Public attitudes to Breastfeeding in Northern Ireland

Marlene Sinclair, Julie McCullough, Rachel Black and Paul Slater

The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, with continued breastfeeding for up to two years or longer. Data from the Northern Ireland Maternity System show that in 2019, on discharge from hospital 38 per cent of babies were breastfed, 12 per cent received a combination of breast milk and formula while 50 per cent received infant formula. This was based on a sample of 22,040 live births. The rates of any breastfeeding have been increasing since 2017, from 47 per cent up to 50 per cent in 2019.

In an effort to improve breastfeeding rates, Breastfeeding–A Great Start, A Strategy for Northern Ireland 2013-2023 (DHSSPS, 2013) was launched. The vision for the strategy is that Breastfeeding is the social and biological norm, and mothers will be supported to give their babies a good start in life. In addition, Sinclair et al. (2018) recommend increasing the understanding of the general public, partners, grandparents and teachers about breastfeeding so that it becomes normalised.

In 2019, the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey asked 1,203 people living in Northern Ireland (NI) about their knowledge and attitudes towards breastfeeding. The percentage of respondent’s agreement for each question was reported. In addition, the survey data were analysed to look for concepts relating to breastfeeding. Eight concepts were identified:

- Relational issues on breastfeeding
- External influences on breastfeeding
- Breastfeeding and the impact on partners
- Attitudes to breastfeeding in public
- Employment and breastfeeding experience
- Breastfeeding is normal
- Breastfeeding is embarrassing
- Breastfeeding is offensive
- Breastfeeding is distasteful

Table 1: Attitudes to breastfeeding

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% strongly agree/agree</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NI Health Survey 2014/15 (N=4144)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breastfeeding is normal</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breastfeeding is embarrassing</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breastfeeding is offensive</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breastfeeding is distasteful</td>
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In order to explore respondent’s knowledge of the health benefits of breast milk for mother and infant, respondents were asked if they...
agreed with a series of statements. Figure 1 shows that a minority of respondents were aware of these health benefits, ranging from 39 per cent strongly agreeing/agreeing that breastfed babies get fewer ear, chest and stomach infections, to only 14 per cent who were aware that bottle-fed babies are at increased risk of cot death. Females and those who had a child that had been breastfed had more knowledge about these benefits. There was a high proportion of respondents who said that they did not know how to answer these questions (47% - 63%). This suggests a clear lack of knowledge about breastfeeding within the population: therefore, more education is required to meet the goals of the breastfeeding strategy.

Figure 1: Knowledge about the health benefits of breastfeeding for mother and baby (%strongly agree/agree)

Reassuringly, 58 per cent of NILT respondents strongly agreed/agreed that breast milk is healthier than formula for babies with more women than men thinking this (Figure 2). A minority (20%) of respondents felt that formula is as healthy as breast milk and this was higher among women than men. While the majority of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that breastfeeding is good for baby (87%), this number has fallen since the 2014/15 NI Health Survey (90%) and is now on the increase since the 2017/18 survey (86%). Notably, women had more positive views towards bottle feeding than men, and there was no significant difference between views on the convenience of breastfeeding compared with bottle feeding.

Relational issues
Over a third of respondents (36%) felt the decision on how to feed a baby should be made by the mother and her partner, while 68 per cent felt that this decision should be made by the mother only, with males and females agreeing similarly with this statement. Women continue to be the main carers for their children and 60 per cent of people surveyed thought that Bottle feeding with formula milk makes it easier for a mother as all the pressure isn’t on her; 15 per cent strongly disagreed/disagreed and 25 per cent didn’t know.

External influences
External influences on breastfeeding are wide ranging and include interactions with Health Care Professionals (HCP), government legislation, or commercial businesses by way of advertising and marketing. Four out of ten NILT respondents (39%) strongly agreed/agreed with the statement Health professionals place too much importance on whether a baby is fed using breast milk or infant formula milk, suggesting that that some parents feel HCPs are too focused on influencing infant feeding choices.

Views on infant feeding methods
One half of NILT respondents (51%) felt that long term it doesn’t really matter if a baby is fed with breast milk or infant formula milk. Survey responses to the statement It’s not the type of milk that you feed a baby with that matters, but how you care for your baby ranged from 63 per cent strongly agreeing/agreeing, 14 per cent neither agreeing nor disagreeing to 13 per cent disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. This suggests that how babies are cared for within individual families is of greater importance than the milk they receive.

Figure 2: Attitudes to infant feeding

Breast milk is healthier than formula
Formula is as healthy as breast milk
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree strongly
- Don't know
In Northern Ireland, pregnant women and families with children under the age of four years who are on a low income receive ‘Healthy Start’ vouchers. These can be used to purchase cow’s milk, fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables and infant formula. When asked whether The government should stop helping parents on low income to buy formula using vouchers, 64 per cent disagreed/strongly agreed, with men being less favourable to the government subsidising formula. However, only 22 per cent felt that women who are breastfeeding should also get shopping vouchers as an incentive to encourage them to breastfeed and 46 per cent disagreed/strongly disagreed.

International Code and Resolution and UK law make it illegal to advertise or promote infant formula for use from birth to six months so that it cannot ‘imply or create a belief that bottle-feeding is equivalent or superior to breastfeeding’ (Baby Milk Action). However, only 10 per cent of NILT respondents strongly agreed/agreed that We should limit advertising from baby milk companies on TV, radio and in magazines, while 55 per cent disagreed/strongly disagreed and 34 percent either didn’t know (18%) or neither agreed nor disagreed (16%). More women (63%) than men (55%) supported the statement that The government should not interfere in whether a baby is breastfed or not.

Impact on partners
A minority of respondents (16%) felt that when a mum is breastfeeding her baby, her partner would be less likely to be involved in their child’s care. A similar proportion (16%) felt that breastfeeding means that it would be more difficult for partners to bond with the baby and they could feel left out. Urban residents and those who had breastfed felt that breastfeeding would have less of an impact on partners’ involvement and bonding.

Breastfeeding in public
Table 2 shows there was a lack of support that Women should only breastfeed their babies at home or in private, with higher age groups being more likely to have this view. In Northern Ireland, women who choose to breastfeed in public are protected by sex discrimination law whereby they cannot be treated unfairly. The ‘Breastfeeding Welcome Here’ scheme allows businesses to identify that they are happy for women to breastfeed their children on their premises.

While there is support for mothers to breastfeed in public, support for a law has fallen since 2014/15 with people aged 65 years or over most likely to disagree/strongly disagree (30%). Three quarters of NILT respondents (77%) felt that People should support mums who breastfeed in public, with those in the 65+ age group being almost three times more likely to disagree/strongly disagree. There was also strong support (77%) that Mums should feel free to breastfeed their babies in public and similarly the 65+ age group was least likely to support this view. Both these response rates have fallen since 2017/18 suggesting a decrease in positive views towards breastfeeding in public. It is important to note that the population samples for the NI Health Survey are not directly comparable to the NILT survey.

Table 2: Responses to questions on breastfeeding in public in NI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NI Health Survey 2014/15 (N=4144)</th>
<th>NI Health Survey 2017/18 (N=3355)</th>
<th>NILT 2019 (N=1203)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women should only breastfeed their babies at home or in private</td>
<td>12 Not reported</td>
<td>71 Not reported</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be a law in Northern Ireland to protect women who want to breastfeed in public</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>84 Not reported</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People should support mums who breastfeed in public</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>82 Not reported</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mums should feel free to breastfeed their babies in public</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>82 Not reported</td>
<td>77</td>
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for both boys and girls. Marginally more females than males (77% and 63% respectively) had this opinion. However, only 27 per cent of YLT respondents thought that the topic of breastfeeding should be taught in primary school. Over half (54%) of the young people taking part in YLT said they had never had a discussion on breastfeeding in school, although 14 per cent could not remember if this had happened or not.

**Conclusion**

Overall, people in Northern Ireland are positive and supportive of breastfeeding and breastfeeding mums. However, the underlying factors on how a woman chooses to feed her baby are complex. The downward trends in some attitudes since previous NI Health Surveys must be viewed in the context of the larger sample sizes. Issues with the transference of knowledge and early education on health benefits and support systems need to be addressed. This analysis of breastfeeding attitudes and knowledge in Northern Ireland will enable HCPs, policy makers and researchers to develop and share appropriate knowledge with identified target groups. Further work is needed to develop and share usable, helpful and understandable messages to all groups to enable women and their families to make informed feeding decisions and to normalise breastfeeding within the community. The support among YLT respondents for breastfeeding education suggests that short, tailored, infant feeding educational programmes in secondary schools (e.g., within Learning for Life and Work or Childcare or Science) would pay longer term dividends in normalising breastfeeding and enhancing the health of the population.

**Key points**

- NILT respondents demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the benefits of breastfeeding.
- Women and those who had breastfed any children had more knowledge of the health benefits of breastfeeding.
- A small proportion of respondents felt that breastfeeding was offensive or distasteful.
- Twice as many women as men agreed that formula is as healthy as breast milk.
- Younger participants, those with higher qualifications and those living in urban areas had more positive attitudes towards breastfeeding in general and in particular towards breastfeeding in public.

**References**

- Baby Milk Action Guide to UK formula marketing rules – promotion to the public (advertising) http://www.babymilkaction.org/ukrules-pt2a
- Sinclair M. et al. (2018) ‘Interventions to increase the initiation of breastfeeding: a systematic review of studies conducted in the UK and Ireland’, *Evidence Based Midwifery* 16(4), pp. 112-119

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