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Baby on Board

Why breastfeeding is a social justice issue.

BY CADET JENELLE DURDLE

I would like to start a conversation about an issue near to my heart as a mother, and related to my previous work as a nurse: breastfeeding. You may wonder how this is relevant to our mission as The Salvation Army. The conversation is important because breastfeeding impacts our lives together. There are many childbearing women in our community, and the impact of breastfeeding in women’s lives is immeasurable—it affects us emotionally, socially, physically, financially and spiritually. It influences our early parenting experiences, both positively and negatively. Further, breastfeeding is a social justice issue.

The United Nations and the World Health Organization recognize infant nutrition as a global health issue, stating “breastfeeding needs to be the norm, not the exception.” The following are just a few widely accepted facts about breastfeeding:

- Breastmilk is a sustainable food source for infants.
- Exclusive breastfeeding increases food security for the whole family.
- Breastfeeding impacts the health of mothers, leading to a decreased risk of breast cancer,

cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes and osteoporosis throughout the lifespan.

- Breastfeeding protects the infant against respiratory and gastrointestinal illness, sudden infant death syndrome and childhood obesity.

Breastfeeding is positive for the community and for the health of both mother and child. Statistics show that 90 percent of Canadian mothers intend to breastfeed, and yet only 25 percent of women who start breastfeeding continue for the recommended six months and beyond—and they tend to be women in their thirties or older, with post-secondary education. One of the most-cited reasons for stopping breastfeeding is returning to school or work. This factor disproportionately affects disadvantaged mothers and families. One recent study from Newfoundland and Labrador found that the rate of breastfeeding cessation after one month was three-and-a-half times higher in the socioeconomically marginalized population than in the privileged population.

For babies from marginalized families, the developmental and health results of

breastfeeding are described as “the great equalizer” in relation to early childhood development, social skills and childhood hospitalizations. Yet very few women from this demographic continue to breastfeed beyond a few weeks. Considering this evidence and the great work The Salvation Army does in vulnerable communities, we need to cultivate an understanding of the social issues that impact breastfeeding.

Discussing breastfeeding can be uncomfortable, but it is imperative that we start the conversation. A good place to begin is to identify our values and ideas about breastfeeding. Ask yourself, How would I feel if a woman wanted to stay in the sanctuary to breastfeed her baby, instead of going to the nursery? How would I feel if a client needed to feed her baby during a program or food bank appointment? What if an employee asked for an extra break to pump her breastmilk? Did you know that breastfeeding, wherever and whenever, including pumping breaks, is a human right?

Other questions to ask are: Do I know how to connect clients with local breastfeeding supports? When pregnant women use our resources, do we ensure that they have access to local health education related to pregnancy, childbirth and parenting? And within the Army, what specific challenges related to breastfeeding do officers in full-time ministry face?

The ministry of The Salvation Army is varied and diverse—breastfeeding will not be a focus for all of us. But it should be discussed when we provide services to childbearing women. As officers, employees and volunteers, we may not be equipped to have direct discussions with clients about breastfeeding, but we can create an environment that accepts, supports and promotes breastfeeding in our facilities, and we can network with local resources that provide prenatal education and breastfeeding support. The following websites are a wonderful resource to find local information about breastfeeding for your community: lllc.ca and breastfeedingcanada.ca.

No mother should be made to feel guilty about her feeding choices, but as a public health concern and social justice issue, we have a responsibility to address the factors that can be changed to support women to breastfeed.

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