

Half of The Infants Are Not Getting Breast Milk Families Choosing ‘Formula Milk’

Muslima Jahan, Dainik Bangla, March 19, 2023

The outdoor facility of the Bangladesh Shishu Hospital & Institute (BSHI) in the capital provides medical services in seven rooms. New parents Saddam Hossain and Romana Akhtar visited the doctor with their five-month-old daughter in room number 184. The doctor gave them a coloured sticker along with the prescription; In which a company has a tick mark next to the name of formula milk (canned milk powder) depending on the age.

This happened back on February 1 this year. The child's father, Saddam Hossain, said that the girl was underweight and was suffering from a cold. They came from Brahmanbaria for better treatment. The child's mother said, ‘There is milk in the breast but the doctor said that the child is underweight. It will be better if she is fed formula milk.’

The largest hospital treating children in the country is Bangladesh Shishu Hospital & Institute (BSHI). On February 1, two doctors were attending to the patients in room 184. One of them is Syeda Mahinoor Ahmed, a resident health officer. She said, ‘I do not recommend formula milk for children under two years. However, if a working mother insists on not providing breast milk or resists breastfeeding, we do counsel her for breastfeeding in the beginning. Still, if she does not agree, we are forced to suggest formula milk’.

A sales representative of foreign formula milk company is designated to work in Shyamoli and Mohammadpur area, which also includes this hospital. For the past five years, his daily work in the afternoon has been to ‘greet’ the hospital’s doctors and exchange pleasantries with other staff, including nurses. He also arranged various gifts for them. As a result, the sales of the company's formula milk in the hospital area have increased at least sixfold in the last five years, the representative said.

According to the data of the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2019, the rate of breastfeeding during the first six months of birth was 65 per cent. The survey was conducted with data from 2017. But according to the Urban Health Survey, the rate was less than 52 per cent in 2021, in urban areas.

There is no alternative to breast milk to boost the immunity and development of a baby.

Urban Health Survey 2021 and World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) data and surveys say that exclusively breastfeeding infants until the age of six months can ensure the necessary nutrition, and reduce the risk of death. But the rate of breastfeeding in the first six months of birth in the country is not on the rise. Rather, this rate is decreasing in urban areas. Mothers who want to breastfeed are not getting proper guidance. Recommendations for formula milk come from healthcare providers, including doctors.

Similar trends in formula milk use were found in the reporter’s research and survey. It has been found that in many cases working mothers are forced to give formula milk to their

children. Relatives also pressurize the mother by repeatedly mentioning that her child is in 'poor health'. Some mothers, however, find formula milk nutritious. Online promotion is also increasing the use of formula milk.

Rubana Ahmed started feeding formula milk to her daughter at the age of two months as she had to return to his workplace. This mother with a job in a private institution said, 'If you do not make them used to formula milk, they will not drink it all of a sudden. My girl suffered from diarrhoea, cold and pneumonia in the first six months'.

China Akhtar, a housewife from Madhupur, Tangail, said, 'Baby's health develops if you feed tola milk (powdered milk), so I started feeding it after birth. If the child was not healthy, my in-laws would reprimand me.'

Mohammad Roni from Savar said that he has been giving formula to his son since the age of three months after watching videos of doctors on YouTube.

A survey was conducted by interviewing 70 mothers asking seven questions including what the baby ate during the first six months, whether the baby suffered from diseases during that time, and who recommended formula milk. Interviews were conducted directly, online and over the phone. The mothers were chosen from villages and cities and are of different ages and professions.

The data from the latest Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2019 says that in 2017, the rate of mothers breastfeeding up to six months in the country was 65 per cent. The survey was conducted by the National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT). In the same 2011 survey by NIPORT, this rate was 64 per cent. Their 2021 Urban Health Survey across 11 city corporations and municipalities in the country shows a further reduction at 52 per cent.

Lack of proper understanding about the importance of breast milk, recommendation of formula milk from doctors or health care providers, the influence of formula milk marketing, lack of post maternity leave for working women, pressure from relatives, online promotion, lack of breastfeeding facilities in public places mainly causing the mothers to give up breastfeeding before six months.

Doctors are suggesting formula milk

On January 11 and 12 and February 1, this reporter was present at the outdoor facility at the Bangladesh Shishu Hospital from 10 am to 1 pm. Rush at the outdoor facilities started after 9 am.

Some of the parents were seen frantically running towards the room mentioned in the prescription with the child in their arms. Some exited the room with relief on their face, and some were anxious. As soon as they got out of the doctor's chamber, they got surrounded by representatives of formula milk companies. They started enquiring about whether the doctor prescribed their 'company's formula' or medicines. At times they would take photos of the prescription.

The reporter saw that the doctors provided a coloured sticker separately along with the prescription. It has a tick mark next to the formula milk according to the age of the child. Such stickers were seen with the prescriptions of at least 10 parents in an hour. They said that the doctor told them to feed their baby this milk. It will improve the health of the baby. Nurun Nahar brought his son from Kamrangirchar. She said, 'The doctor asked to feed this formula milk every time before giving medicine.'

This reporter took pictures of several stickers of formula milk supplied by doctors. The stickers came from rooms 184 and 185 of the outdoor facility. These stickers were also placed openly on the tables of these two rooms. Hospital records said there were two doctors in each of the rooms. All of them were resident health officers of the hospital.

Outdoor physician and resident health officer Noor-Uz-Zaman said, they only recommend formula milk only if the patient has diarrhoea or has already started consuming formula milk. To avoid mistakes by the buyer, it is ticked on the sticker instead of being written in the prescription. However, he said that he did not receive any incentive or financial benefits from the milk company in return.

Three formula milk company representatives (on condition of anonymity) who worked in this hospital and adjacent areas of Shyamoli and Mohammadpur spoke to this reporter. One of the representatives of a relatively new company said that writing formula milk in the prescription is a punishable crime. To avoid this the doctors are provided with stickers from the company. Many doctors also write on separate papers. But most of the time their advice is verbal.

When asked why these doctors were writing the name of the formula milk of his company, he said, 'I meet the doctors every day after 12:30 pm. You have to give small tokens such as drinking water bottles and pens. Company often organizes scientific seminars, where these doctors are invited as speakers and paid for their participation.'

The largest specialized hospital for children was selected as a case study to observe the role of doctors in recommending formula milk. There are similar allegations against the doctors of the government and private hospitals of the country.

A joint WHO-UNICEF survey titled 'How the marketing of formula milk influences our decisions on infant feeding' found that 98 per cent of mothers had a strong desire to exclusively breastfeed their babies for up to six months. But they could not due to a lack of proper advice. 60 per cent of health professionals recommend giving formula milk to newborn babies.

The survey was conducted by interviewing 8,500 parents, pregnant women and health workers from eight countries including Bangladesh. The survey result was published in 2022.

Babies born in hospitals are more prone to formula milk

The survey conducted by the reporting team also suggests that 55 per cent of mothers gave their baby formula milk before it reached the age of six months. Most of these mothers had their children born in the hospitals. The government survey also suggests a similar trend. Data says babies born in hospitals are 20 per cent more likely to receive formula milk than babies born at home.

School teacher Sumi Akhtar gave birth at Moghbazar Community Hospital. The doctor suggested formula milk as the baby was crying after birth. Once Sumi returned home, she could not make her baby get used to breastmilk again. Another mother, Rokeya Rahman, received similar advice from doctors and nurses after giving birth at Holy Family Hospital. But these suggestions were verbal.

According to paediatricians and gynaecologists, the mother's breast produces only one to two teaspoons of milk daily during the first three days after giving birth. This milk is considered insufficient by family relatives and the mother. During this time, children may cry for various reasons including stomach ache and heat. After caesarean delivery, milk is not produced for the first few days. Many parents then provide formula milk. Again, many doctors fall for the temptation of the companies and recommend formula milk. Mothers also get free formula milk samples at the hospital.

According to Sabikun Nahar, Surgeon and Gynaecology & Obstetrics Specialist of Dhaka Medical College (DMC), breastfeeding has nothing to do with hospital or home delivery. She said that if there is a C-section for the first child, there may be some delay in getting breast milk. In that case, the child should be patiently held in the right position and fed again and again. It will quickly release the oxytocin hormone and the baby will get milk. It is also important to eliminate the idea that the child is hungry when he cries.

Working mothers are without alternatives

Government employee Sohana Islam had to take leave from her office long before giving birth due to illness during pregnancy. To rejoin her office, she started giving her son formula milk from the age of three months. A decision, which she regrets now. She said, 'Many times I felt like I was depriving the child of nutrition. But I chose formula milk to save my career.'

Afreen Shahnaz, an administrative officer of a school, also provided formula milk to her daughter from the age of two and a half months. She said, 'The girl was having frequent diarrhoea, suffering from gastric problems. But I continued with the formula.' Banker Rumana Sarkar started formula milk at night as she won't be able to work properly in the morning if she keeps awake. Some of the mothers shared similar stories.

According to the survey conducted by the reporting team, 80 per cent of mothers who chose formula milk before six months were working. The rate of suffering from various diseases after consuming formula milk was also high in those children. But mothers said that they started giving formula milk after two months due to the rush to return to work. The government survey also said that while 85 per cent of mothers breastfeed their babies in the first month of their birth, that rate reduces to 40 per cent in the first three to four months. Mothers with government jobs can enjoy maternity leave twice for six months. According to labour law, in the private sector this leave is for four months.

There are also complaints regarding the lack of proper care and nutrition for the mothers to breastfeed. However, some mothers consider formula milk to be nutritious. Many mothers also give formula milk to their babies due to the lack of breastfeeding facilities at workplaces and public places.

Online promotion of formula milk

Online promotion of formula milk as an alternative to breast milk is now in full swing. Formula milk companies have social media pages. Doctors are also creating content on YouTube recommending formula milk. They are getting high praises from different groups membered by new mothers. Many mothers are choosing formula milk after hearing such recommendations.

One such mother is Taslima Akhtar. She gave formula milk to her son when he was two months old. The infant started suffering from digestive disorders and diarrhoea only after a few days of consumption. Later her son had to be admitted to the hospital for treatment. Taslima said, 'I thought as the boy's weight was low, feeding him milk powder will improve his health. I posted in the group regarding this and received advice. I started feeding him formula milk with everyone's advice.'

After enquiring about the admin panels of two such groups, it was found that they sell formula milk and baby food. Their products received praise through various posts.

A health expert and nutritionist working on breastfeeding at a UN agency said (on the condition of anonymity) that public or online promotion of formula milk is prohibited but they continue to exist. These punishable criminal offences are committed in public. There is no monitoring. This senior nutritionist commented that formula milk aggression is increasing day by day because there is no punishment.

What measures can be taken

Department Head (Field) of the Public Health Nutrition Institute, Mahbub Arefin Rezanur said, 'Activities to raise awareness by the partners about the existing law at the district and divisional levels to reduce the priority of formula milk is going on vigorously. Supervision is not possible due to a lack of manpower. However, if any doctor is suggesting formula milk, he or she will be penalized based on the evidence.'

However, Rezanur could not confirm whether anyone has been ever penalized for such a crime. He said that a trip to abroad of a group of doctors has been cancelled as a punishment.

Chairperson of Bangladesh Breast Feeding Foundation Professor SK Roy said in this context that powdered milk companies are promoting their products freely, and as a result, mothers are being influenced easily. Exemplary punishment should be provided to those who violate the law in this situation.