

# Informal Human Milk Sharing and Selling: Risks and Challenges

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## Research Objectives:

- To examine liabilities and safety measures of human milk markets and online milk sharing networks.
- To investigate the motivations, experiences and impressions of mothers engaged in informal milk sharing in Switzerland.

## Introduction:

Despite the risks of mishandling, adulteration, disease transmission and discouragement from the medical community, informal sharing and selling of unpasteurized human milk online are rising in popularity and controversy.<sup>1-6</sup> Little is known about the practices and human milk markets in Switzerland. Therefore, the goal of the study, led by Stillförderung Schweiz, is to investigate the motivations, practices, and perceptions of mothers who have engaged in online milk sharing. Additional research examines the legalities, prices, participants, quality and safety issues of human milk from online sources.

## Online Research Results:

No scientific studies were found on informal milk sharing or selling in Switzerland, despite the overall growth of studies.<sup>7-11</sup> Several online milk exchange platforms were found (Fig. 1) without liabilities nor official safety or hygienic procedures (Fig. 2). The most popular milk sharing platform in Switzerland is the Human Milk for Human Babies Facebook group with over 800 followers.<sup>12</sup> Researchers have purchased and tested human milk from the internet and have found viral transmission risk (positive serology in HIV), tobacco, caffeine, adulteration (mixed with cow's milk) and bacteria contamination which reflects poor hygienic handling and misrepresentation of personal information online.<sup>13-16</sup>



Figure 1: Online milk sharing/selling platforms and networks

WEBSITES	SAFETY MEASURES	LIABILITIES	ACTIVITY LEVEL
ONLY THE BREAST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Info on donor screening, blood testing, doctor consultation, medical history, pasteurization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Use Agreement' available</li> <li>Not liable for harm</li> </ul>	Limited
EATS ON FEETS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suggests donor screening</li> <li>Sample donor questionnaires</li> <li>Tips to pasteurize</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contract templates</li> <li>Not liable for harm</li> </ul>	Limited
HUMAN MILK 4 HUMAN BABIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited info on safe milk handling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None</li> </ul>	Very Active
MILK SHARE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Donor screening, testing, consult doctor</li> <li>Tips on storage, hygiene, pasteurization, shipping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Breastmilk Donor Agreement'</li> </ul>	Limited

Figure 2: Assessment of safety measures, liabilities and activity level of milk sharing websites in Switzerland.

## Material and Methods:

- Literature review on milk sharing and online human milk market research with a focus on safety measures, liabilities and activity level in Switzerland.
- Interviews with mothers (donors or receivers) engaged in milk sharing.

## Results on Maternal Perspectives

Five mothers were interviewed from a milk sharing Facebook group. Figure 3 highlights the milk sharing motivations of donors and receivers. Milk donor motivations included goodwill, having too much milk or death of an infant. Milk receiver motivations included going back to work, having too little milk or maternal illness. Milk receivers felt guilty and were concerned about the taboo and societal judgment and stigma of using another woman's milk.

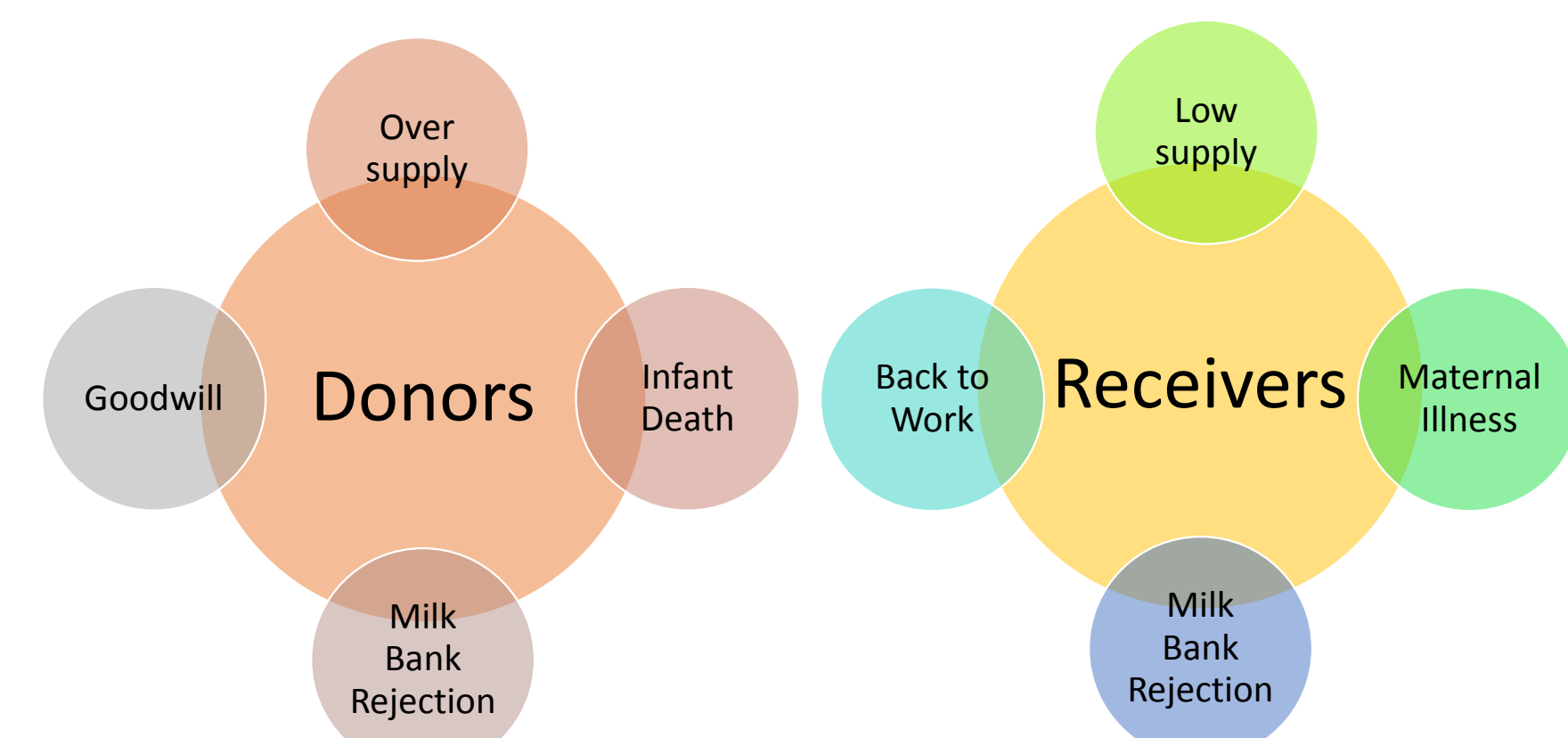


Figure 3: Milk sharing motivations of donors and receivers

All participants experienced lactation or breastfeeding challenges, could not access a milk bank and experienced stress (Fig. 4). Following in-person or online contact, mothers built trusting relations and believed the benefits outweighed the risks, preferring unpasteurized donor human milk over infant formula. Overall, participants assumed no harm and positive intentions from other mothers. Yet, screenings, medical background checks, blood tests and hygienic protocols, e.g., pasteurization, were limited in practice.

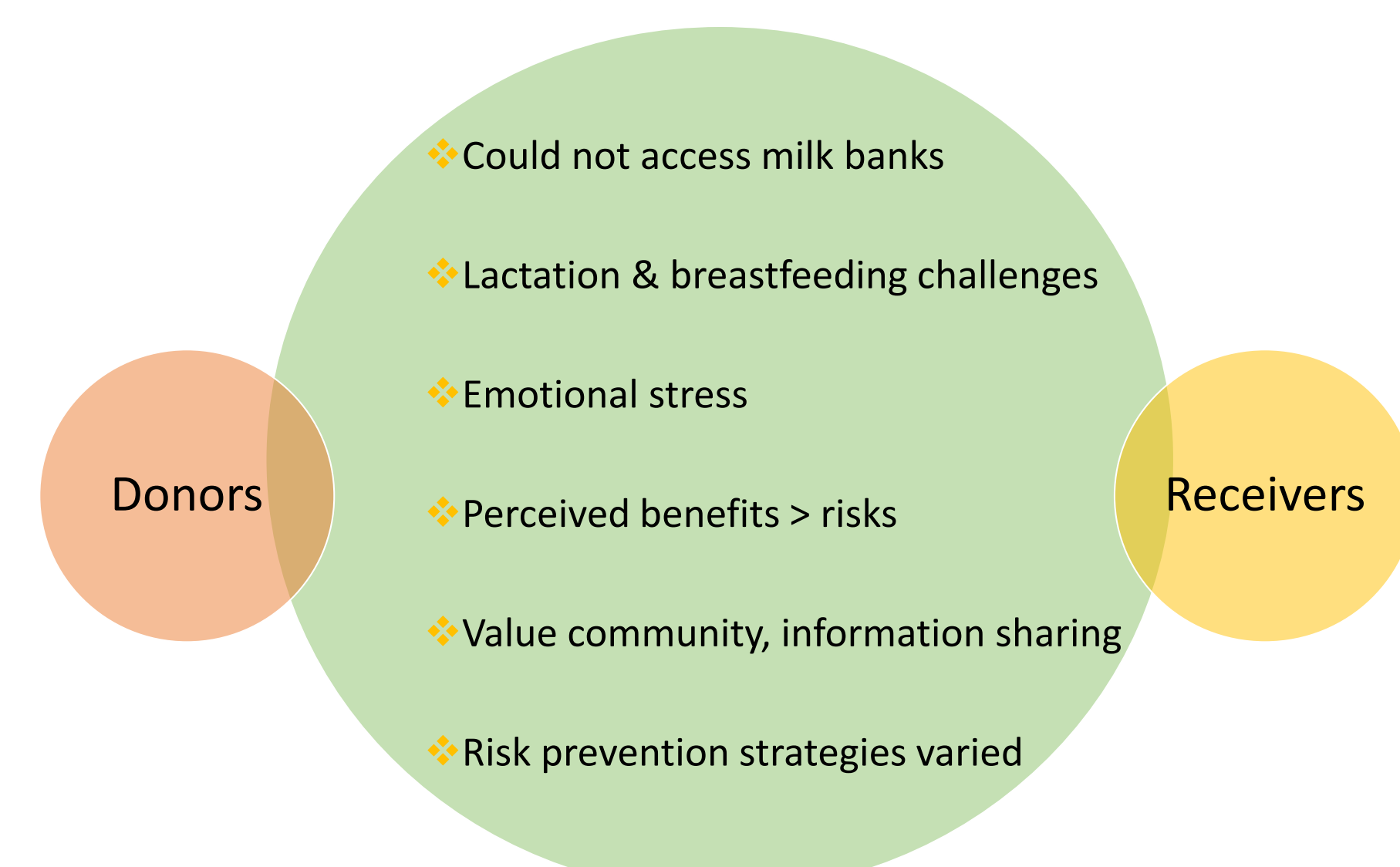


Figure 4: Maternal perspectives of milk sharing experiences

## Conclusion:

**Human milk is unregulated and in demand in Switzerland, as evident in the rise of informal milk sharing. Participants in this study experienced systematic barriers while pursuing their breastfeeding goals. Yet, found value through informal milk sharing networks. Overall, the lack of medical support, regulation, hygienic standardization and accessibility to safe human milk presents numerous gaps, challenges, and rising concerns. Results from this study can deepen the understanding of maternal needs in order to develop public health interventions, clinical practices and policies that promote maternal and infant health and safety.**

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