Breastfeeding is one of the most effective ways to ensure child health and survival. Despite WHO recommendations, fewer than half of infants under six months old are exclusively breastfed.

Breast milk is the ideal food for infants. It is safe, clean, and contains antibodies that protect against many common childhood illnesses. Breast milk provides all the energy and nutrients an infant needs for the first six months of life, continuing to meet up to half of a child's nutritional needs during the second half of the first year and up to one-third during the second year.

However, Rwanda's 2019-2020 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) shows that exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months decreased from 87.3% in 2015 to 80.9% in 2020.

To address this, the National Child Development Agency (NCDA), in partnership with the Rwanda Biomedical Center (RBC) are raising awareness under the theme "Closing the Gap: Breastfeeding Support for All.

Speaking to the media on Tuesday, Agnes Uwineza, Head of Nutrition and Hygiene at NCDA emphasized ongoing collaborative efforts with all stakeholders to improve conditions for breastfeeding mothers at the workplace in both public and private sector.

Since October 2nd, 2022, Rwanda has increased paid maternity leave from 84 days to 98 days and prohibited the dismissal of pregnant workers. Additionally, one hour daily is allocated for breastfeeding mothers to nurse their children. Interventions include Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers and breastfeeding rooms at workplaces.

"A Ministerial Order issued in August last year on occupational health and safety extended the duration of maternity leave for female employees who have recently given birth from 12 weeks to 14 consecutive weeks. This additional time is another opportunity for mothers to breastfeed," Uwineza said.

Uwineza also highlighted the recent introduction of flexible working hours, permitting mothers to engage in morning breastfeeding alongside the existing one-hour break.

Faustin Machara, NCDA's Maternal and Child Nutrition Officer, emphasized the

importance of breastfeeding rooms in every organization. “After three months of maternity leave, when mothers return to work, most children aren’t able to breastfeed exclusively for six months, leading to stunting among children. We are mobilizing for a safe, quiet, clean breastfeeding environment for both mother and child.”

Machara also noted the substantial costs of not breastfeeding, including implications at the individual, family, and societal levels. Psychological benefits include an emotional bond between mother and child, maternal satisfaction, reduced infant crying, and improved child security and performance on intelligence tests.

The decline in exclusive breastfeeding from 87.3% in 2015 to 80.9% in 2020 is likely due to mothers introducing complementary foods at 4-5 months. The introduction of solid, semisolid, and soft foods at 6-8 months has increased from 56.7% in 2015 to 81.4% in 2020.

Justin Ntaganda, RBC’s Nutrition Officer, reviewed results from the sixth Population Health Survey (DHS) by the National Institute of Statistics (NISR), revealing that 33% of children under five in Rwanda are stunted, down from 38% in 2014-15. Additionally, 1% of children under five were underweight for their height in 2020, up from 2% in 2015, and 8% were underweight in 2020, compared to 9% in 2015.

Ntaganda emphasized that proper breastfeeding from birth to six months can significantly reduce malnutrition, obesity, and immunodeficiency diseases. He called upon the private sector, government institutions, partners, and civil society organizations to participate in the breastfeeding campaign and raise awareness of the need for comprehensive support for breastfeeding mothers.

The WHO and UNICEF recommend initiating breastfeeding within the first hour of birth and exclusively breastfeeding for the first six months. Infants should be breastfed on demand, and no bottles, teats, or pacifiers should be used. From six months, children should begin eating safe and adequate complementary foods while continuing to breastfeed for up to two years or beyond.