



# Protecting breastfeeding: Brazil's story

PHOTOGRAPH: MIKE BRADY



**Sonia de Oliveira Brady** has worked tirelessly to promote breastfeeding, and protect mothers and infants from aggressive marketing practices in her native Brazil. Here she describes some of the innovative strategies employed

I am a Brazilian paediatrician, until recently co-ordinating the human milk bank in São José dos Campos, a city of about 600,000 people in São Paulo state. Until 2001, I also co-ordinated the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) in Brazil. Now that I am living in the United Kingdom, I am often pleased to hear Brazil's experience in promoting, supporting and protecting breastfeeding being cited and praised here.

In its *Progress of Nations 1999* report (Unicef 1999), Unicef published the results of a study of exclusive breastfeeding gains. Brazil was second on the list of 35 countries, with a comparison between rates for 1986 and 1996 showing a four percentage point increase per year in exclusive breastfeeding at four months. A total of 21 of the countries had shown increases in breastfeeding rates, others remained static and five had decreasing rates. A new IBFAN report examines the experience in implementing the Code and Resolutions in Brazil alongside that of other countries, including England (IBFAN 2003).

## Brazil's experience

Brazil's innovative work in human milk banking and 'baby kangaroo' (the method of skin-to-skin contact between a mother and a low-birthweight, premature infant) is well-known. Many people also ask me about the involvement of the fire service in collecting donor milk and the 'baby-friendly postal workers' who carry the breastfeeding message to every door. But here I want to talk about an aspect of Brazil's achievement that is sometimes overlooked: the protection of breastfeeding.

As Unicef said in *Progress of Nations*: "Breastfeeding gains stem from initiatives to publicise the benefits to both mother and child and to prohibit the advertising and

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*promotion of breastmilk substitutes, feeding bottles and teats."* (emphasis added).

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Brazilian mothers have stopped breastfeeding, principal reasons given are "poor milk" and "insufficient milk". It has been documented how the entry of transnational baby food companies into Brazil has promoted these ideas to build the market for artificial milks (Goldenberg 1989). Against this background, health campaigners and the Government investigated how to regulate the baby food industry and supported the adoption of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes at the World Health Assembly (WHA) in 1981 (WHO 1981).

## Infant food marketing Regulations

In 1983, health campaigners formed IBFAN Brazil to work for implementation of the Code and subsequent, relevant WHA Resolutions and began to monitor company compliance with the Code and Resolutions in 1985. IBFAN at first conducted monitoring exercises every two years and then annually. Legislation was introduced in 1988 regulating the marketing of products for feeding infants up to one year of age (Ministry of Health 1988).

The regulations have been reviewed and modified twice in response to new WHA Resolutions and the results of IBFAN's monitoring. For example, our monitoring showed that some complementary foods, such as cereal porridges, were being used for feeding infants as young as two months old. Warnings were required in publicity materials for complementary foods, but the companies argued that their products were intended for children over one year of age and so were outside the scope of the regulations. The regulations were therefore revised in

### Brazilian regulations for the marketing of foods for infants and young children, teats, dummies and feeding bottles (Ministry of Health 2001)

#### Principal requirements

- No promotion to the general public of infant formulas, follow-on formulas, specialised formulas, feeding bottles, teats and dummies. Specified warnings required on labels.
- Complementary foods must not be promoted for use before six months of age.
- Complementary foods, other foods for infants and young children up to three years of age and whole milks must include warnings on the labels and in publicity materials. The regulations specify the wording, text size and presentation of information for these products and for nipple shields.

2001 to cover products for children up to age three (see panel), and now a Ministry of Health warning has to appear on the labels and in publicity materials.

### Stopping violations

The publicising and enforcement of the regulations is of fundamental importance for the defence and protection of children's health... A child breastfed in accordance with the objectives of the regulations will use fewer health service resources, giving substantial savings in human and material resources.

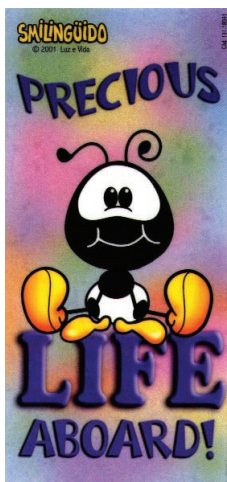
*Maria de Fatima,  
National Breastfeeding Coordinator, 2002*

It is not enough to have regulations on paper; they need to be independently monitored and enforced. IBFAN Brazil's 34 groups conduct monitoring and report violations on an ongoing basis. A national annual monitoring report is sent to the Ministry of Health and National Health Inspectorate. Monitoring results are also important for raising awareness among the

**Below: Reversing the decline in breastfeeding requires the involvement of everybody. When seven-year-old Caio saw this promotional giant feeding bottle in the supermarket, he told his mother: 'Look, mum! Dr Sonia isn't going to be pleased'**



PHOTOGRAPH: IBFAN SAO JOSE



**Left: Smilinguido. This ant family is famous across Brazil. The company agreed to remove the dummy from the 'baby on board' sticker after being contacted by Sonia de Oliveira Brady (Copyright: Luz e Vida)**

IBFAN international network (global *Breaking the Rules* monitoring reports are published periodically (IBFAN 2001)), and for delegates attending international policy setting meetings, such as the World Health Assembly.

IBFAN also trains the authorities sanctioned to take action against malpractice: health inspectors, the consumer protection organisation (PROCON – a non-governmental organisation) and public prosecutors, and for health workers and professional associations. Our basic training programme is 32 hours over four days, which is considered the minimum required to understand the regulations and how to monitor them. As part of the training course, we visit hospitals, pharmacies and supermarkets to check that they are complying.

**Below: Learning how to market breastfeeding. The São José milk bank collection vehicle carries the message: 'Mother's milk: the best food in the best packaging'**



PHOTOGRAPH: SONIA DE OLIVEIRA BRADY

**Companies employing more than 30 women... have to offer creche facilities, and mothers have the right to two breastfeeding breaks per day until their children are six months old**

### Everyone has a role

In São José dos Campos, we followed the theme of the 1999 World Breastfeeding Week, 'Breastfeeding: Education for Life', by speaking about the advantages of breastfeeding and the basics of the regulations to pupils and teachers in all primary and secondary schools and to carers in crèches. IBFAN's handmade dolls, which give birth and breastfeed, were a useful prop (Baby Milk Action sells IBFAN São José dolls, which help to raise funds for both organisations).

The success of this strategy was demonstrated when Caio, a seven-year-old pupil, alerted us to a feeding bottle promotion in the supermarket Carrefour. We photographed the evidence and reported the violation to the health inspectorate, who removed the promotion. Carrefour has not repeated it. ▶

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## Other undermining promotions

IBFAN São José has worked with various non-baby food companies, the media and celebrities to encourage them to take care with the images they use when representing babies, because sometimes these promote artificial feeding. For example, companies have removed dummies and feeding bottles from 'baby on board' signs, labels for products such as nappies and advertisements for items such as mobile phones where infants are featured.

Studying the way companies market their products has taught me some lessons. Having seen the large signs on company lorries and vans, I arranged for a large promotional message on the milk bank's collecting vehicle which travels across the whole city: "Mother's milk. The best food in the best packaging".

## Removing obstacles at work

The Brazilian constitution includes various rights for working mothers, based on those of the International Labour Organisation, including paid maternity leave of 120 days (from eight months of pregnancy or after birth) and guaranteed job security. Fathers have a right to paternity leave of five days after birth. Mothers receive a payment of a month's minimum wage from the Government when they give birth. Companies employing more than 30 women over 16 years of age have to offer crèche facilities, and mothers have the right to two breastfeeding breaks per day until their children are six months old.

Again, it is not enough to have laws on paper. São José is an industrial centre with more than 400 factories of various sizes. The city health secretariat has introduced counselling for mothers before they return to work or study (we have many teenage

mothers) on how to express breastmilk – after training, the majority of mothers prefer hand expression to using a pump – and how to freeze breastmilk. The mother and the carers for her infant are also trained on how to cup feed. The city council provides crèche facilities for female employees with children up to five years of age, with spare spaces for the children of other working mothers. Again, carers are trained to support mothers who are breastfeeding with cup feeding.



**Above: breastfeeding dolls, handmade in Brazil for educational purposes. After giving birth, the baby attaches with a press stud! Available from Baby Milk Action for £12 (not suitable for children)**

The health secretariat encourages companies to fulfill their obligations. For example, I worked with Ericsson, the mobile phone company, to introduce a collecting point for workers who want to breastfeed. There is a room with a freezer, fridge and thermos box for milk to be collected to be taken home.

## Results that speak for themselves

The Ministry of Health/Unicef has awarded São José dos Campos the title of 'Baby Friendly City' for its strategies to reduce infant mortality introduced in different areas of health, education and social services.

The latest breastfeeding figures (based on interviews with the guardians of 1,882 children under one during the 2001 'vaccination day') for the city show its strategies are working. At four months, 36.6 per cent of babies are 'exclusively' breastfed. At six months, 26.7 per cent are exclusively breastfed and 21.5 per cent 'predominantly' breastfed (breastfed with some water, tea or juice), making a total of 48.2 per cent 'completely' breastfed (de Oliveira Brady 2001).

It is hard work to reverse the decline in breastfeeding experienced in Brazil. But with wide involvement in a range of strategies to protect, promote and support breastfeeding we are succeeding in São José and across the country. **TPM**

**Sonia de Oliveira Brady** now lives in Cambridge, working as a freelance author and trainer

### CONTACTS

**Baby Milk Action**, 23 St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge, CB2 3AX. 01223 464420; [info@babymilkaction.org](mailto:info@babymilkaction.org); [www.babymilkaction.org](http://www.babymilkaction.org)

**IBFAN** Contact through Baby Milk Action or [www.ibfan.org](http://www.ibfan.org)

*IBFAN's 2004 breastfeeding calendar is now available. Turn to page 6 for details.*

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