

Anwar Fazal—A Breastfeeding Advocate Extraordinaire

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Anwar Fazal Dato' Seri¹
and Maryse Arendt, IBCLC, FILCA, BSEd² 

Abstract

Anwar Fazal has been a driving force in the founding of several civil society organizations in the areas of health, human rights, environment, and peace, that have been at the forefront of activism locally, nationally, and globally. In this interview, he shares his journey of 6 decades, involving a multiverse of public interest issues, which led him into the breastfeeding movement. It began with the setting up of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), a pioneering action that triggered the formation of Health Action International (HAI), Pesticide Action Network (PAN), and the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA). Each of these resulted in several unique frameworks and codes relating to the marketing of infant foods, pharmaceuticals, and pesticides. They also led to the formation of World Breastfeeding Week, now being celebrated globally. Anwar studied Economics at the University of Malaya and did his postgraduate studies in Education. Anwar has served as a visiting professor at the University of Science Malaysia and the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). He is the recipient of the Right Livelihood Award, popularly known as the “Alternative Nobel Prize,” for his work on breastfeeding and infant nutrition and other health, environmental, and consumer issues. La Leche League International (LLL) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have honored him with the International Health Award and the Millennium Development Goals Award. He has written extensively on breastfeeding. He is currently Chairperson Emeritus of the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) and continues to speak out actively on protecting, promoting, and supporting breastfeeding.

Keywords

breastfeeding, ethics, IBFAN, International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes, politics of breastfeeding, WABA

MA=Maryse Arendt; AF=Anwar Fazal.
This interview has been edited for readability.

MA: You have been present in the breastfeeding world for so long; when did you first come into contact with breastfeeding issues? How did your breastfeeding journey start?

AF: My journey into breastfeeding started in 1941, 83 years ago. I was the first child of my parents and I breastfed for 2 years.

My passion from a young age was reading, and in the early fifties, my father bought the family a copy of the Pears' Cyclopaedia, an amazing book on nearly everything, everywhere in the world. I learned by being a curious cosmopolitan, a Universalist, and always with a thinking mind that was open to anything, anywhere, anytime, from comics to novels to textbooks. I once had a sinus problem and a traditional doctor said it was due to “overthinking”! I lived through World War II. One unforgettable experience was a story my mother told me when



Maryse Arendt

I was 5 years old. She told me that the Japanese attacked Malaysia in December 1941. A team of soldiers invaded our village and slammed the door open where my mother and a few other women were also hiding. The soldiers found her in the act of breastfeeding me. The soldiers looked at each other and decided to walk away without causing them any harm. Wow! Breastfeeding saved me and all of our lives.

¹Chairperson Emeritus of the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA), Malaysia

²Berufsverband vun den Laktationsberoderinnen zu Letzebuerg, Luxembourg

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Corresponding Author:

Maryse Arendt, IBCLC, FILCA, BSEd, Berufsverband vun den Laktationsberoderinnen zu Letzebuerg, 17 rue Charlemagne, L1328, Luxembourg.

Email: maryse.arendt@pt.lu

MA: You are known as an activist and organizer in many fields; how did this happen?

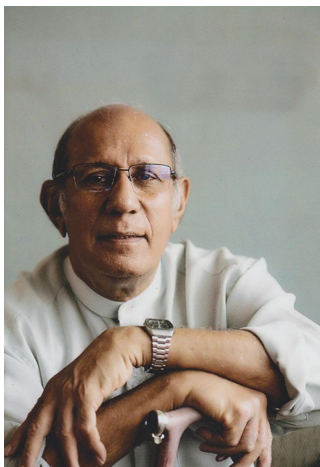
AF: My journey of activism began at the University of Malaya, the only university in the country then. I was studying economics and business administration. My eyes opened to understanding how the world operates. My postgraduate studies in education taught me how to convey information, knowledge and wisdom—three different words so essential to communication.

I was elected president of the National Union of Malaysian Students in 1963. That taught me leadership in the form of organizing and being a change-maker, seeking justice and fairness. My first lesson on “justice” was deep. It was when I had among the best academic results in the State, but, shockingly, I did not receive a scholarship given to the best students. This situation forced my father to borrow money to pay for my studies. At the end of the first year, I was among the best-performing students in the Faculty of Arts, and I was automatically given a full scholarship that paid for my fees for the rest of my stay at the university. Justice finally prevailed!

MA: In the video that celebrates the 40th anniversary of the Code on Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes, (Global Breastfeeding Collective, n.d.) there are interviews with those persons present at the beginning of the Code; you were there representing IOCU (International Organization of Consumer Unions).

AF: My career work began with teaching economics at the Royal Military College in 1965, where I initiated an innovative monthly Magazine called *The Entrepreneur*—a word not much known then—to teach my students to be creative and face up to challenges. I moved to being a public servant with the City Council of George Town, Penang, where I learned about local democracy, and grassroots and community engagement. While there, I initiated the setting up of the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) in 1969 and served as the Honorary Secretary for 5 years. CAP became a champion for the people, especially concerning health and safety issues. I was invited by the International Organization of Consumers Union (IOCU) in October 1974 to set up a regional office for Asia and the Pacific. They knew of my skills in start-ups and management, and my passion for justice. It was there that my journey into international activism began. IOCU became the voice of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) globally at the United Nations. We did not like that term and started using the words “Civil Society” instead.

My trinity of values was: (1) caring for consumers, (2) caring for other people, and (3) caring for the



Anwar Fazal

environment. I also developed a Charter for Consumers Rights and initiated World Consumer Rights Day, celebrated on 15th March yearly.

MA: How did it happen that you and the IOCU became involved with the topic of predatory marketing of breastmilk substitutes?

AF: In 1977 I was surprisingly invited by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (who were then working on Nutrition issues with the Economic and Social Commission for Asian-Pacific [ESCAP]) to take up a consultancy role for 2 weeks to develop a Code of Ethics for the international trade in food. I worked out of the FAO office in Rome, Italy,

and did a major and pioneering report titled *Food, Health and Honesty—A Report on the Elaboration of a Code of Ethics for the International Trade in Food* (Fazal, 1977).

MA: Today, the FAO/WHO (World Health Organization) Codex Alimentarius has a *Code on Ethics in International Trade in Food Including Concessional and Food Aid Transactions* (FAO, 1979), and it was quite a struggle to keep the Code enshrined there against the lobbyism of formula manufacturers. So, you were a pioneer too in ethics in trade!

AF: The IOCU links with the UN led me to another adventure. I was invited to represent IOCU at the First United Nations Conference on Women, which was held in Mexico in January, 1975. I was to speak at the parallel civil society forum on the topic of the exploitation of women as consumers. There, I bumped into a lawyer and a breastfeeding advocate, Leah Margulies (Margulies & Arendt, 2022a, 2022b). That chance link facilitated a lifelong friendship of working together in the formation of a global movement to battle against the Infant Formula Companies. I learned about the Nestlé Boycott. The chance encounter also linked me with the Interfaith Centre for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), where she worked together with Ed Bear, [and] ICCR became another key player in the breastfeeding movement. That chance meeting brought me directly into the breastfeeding movement.

MA: This meant that from little groups you sprouted into unparalleled civil society activism at the global level.

AF: I will never forget the many events that played a critical role. The first was the story of a medical doctor, Dr. Cecily Williams, who was working in Penang and other parts of Malaya on health issues under the British colonial government. She saw clearly that commercially produced canned milk was undermining breastfeeding in the east coast of Malaya. She was outraged and gave a historic lecture to the Rotary Club in Singapore in 1939, titled “Milk and Murder.” Her title wording shocked them, but she told them she could think of no other words! To

preserve her legacy, I arranged with WABA to republish her biography titled *Mother & Child Health—Common Sense, Creativity and Care* (Williams & Baumslag, 2006). Incidentally, she became the first Director of the Maternal Division of the WHO.

The second was the books, *The Baby Killer by Muller* (1978) and *The Baby Killer Scandal* by Chetley (1974). It was later republished in Geneva, by a young group called the Third World Action, an initiative of the Declaration De Berne. They bravely changed the title to “Nestlé Kills Babies.” It led Nestlé to sue this young brave group. It was the first global litigation of this sort. The court case gave the breastfeeding movement global publicity like never before. A book has been published on this subject. The court made an interesting judgment. It found the Berne group guilty regarding the title of the book and imposed a nominal fine. The court, however, said that the contents of the book were all correct and breastfeeding was being undermined. A great victory for the movement!

The words “Commerciogenic Malnutrition” that the great couple Dr. Jelliffe and his wife coined and promoted. I believe vocabulary words and slogans like this and “Boycott Nestlé” were incredible. The role of UNICEF (the United Nations Children’s fund) and the WHO, and particularly the heads of these UN organizations at the peak of the struggles—Jim Grant and Hafdan Mahler—were bold and courageous to stand up with us and against powerful corporations and governments.

Another unforgettable moment was when the vote to adopt the Code happened. After a day of negotiations there was a consensus, with the United States (US) also supporting it. Suddenly, there was a political change in the US where the Republicans defeated the Democrats. President Kennedy of the Democrats had been a great and key supporter of breastfeeding. Under the Republican government of the US, it became the only state that voted against the Code. A few other states weakly abstained.

At the conclusion of the conference planning for an International Code, I was asked to make a statement on behalf of the six civil society groups: IOCU, the Interfaith Centre of Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFACT), Oxfam, War on Want, and the young group Declaration de Berne. Never before in UN history has such a civil society coalition emerged and been given an opportunity to speak out. I announced that this new coalition would continue to ensure follow-up action. We announced that it would be called the International Baby Food Action Group. Then, later, I suggested that instead of a group, we rename it to a “Network,” the first group globally to use the term. I suggested that this would enable us to be what we called “Fast, Flexible and Furious,” instead of being trapped in bureaucracy. The unique arrangement was that each of our partners would take lead roles in their areas of specialty. We built on our diverse strengths.

MA: You described so well the birth of IBFAN and the different events leading up to it. You are still planning for the future, and you have a lot of ideas.

AF: There are some ideas I am pushing, like a “Mother Friendly Workplace Initiative” with the help of International Labour Organization (ILO) and Trade Unions must grow.

I am continuing to give regular lectures on breastfeeding issues promoting what I call “the *Panchasila* of Breastfeeding.” The *Panchasila* is an Indonesian word that means “five values.” The five values are: (1) medicine: breastfeeding gives immunity; (2) nutrition: it gives the right food; (3) ecological: it cares for the environment—no waste like bottles, etcetera; (4) economic: its free; (5) love: the mother and child bond of looking at each other and the touch are soulful.

I have also proposed the idea of an International Breastfeeding Academy (IBA) which is now being taken up seriously with the Malaysian government Health Minister by WABA. It will be a primarily digital platform that provides capacity building actions and links for the whole world. It is a baby now and a work in progress, but it will emerge as a great tool. It is critical to building the future generation, and “lifelong learning” is critical if we are to be strong and growing.

MA: I have noticed that some people address you with “Dato.” What does this title mean?

AF: Dato is a title of honor given by the State Government in Malaysia. It is the equivalent of the English knighthood “Sir.” I have had it for some 2 decades. Last year I was given among the highest titles of the state: “Dato’ Seri.”

MA: What do you see as the next biggest need/challenge for global breastfeeding?

AF: The future, the challenges, and the battle will continue. The family of breastfeeding organizations, professionals, UN agencies, universities, and hospitals will need to continue to work together to keep movements even more assertive, creative, and positively active. We need to continue to be alert about new corporate machinations. We shall need to keep fighting. We must never forget that little people doing little things in little places can together creatively and joyfully make the world a better place. We must not forget the future is not a destination; it is a journey that we make—and that this journey can make a better world. We must keep doing it. The babies will be smiling at us.

MA: Key personalities of United Nations’ agencies gave WABA, on its 25th Anniversary some 10 years ago, unforgettable statements that you want to share with us.

AF: Oh, yes, I think they must be made into a poster one day.

Margret Chan, Director General, World Health Organization, said: “Support for breastfeeding is needed not only from the health sector, but also within families, communities, and the workplace, backed up by appropriate policies and legislation. The International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes and the Global

Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding are instruments to guide necessary actions. They call upon all concerned parties to play their role.” Anthony Lake, Executive Director of the United Nations Children’s Fund, said: “Breastfeeding is best fed, whether the baby is born in Uganda or England, China or Canada.” Juan Somavia, Director General of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) said: “The challenge for us is to see the cause of gender equality and the struggle for maternity protection as a basic right. We have affirmed that all in society—employers, workers, governments at large—share the responsibility for maternity protection. We look forward to working with you to make this reality” Professor Olivier De Schutter, The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Rights to Food, said: “To promote breastfeeding better and more effectively, we must build on breastfeeding as a human right both for women and for the infant. This imposes certain obligations on governments particularly to adapt the world of employment to the need to support breastfeeding and to seriously implement the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes” Kraisid Tontisirin, Director, Food and Nutrition Division, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, said: “Premature introduction of complementary foods is a major threat to exclusive breastfeeding and second, nutritionally inadequate complementary foods are a major cause of child malnutrition.”

MA: Promoting, protecting, and supporting breastfeeding has been a journey of 8 decades for you. Can you describe it?

AF: The journey will continue: Making this journey has been like a journey over rivers and oceans, valleys and mountains. It had its highs and lows and great stops and painful hurdles. Whatever, as one wise Pacific Islander once reminded me, three things are important for your work. The first is people, the second is people, and the third is people!

Great movements are about three kinds of people: (1) the “heart” people (I call them the “blood, sweat and tears” people—the “BSTs”); (2) the “head” people (the experts, who I call the “PHDs”); and (3) the “hand” people (who are skilled in managing; I call them the “GTDs”—the “Getting Things Done” people).

Over the years, the breastfeeding movement saw a magnificent proliferation of such wonderful people, pathfinders and passionates, devotees, doers, energizers, and experts. They were the chakras (life forces) of the movement. I did not meet all of them, but many I did, and I want to write down my list of the people who I came across who made a difference to the movement and to my work. They bring out a cluster of more memories about different times, different events, and organizations that have touched my life:

- Marian Tompson, Mary White, Lidwina Froehlich, Mary Ann Kerwin, Betty Wagner, Viola Lennon, and Mary Ann Cahill (Marinelli, 2018)—the seven

mothers who gave us over forty breastfed babies and one of the most global “grownups” on breastfeeding—the La Leche League International, born in 1956 and destined to live forever.

- Christopher Kruth and the Berne Declaration people, Arbeitsgruppe Dritte Welt (Third World Action Group), who courageously printed *Nestlé Kills Babies*, which led to a historic court case. A film should be made on that.
- David Morley and Zef Ebrahim of the Tropical Child Health Unit at London University, who gave us much of the “science” those days.
- Felicity Savage, Elisabet Helsing, and Naomi Baumslag (who can forget her *Milk, Money, and Madness?*; Griswold & Omer Salim, 2017) and Gabrielle Palmer (Palmer & Arendt, 2021). *The Politics of Breastfeeding*, a must-read, were always resources par excellence. More recently, Judith Richter’s *Holding Corporations Accountable, Corporate Conduct, International Codes, and Citizens Action* reminds us of our continuing academic struggles with corporations.
- Dr. Michael Latham, who is in a class all by himself, spawned several generations of international nutritionists who showed that excellence and commitment over and over again in many ways. Ted Greiner, Olivia Yambi, Miriam Labbok and many more who were Cornell alumnus.
- The “Geneva” people and GIFA people were always there for us—Jane Cottingham (of Isis, a pioneering International women’s organization) Nancy Jo Peck, Judith Philipona, Alison Linnekar, and many others who ensured our work at WHO and ILO particularly; and Jean Claude Buffle, the journalist with *24 Heures*, who gave us—*N. . . comme Nestlé, le lait, les bébés et la mort*—an excellent exposé of Nestlé.
- Ross Mountain and Thierry Lamaresquier at United Nations NGO Liaison Service (NGLS) were always there for us and were unforgettable resources. A paper was written by Thierry about the pioneering UN–Civil Society collaboration on the issue of breastfeeding.
- Among the government representatives at the WHO, I remember the steadfastness and strength of Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kutia of Nigeria and Dr. B. Hadj-Lakehal of Algeria.
- Annelies and Jean Pierre Allain (Arendt & Allain, 2019) who, in Geneva and later in Penang, were so central to our work and for me were “hubs” like no other. Annelies’ work with the Code and Jean Peirre, with his multiple languages and advocacy skills, were unparalleled support for us. Their home in Geneva was a home for me during our many visits.
- The U.S. people were central to the campaign: the Kennedy Hearings, the Nestlé boycott. Among the most memorable for me were:

- Sister Regina Murphy, Head of the International Nestle Boycott Committee.
- Ed Baer and Leah Margulies from the International Centre for Corporate Responsibility.
- Doug Johnson and Doug Clements from the Infant Formula Action Coalition (Johnson & Duckett, 2020).
- Pat Young of World Food Day in Washington, US, was even designing WABA's flyer overnight—a flyer that still is one of our best little pieces.
- Stephan Joseph, who resigned from the U.S. government to protest the US “No” position on the Code.
- Frances More Lappe and John Collins (the Food First people) gave us many strategic mega insights.
- Miriam Labbok, Penny van Esterik, Naomi Baumslag and James Grant of UNICEF (Smith, 2018), whose courage, insight, and “go go” attitude were a beacon for us. He encouraged us to form WABA and gave it funding. Without UNICEF, we would not have grown as rapidly. The UN halo would not have been lighted. Some wonderful people reminded us that the UN could be a remarkably pro-people organization. Urban Johnson, Janet Nelson, Margaret Kyenkyia-Isabirye (whose role in Africa, in IBFAN, in UNICEF and in the global Movement for Children has been particularly special; Kyenkyia & Marinelli, 2020), Richard Jolly and Stephen Lewis, and many others like Lida Lhotska, carried the torch of commitment and responsibility (Lhotska et al., 2020).
- At the WHO, Goran Sterky stood out as a giant in fearless advocacy of WHO mandates, and Hafdan Mahler, the Director General, created a whole new relationship with the NGO system from which the WHO took time to recover. Elisabet Helsing and Marina Rea (Rea & Arendt, 2022) were always constants in their command of the issue and their commitment.
- The artists are important, and Linda Kelsey, the American actress who did the tour of Asia to increase public awareness of the campaign, and Liv Ullmann of Sweden come to mind. There was Lucy Lawless of New Zealand who acts in the epic drama, “Xena the Warrior Princess” and joined the many who support our work. I will never forget the Pantomime Mums of the Philippines, the Brazilian Mime Theatre with Antonio & Marcia, and currently, Bonnie Davies of Canada. We need more of such creative people.
- Dr. Raj Anand of India gave textbooks and healing, and Arun Gupta who has given us global surveys of breastfeeding!
- Penny Van Esterik gave us useful frameworks and actions for gender and friendly workplaces.
- I must not forget Nomajoni Ntombela of Swaziland, Pauline Kisanga of IBFAN Africa, and Ines Fernandez of the Philippines, who have been creative mobilizers in their regions and countries, [and] Nor Ellen Sokol, who came to Penang burnt out from corporate law practice to try an adventure on environmental issues, and ended up being among the world's foremost authorities on the Code.

Now, people like Patti Rundall (Rundall & Arendt, 2021) from IBFAN and the amazing OCEAN list are doing amazing sharing and action.

No list like this is ever complete if we do not pay a special and highest tribute to all the mothers of the world and the many grassroots groups that work with them to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding. I will never forget to thank the WABA family: Beth Styer and Felix Savage, my co-chairs for many years at WABA, and the wonderful team of Susan Siew, Sarah Amin, and Lakshmi Menon, and later, Dr. Amal Salim, Sita and Pei Chin, and the many other staff who serve as a key hub of this movement. I have faith that they will continue nourishing the spirit of this great movement. And there were all the people who served over the years in the WABA Steering Council, Task Force, Advisory council and Regional Focal Points. All of these people were very special to me. Although I have not named many, their solidarity, friendship, and strength are etched in my heart. The IBFAN Coordination Council (IBCOCO) Steering Council and my dear friends in LLLI, ILCA, Wellstart, and the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine were and are a special part of the breastfeeding movement.

I want to end by offering readers a poem called “Anyway” by Kent M. Keith which you can read here (<https://www.paradoxicalcommandments.com/>). Mother Teresa had this statement on the wall of her office/home/clinic cum sanctuary. People in the social movements know how much this has relevance and will probably want it there too. This eloquent humility and persistence keeps us going against all odds. It helps to keep fighting the good fight!

No movement is complete without those who demonstrate that it can be done, and multiplied.

- Dr. Natividad Clavano of Baguio Hospital in the Philippines was a great model inspiration.
- Audrey Naylor, Helen Armstrong, and Elizabeth Hormann (Arendt & Hormann, 2022) were great multipliers of competency of breastfeeding, generally the developer of the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative.

Author Contributions

Fazal Anwar: Conceptualization, Validation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

Maryse Arendt: Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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ORCID iD

Maryse Arendt  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0523-3837>

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