



Sen. Cayetano's office

### "CULTURAL REVOLUTION"

Sen. Pia Cayetano is leading a "cultural revolution" of sorts, bringing her breast-feeding advocacy outside the Senate halls by holding seminars to teach women the value of breast-feeding and encourage them to make the choice.

# FREEDOM TO EXPRESS

Sen. Pia Cayetano is bringing breast-feeding back in vogue among Filipina mothers who have to nourish their young and take home the bacon

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**"I** had a difficult time looking for a private space where I could do it," the woman said. "At airports, I had to lock the door of diaper-changing stations for some privacy, but the incessant knocking of other people wanting to use the room rattled me."

It was that familiar weight in her bosom, and the world seems none too sympathetic at the moment with her desire to express.

Later on, as lady legislator Pia Cayetano, the woman set out to remedy the situation for other women who have ever found themselves caught short in a similar manner while attending to their primal maternal duty at work.

The proposed Expanded Breast-feeding Act was one of the very first bills Cayetano filed as a novice senator. But time ran out on its passage in the 13th Congress. Now she is hopeful that before the present Congress adjourns by midyear, Filipino mothers wishing to breast-feed can look forward to a couple of new institutional mechanisms, namely workplace lactation stations and hospital milk banks, to support their decision.

It is not always an easy decision and it has grown to be an unpopular one, notwithstanding the issuance in 1987 by then President Corazon Aquino of Executive Order No. 51 or the National Milk Code, a law whose angle of addressing breast-feeding decline is to go

after the conversely more popular breast-milk substitutes.

"Twenty years after the Milk Code, there was hardly any change in breast-feeding rates. It has gone even lower and 16,000 infants continue to die each year from not breast-feeding," says pediatric gastroenterologist Mary Jean Villareal-Guno.

Data as of 2007 show that only 16 percent of Filipino babies are exclusively breast-fed up to six months. Half of our infants today wholly subsist on their mothers' milk for only 24 days or less, compared to 1998 when the same number of children get exclusive sustenance from their mothers for up to one and a half months.

According to Cayetano, the new breast-feeding bill supplements the Milk Code and another related law, the Rooming-In and Breast-feeding Act of 1992, which provides incentives to all government and private health institutions with rooming-in and breast-feeding practices.

The new bill goes down to the brass tacks from the mothers' practical perspective by mandating workplaces and public places such as shopping malls to set aside a facility within their premises for the use of employees and patrons. Nursing employees should also be granted lactation periods or "milk breaks" during the workday for either breast-feeding or expressing their milk for future use.

The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) will make the lactation station and milk breaks part of its labor-standard requirements. “We asked DOLE if it’s reasonable, doable, and can be done by small companies,” says Cayetano. “We’re not asking them (the companies) *naman* to invest millions or even hundreds of thousands to provide these facilities.”

The minimum requirements for a lactation station are privacy, good ventilation (not necessarily with air-conditioning), and easy access to a sink or lavatory. There should also be refrigeration or appropriate cooling facilities for storing milk, electrical outlets for breast pumps, a small table, comfortable seats and other items that the government, through the Department of Health (DOH), sees fit to include.

There might be some flexibility for businesses with very small headcount. For a shopping mall with 50 establishments for example, a common area can be set aside for the employees of the different mall tenants.

Unlike the controversial Milk Code, the bill seems to draw support from everyone, including those defending breast-milk substitutes, says Cayetano. It makes business sense, she adds, citing various studies in the United States linking corporate lactation facilities with fewer work absences, increased staff retention, and higher employee morale.

### Pushing the milk bank

The refiled version of the bill also incorporates an existing but little known provision in the Rooming-In Act, the promotion of milk banks in health institutions. The bill specifies that the donated and pasteurized breast milk “will primarily be given to children in the neonatal-intensive-care unit whose own mothers cannot produce or do not have enough breast milk.”

Since the passage of the Rooming-In Act 16 years ago, only a couple of government hospitals, the Philippine General Hospital and the Philippine Children’s Medical Center, have set up such a facility.

Cayetano acknowledges that a milk bank entails a huge investment for health institutions, that’s why the present bill will still serve only to encourage further, not require, big hospitals to set up their own. As an incentive for the hospitals to act posthaste, there will be tax exemption of up to twice the amount of actual expenses incurred for complying with the provisions within six months after the bill is passed.

“What we expect is for DOH to push this (the milk bank concept) among the bigger health institutions,” she said. “We were advised by health experts not to mandate it yet



### SEN. CAYETANO

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because it would be hard to push if they (the hospitals) are not yet ready.”

The question of readiness is a complex one that begins with the mothers themselves. A mother of two and a former milk donor herself, the lady senator believes that mothers should be aware and convinced first that there is nothing wrong with sharing milk. If their babies are the recipients, there should be reasonable assurance that the milk is sourced safely.

“*Mas maganda kung kilala nila ang nanay* (donating the milk) and know her lifestyle,” observes Cayetano. She cites the practice now in some *barangays* where, instead of a day-care center, mothers [in a group] take turns to wet nurse all the babies belonging to their neighborhood “milk pool.”

She acknowledges that it might take a while for mothers to take milk sharing one step further, by entrusting their infant’s well-being to breast milk sourced from a “stranger.” As it is, many Filipino mothers still need to be convinced of something more fundamental: that they should be breast-feeding at all.

### Loss of breast-feeding culture

“There’s this aspirational view in this country that really has to change, *‘kung may pera ka, bumili ka ng nasa lata,’*” notes Cayetano. “The awareness and convenience of breast-feeding are the two main issues. It is not a way of life to many people especially to urban women because of, again, access to breast-milk substitutes.”

She views the Milk Code as a stringent-enough legal tool to curb the popularity of breast-milk substitutes, notably those manufactured as such. But she feels that it can improve in the area of stepping up the marketing of breast milk itself, instead of just focusing on regulating its competitors.

“For as long as you’re trying to regulate the marketing of substitutes, you should also be promoting the alternative. Otherwise, *baka bumalik rin tayo sa mga* bad practices still existing in the provinces,” she said, referring to the use of unauthorized breast-milk substitutes such as rice washings (*am*), water and sugar, and evaporated milk.

Her present bill also calls for breast-feeding programs, developed by DOH and offered to employers (as part of the companies’ human-resource-development initiative) and to local-government health centers.

To win over future parents at an early age, breast-feeding education is to be integrated in the elementary, high school, and college curricula, especially in the medical-related and technical vocational courses. Also endorsed is a breast-feeding-awareness month to be celebrated every August.

One cannot legislate cultural change but the right environment can be set. “Cayetano’s bill fits in to support the working women,” Guno opines. “It can be part of culture development because if we now begin to see nursing rooms in malls and workplaces, then it brings back the [breast-feeding] culture to acceptability. It won’t be considered indecent for a woman to bare her breast in public.”

She cites a study saying that work is a top reason women don’t breast-feed. With women comprising 40 percent of the country’s 33.3 million workforce, as per a 2006 labor-force survey, and with more than 60 percent of these working women married, what we have is a major cultural force that might be predisposed not to breast-feed.

Says Cayetano: “The difficulty is not only in convincing the mother that it is the right thing to do image-wise, but also since a lot of women are married to their career aside from their husbands and have lots of kids.”

Guno observes that although there are policies in the Philippine Labor Code to support the working mother by prohibiting night work and mandating day-care facilities, maternity leave, and family planning, a lot more can be done such as institutionalizing breast-feeding breaks (included in the Cayetano bill), standardization of salaries, more nursing groups, and nondiscrimination in hiring.

Still, it would be the woman’s choice in the end. Cayetano wants Filipino women to have a clear appreciation of what breast-feeding entails and still choose it for their kids. “Real women breast-feed. It may not be easy for them to breast-feed and it’s an inconvenience. In fact, it is painful in the beginning but it is genuinely what is best for your baby. Know it and make an informed decision.” **M**