

Brief report about the United Nations Climate Change Conference, Dubai, United Arab Emirates 30 November -12 December 2023 – (COP28).

The UN climate change conferences have been taking place every year since 1995. These multilateral decision-making forums on climate change have a membership of almost every country. In 2022 COP27 was held in Egypt and for reference there is an article about this conference on the College website - [link](#).

It was reported that more than 95,000 people attended COP28 in Dubai this year, and this number included at least 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists (Igna, 2023a). Concerns had already been expressed by many about the location in a country which continues to promote the fossil fuel economy, but it was hoped that most attendees would be there to collaborate, build partnerships and share solutions (Hayhoe, 2023).

Supporters of the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty were active at COP28. The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty is supported by the World Health Organization, the European Parliament, over 90 cities, and 3,000 scientists and academics, amongst others, and the day after COP28 ended the Wellington City Council NZ, formally endorsed the Treaty proposal. Colombia and Nauru also signed the Treaty at COP28. The Secretary for Climate Change and National Resilience of Nauru, Reagan Moses, spoke about the importance of financing a just transition for the countries most vulnerable to climate change (Fossil Fuel Treaty, 2023). Nauru as a small island nation is at great risk of catastrophic sea level rise, as well as being vulnerable to drought and ocean acidification.

Unfortunately, the President of COP28, Sultan Al Jaber, whose appointment as COP28 president was of course controversial, was reported in the media as saying there was no science indicating that a phase-out of fossil fuels is needed to restrict global heating to 1.5C, and that the phasing out of fossil fuels would not allow for sustainable development unless the world was taken “back into caves” (Carrington & Stockton, 2023). Scientists at COP28 said that these comments were incredibly concerning and verging on climate denial (Ibid). In one of the opening remarks of the conference, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres did call for a phase out of fossil fuels with a clear time frame, and a just and equitable transition to renewables. Guterres also addressed the attendees from the fossil fuel industry and told them their “old road is rapidly aging. Do not double-down on an obsolete business model” (Igna, 2023). The conflicting messages relayed in COP speeches does very little to foster confidence in these large gatherings of powerful, mostly male decision-makers, many of whom have obvious conflicts of interest.

On Day 1 of COP28 a framework was ratified to make the COP27’s Loss and Damage Fund operational. The purpose of this fund is to help low-income countries pay for climate related damages, and contributions to this fund from wealthy nations have now reached US\$260 million, which is well short of the money likely to be needed. Environmental disasters, due to climate change, disproportionately affect countries least responsible for the damage being done to the planet.

A key action in 2023 was to make food and agriculture a priority issue in terms of sustainability and climate change threats. Food security is a key issue at the COP conferences and a push for food and agriculture to be featured in all national climate plans was made. The mostly forgotten and unmentioned aspect of food security worthy of recognition on the global stage is breastfeeding. Breastfeeding represents not only optimal food security and immune protection for infants, but it is also safe and sustainable. Breastfeeding is environmentally friendly, it is a natural and renewable food, and it is delivered to infants via what has been described as the shortest food mile, with, “... a zero-carbon footprint” (Palmer 2009, p.346). It was in 2020 that the World Breastfeeding Week, an initiative of the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) focused on climate

change and the impact of infant feeding on the environment. 'Support breastfeeding for a healthier planet' was the 2020 slogan (World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action, 2020).

The Geneva Infant Feeding Association and the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) recently released a statement about COP28 (GIFA/IBFAN, 2023). In this strong statement they pointed out that endless discussions about adaptation, mitigation and atmospheric pollution were not what people wanted from these conferences. Instead, they said that people needed to know that COP28 would provide an action plan to limit the climate change impacts being experienced now. GIFA/IBFAN highlighted how difficult it was for populations to adapt to disaster situations caused by climate change and suggested that starting right at the beginning with newborn babies and their mothers, how we feed our babies and how we produce our food would be an important part of a mitigation strategy. When access to clean water, food, sanitation, and health care is limited breastfeeding can be life-saving for infants.

To have breastfeeding recognised as important for the planet as well as infants and mothers, and to promote breastfeeding as part of food security would represent a significant milestone within climate change discourse and discussion. Recognising breastfeeding as significant would also require governments to be held accountable for the protection of breastfeeding and the support for women to breastfeed. Without support and protection there is little point in telling women how important breastfeeding is and repeating the unhelpful mantra of 'breast is best' so favoured by the commercial baby milk industry. For many women breastfeeding remains out of reach, for reasons usually out of their control, and often linked in industrialised nations to a lack of societal support which includes workplaces and childcare settings. In poorer nations the influence of baby milk marketing is pervasive and aggressive and can mislead women and families into thinking commercial baby milks are better and healthier than breastfeeding. The devastating results of this are well documented and have been well documented for many years (Rollins et al. 2023). Baker et al., (2023) have highlighted how the commercial milk formula industry contributes to not only widening socioeconomic inequities but also to environmental harms on a large scale.

The under-appreciated role of women as farmers and climate activists was highlighted in an article about COP28 which suggested that recognising and addressing women's rights is necessary for any sustainable transformation of food systems, or indeed climate action to be successful (Polar, 2023). Women were described by Polar as being "more likely than men to adopt practices that adapt to new climate extremes when given the chance" and as "powerful agents of resilience in an effort to protect food systems from the emerging and inevitable impacts of climate change." Although the number of women leaders at COP28 increased to 15 out of 133 participants (CARE, 2023) (there were seven women out of 110 leaders at COP27), this domination by men and underrepresentation of women continues to be disturbing, unfair, sexist, misogynistic, and short-sighted.

The SHE Changes Climate organisation works to drive awareness of the crucial role of women in accelerating climate action and in looking for greater equality in climate negotiations (SHE Changes Climate). Discrimination against women is still a stark and brutal reality in many countries and the marginalisation of women due to socioeconomic and structural barriers continues. She Changes Climate released a statement for COP28 which included a sentence about the importance of "nature based solutions" and women driving positive change (SHE Changes Climate, 2023). Supporting women to participate equally, fairly, and meaningfully in climate action requires agencies to be clear when they speak about women. The words gender and sex are unfortunately often confused, and agencies predominantly talk of gender equality and equity. Gender is a social construct and includes all people – not just women. A UN Women report entitled "Feminist Climate Justice" presented evidence of what was described as climate change policies overlooking gender

issues (Turque et al, 2023). What we urgently need to be talking about is women's sex-based rights, whilst highlighting the continued erosion of women's rights, and the sexism and misogyny that continue to be barriers to women being "given a chance" and becoming "powerful agents of resilience."

Giving women a chance to participate in all meaningful discussions about climate change, fighting for their sex-based rights and, amongst other critical actions to protect women's 'work', – the world of climate change action and justice should start to recognise the links between breastfeeding and environmental sustainability and the importance of supporting women who make decisions to breastfeed.

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