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Provision of breastfeeding spaces vital for productivity, UCT study finds

Mothers who breastfed at work were more committed to their company or institution and had increased productivity, research by a University of Cape Town (UCT) academic has found.

Associate Professor Ameeta Jaga, an organisational psychologist in the commerce faculty's School of Management Studies, says the provision of spaces for breastfeeding is vital for creating an inclusive, productive workplace and have been a long time coming. While the country's employed labour force hovers around 45% women, there is little support for new mothers returning to work – and little grasp of the compelling business and economic benefits of breastfeeding for society.

“Employers must rethink how they can support breastfeeding at work, and in turn contribute to a more productive workforce and an equitable society. There is this stigma about breastfeeding because the idea of breasts is still sexualised.

And it's not just a woman's issue that ends with maternity leave. In the context of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, specifically on health and well-being, decent work, gender equality and the overall future of society, supporting breastfeeding at work is vital,” says Associate Professor Jaga.

The 2016 [Lancet Breastfeeding Series](#) said investing in breastfeeding is the most effective single intervention in reducing child mortality. Breast milk contains a powerful combination of vitamins, minerals, nutrients and antibodies specifically tailored to meet an infant's changing nutritional needs. It is key to cognitive abilities, immunity and nutrition.

Associate Professor Jaga believes that while the percentage of the country's babies that are exclusively breastfed has increased overall from 8% around 2012 (the lowest in the

world) to 32%, interrogated by month by month, this number is still much lower in months four, five and six than in months one, two and three.

Research shows that these low exclusive breastfeeding rates contribute to the high prevalence of malnutrition, diarrhoea, pneumonia and under-five mortality in South Africa.

Before this leads to a crisis, however, Associate Professor Jaga is clear that we need to create awareness, and within her own workspace has begun a conversation with UCT's Organisational Health section to consider a breastfeeding at work policy and guidelines for supporting breastfeeding at work at the university – and to ramp up awareness.

“These small awareness shifts make a difference. One doesn't have to implement high-cost, structural changes. Most research shows that formal policies or structures won't work anyway if you don't have the shift in culture or mindset of supervisors and management.” She points out that all that is needed is a comfortable private space, fridge facilities for storing expressed breast milk, and somewhere to wash a breast pump.

UCT's Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences recently established a mothers' room which offers a private space for breastfeeding mothers.

Last year a similar facility was opened at the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital, thanks to hospital management, the Children's Hospital Trust and the Child Health Advocacy Committee of UCT's Department of Paediatrics and Child Health.

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