

Breastfeeding is an essential source of nourishment for millions of infants worldwide. Breast milk contains require nutrients that can help prevent infections and malnutrition. Mother's milk is safe, free, and renewable. However, in the last several decades, breast milk has had to compete with the rapidly growing market of breast milk substitutes – baby formula. As consumers, we trust that the producers of breast milk substitutes make it their number one priority to protect infant health. However, the news that infant formula posed a danger to infants may come as a surprise to many. In the mid 1970s, Nestle (a Swiss multinational) the number one producer of breast milk substitutes was attacked for aggressively marketing baby formula in developing countries.

The story of the Nestle Baby Formula Controversy begins almost three decades ago with the publication of a pamphlet called 'The Baby Killer' in 1974 by Mike Muller and War on Want, a London-based activist group concerned with problems of the Third World (Akhter 1994). The pamphlet claimed that Third World babies were dying because their mothers were feeding them infant formula that was being marketed by multinationals such a Nestle of Switzerland (Akhter 1994). The pamphlet claimed that the infant deaths were due to irresponsible marketing of infant formula, especially the “use of medically unqualified sales girls, the distribution of free samples, and the association of bottle-feeding with healthy babies to promote the use of infant formula by mothers” who should have been breast-feeding their babies rather than bottle-feeding them (Akhter 1994). Before The Baby Killer was published, the issue of marketing baby formula to underdeveloped countries received very little public attention. However, the pamphlet raised public awareness and in 1974 the Third World Action Group, TWAG,

translated the pamphlet into German and republished it under the new title, 'Nestle Kills Babies' (Akhter 1994).

The infant formula controversy quickly spread from Europe to the United States where the Infant Formula Action Coalition, INFACT, protesting the marketing of infant formula in the Third World, issued a consumer boycott of all Nestle products on July 4, 1977 (Akhter 1994). Soon other organizations such as the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, ICCR, joined the controversy by advocating, "multinationals should curb their infant formula promotions in Third World countries" (Akhter 1994). As a result of international pressure and investigations, Nestle finally admitted to violating many provisions of World Health Organization international code of marketing of infant formula. These violations included:

- **Advertising infant formula directly to mothers**
- **Giving free supplies**
- **Giving mothers free samples of their infant formula**
- **Sending mother's direct mail promotion of their infant formula**
- **Mothers of newborn children receiving free samples**
- **Distributing free supplies in China**
- **Labels not in local languages**
- **Nestlé's non scientific and non factual claim that Nan 2 is "the ideal to ensure optimal growth and development"**
- **Hospitals given low cost supplies Labels recommending 'weaning' foods from three (3) months (Philipp, O'Brien 2001)**

In addition to the above violations, Nestlé's marketing of powdered infant formula in countries where, according to the World Health Organization, at least two thirds of the

people have no access to clean water and mothers are unable to read the instructions properly, thus baby formula under these conditions represents a danger to newborn infants (Leeman 2002). Although Nestle insists that the company had changed its marketing practices and is now in compliance with the World Health Organization's rules, there are still lingering doubts that Nestle "has not earned the benefit of the doubt and there are all sorts of reasons not to let it off the hook yet" (Leeman 2002).

The Nestle baby formula controversy remains a reminder that even in today's economy a company can still suffer financial loss and find itself swallowed in a public relations nightmare due to the strength and unrelenting efforts of special interest groups and private voluntary organizations (Akhter 1994). These forces, which are comprised of grass roots groups and international organizations have become "active constituents of the new international sociopolitical environment, including international business activities," and show signs of becoming even more powerful as a watchdog for Third World countries in the years to come (Akhter 1994).

Sources

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