What is the Nestlé Boycott?

The Nestlé Boycott is the world’s largest ever consumer boycott, and is currently strongly supported in 20 countries around the globe. Its history stretches back well into the 1970s, and the campaign has been taken up by hundreds of thousands of people over the years. The concept of the boycott is simple: Nestlé markets breast-milk substitutes unethically and with fatal results, and consumers refuse to let them do so without experiencing any consequences.

There is more to this issue, however. For example, why target Nestlé? Out of the many infant food companies that act immorally, why has it been selected as the focus for this activism? The answer is because Nestlé is the largest marketer of infant feeding products and therefore the industry leader in marketing and advertising. Nestlé controls 40% of the infant formula market, and has been singled out by independent monitoring groups as the most offensive and consistent violator of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes. As the largest company in the industry, they also set marketing standards for smaller corporations. If Nestlé were forced to change their marketing practices, other companies would likely follow suit. In this way, the Nestlé Boycott is a protest against the entire infant feeding industry. Companies must not be allowed to put profits over the lives of infants.

Health Issue
The Boycott is about stopping unethical corporations, but it is also a health issue. In no uncertain terms, bottle-feeding is a health crisis. Hundreds of thousands die every year because they are not breastfed properly, and millions more suffer from health problems or are less healthy overall because they are bottle-fed. The Boycott is an effort to improve the health of those at risk.

Women’s Issue
The Boycott is a women’s issue. At a very basic level, it is about a mother’s right to choose, without interference, how to raise her child and care for herself and her family. Nestlé attempts to warp this choice and give misinformation to mothers. The Boycott aims to protect a woman’s right to do what’s best for her and her family. In this way, the Boycott is also about children. The most direct victims of Nestlé’s actions are infants; people who are unaware of the formula company’s assault on their wellbeing and are powerless to defend themselves. Only we, as adults, can help them.

Poverty Issue
The Boycott is also about poverty. Most of the damage Nestlé has done has been felt in the world’s poorer nations. In these countries, sanitation and infrastructure are often inadequate, and thus bottle-feeding is dangerous. Bottle-fed children die because they are poor. Nestlé also burdens the impoverished people it convinces to bottle feed because bottle-feeding costs money, whereas breastfeeding costs nothing.
Global North vs. Global South
The Boycott is about the conflict between the global North and the global South. In many areas of the South, Nestlé exploits the fact that bottle-feeding is seen as a status symbol because it is ‘western’. Nestlé also continues the pattern of rich governments and companies from the North exploiting the people of the South by infiltrating poorly monitored, inadequate health care systems. And by not speaking out, we in the world’s industrialized countries continue the historic pattern of indifference towards the world’s marginalized regions.

HIV/AIDS Issue
Now more than ever before the Boycott is also about HIV/AIDS. The pandemic in Africa has caused a debate over the safety of breastfeeding, and Nestlé has already begun to use this to its advantage, at the expense of children. This will add more suffering to the families of those 29.4 million people already dying.

Natural vs. Modern
The Boycott is about the conflict between the ‘natural’ and the ‘modern’. Increasingly in our civilization, behaviour that has been the norm for millennia is being replaced by something that has been deemed ‘better’. Breastfeeding is one of these behaviours, and has been replaced in many areas of the world by feeding. This switch is based on the belief that breastmilk substitutes are scientifically enhanced and superior to breastmilk, or that formula can be an adequate and more convenient replacement for breastmilk. The substitution of Nestlé formula for breastmilk is one of many indicators of a dangerous social trend. We reject what comes naturally in favour of something which we perceive better suits our lifestyle and is more appropriate for members of an ‘advanced’ culture. In the breastfeeding vs. formula feeding debate, as with many other scenarios, what is natural is far healthier for both humans and the rest of the living world than the artificial alternative.

The Boycott involves all of these issues, but mostly it is about the fate of millions of young lives, and is therefore an incredibly important campaign. It typifies our civilization in the early years of a new century; a time of giant corporations, mass poverty, incredible wealth, continental epidemics, and declining standards of living. If we desire a better society, the strength of these forces must be diminished. The Nestlé Boycott is a positive move towards change.