State of Breastfeeding in 33 Countries 2010, Tracking Infant and Young Child Feeding Policies and Program Worldwide, 2010 Pg 32, Publisher IBFAN (Africa, Asia, Latin America and Caribbean).
breastfeeding. Achieving the objective is a huge challenge for a group which operates voluntarily but with determination and passion in breastfeeding we will make it happen.

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