

# At the Summit with my Baby

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Magano Neri

Sister Director Magano Neri participated in the Oxfam Gender Justice Summit in Canada and took her three month old baby with her. She realized that taking Ondeya along was as much a parental responsibility as a political statement.

In June this year the Oxfam Gender Justice Summit was hosted in Toronto, Canada, and as an Oxfam partner Sister Namibia was invited to participate. The Summit brought together volunteers, donors and partners of Oxfam Canada from America and Africa to share experiences and discuss issues like food security, climate change, and maternal health. Given Sister Namibia's work on sexual rights my contribution focused on sexual and reproductive health.

As a new mom I had to take my 3-month old breastfeeding baby Ondeya with me. My fears about travelling with her were quelled, when she was absolutely well-behaved on the flight. I dressed her in over-sized diapers to avoid the cramped toilets to change her, but she slept so much that I changed her diapers practically in her sleep. When she was awake, she was so fascinated by the people around us that she would always find someone to giggle at. This totally interrupted her feeding. She would suck a little on my breast, but instantly remember that she had recently found a friendly face to charm and look up to see if it was still around. This would go on until I covered her head with her blanket to stop

further interruptions.

We were very fortunate that my husband's mother in Canada could assist me with caring for while I participated in the summit. This was a real bonus as there are obvious challenges to business travel with an infant. Fortunately, I was also welcome to bring her along to meetings, and the accommodating and warm attitude of my colleagues helped me to feel comfortable about participating. I was able to connect with many of them, particularly with those who were parents themselves. I enjoyed listening to their experiences of juggling work and family, and their support reminded me that I was not the only woman out there trying to combine work and motherhood.

Breaking down walls

I recall when people first started using laptops at conferences, about ten years ago. People would ask others to put them away, complaining that they found the key tapping to be disturbing. Ten years later, everyone has their laptops out to take meeting notes (or check their e-mail!). That culture shift happened gradually - and a similar culture shift has to happen around children. The more parents will include their - well-behaved - children in their professional lives, the more we will break down the wall that separates the public and private spheres, a wall that has historically served to keep women and men in separate worlds. I realized that bringing Ondeya along was as much a parental responsibility as a political statement. I was not just helping my family and Sister Namibia; I was in effect contributing to a culture shift.

I have survived my first long distance trip with my infant daughter and we are both safe and happy back home! So to all you working moms who also have a paid job and juggle work and family, just remember: Bringing your baby to work and advocating for a more family friendly work environment means you too are in fact helping to make our culture stronger, healthier and more human! ♀