



STIGMATIZATION AND CONFRONTATION OF BREASTFEEDING IN PUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

Despite the unequivocal health benefits of breastfeeding for both infants and mothers, the stigmatization and challenges associated with breastfeeding in public persist, even in developed nations such as the UK. This article delves into the enduring societal barriers that deter mothers from openly breastfeeding their infants and the consequent impact on maternal and child health. Highlighting the startling statistics that reveal over one-third of mothers avoid breastfeeding in public, with many resorting to concealing their actions, the article underscores the pressing issue of declining breastfeeding rates shortly after childbirth. Media reports of public humiliation add to maternal discomfort and anxiety, further discouraging public breastfeeding.

KEYWORDS: *Breastfeeding Stigmatization, Public Breastfeeding, Maternal and Child Health, Breastfeeding Challenges, Declining Breastfeeding Rates*

INTRODUCTION

Breast milk is designed by nature as the perfect nourishment for our baby. Babies fed exclusively on breast milk for the first six months are healthier, as breastfeeding is offering protection from infections & inflammation, reducing the risk of the child becoming obese and developing diabetes, asthma, development of the immune system & gut microbiome and eczema later in life. In spite of so many advantages still there are so many developed countries like UK, which is among the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world. Worries about stigma and embarrassment around breastfeeding can lead to some women feeling unable or unwilling to breastfeed in public. This can lead to isolation or even some women cease breastfeeding before they intended to. Breastfeeding is the most natural, healthy, best start a mother can provide for her infant. Some women may struggle to breastfeed, or they may have good reasons not to, however there are certain surveys which suggests that many women don't breastfeed because of fears of feeding in public and the perceived social stigma. For years, the right of lactating mothers to feed an infant in public has been an ongoing struggle that not only aims to deconstruct the notion of breastfeeding as a domestic chore but also attempts to normalize a practice that is considered taboo in multiple societies across the globe.

PROBLEMS WITH PUBLIC BREASTFEEDING

Many women are worried about feeding in public and media reports of women being humiliated in shops or open spaces are the reasons behind this fear. Here the question arises, "what is wrong with others if they saw a mother breastfeeding her baby outside in the public?" Why we can't understand that getting nutritious feed from their mother is the fundamental right of every infant?

More than one in three mothers avoid breastfeeding in public and six out of ten take steps to hide the activity as much as possible. That discomfort and embarrassment are part of the reason that breastfeeding rates drop off. Many mothers start off feeding their babies by breast (74%) but just six to eight weeks later, that figure has tailed off to just 47%. In the Start4Life survey, one in ten women who chose not to breastfeed said one of the reasons for their choice was anxiety about feeding in public.

Dr Ann Hoskins from Public Health England said:

'Breastfeeding gives babies the best start in life, and it comes with a whole host of benefits for the mother too. Anxiety about breastfeeding in public certainly shouldn't be a barrier to breastfeeding in general. One of the greatest benefits of breastfeeding is that it can be done anytime and anywhere, so as a society we need to help new mothers feel comfortable in feeding their babies wherever and whenever they need to, and we all have a role to play in that'.

Eventually our society has to look forward to help every mother who has fear & anxiety to feed her own child in public & firstly this lesson has to be started inside her own family. Each & everyone in the family of a newborn has the responsibility to nurture their child



in a way beneficial for the child & that there is nothing extraordinary if the mother is feeding her baby in public who is crying impatiently because of hunger. Everyone has to understand this concept that feeding a baby not only satisfies his thirst & hunger but also it provides a sense of security to the child when the mother holds her tightly in her arms as touch becomes an early language for the babies & they respond quickly to skin to skin contact. It provides a soothing effect & sense of calmness to the baby when they saw large number of unusual faces around them in public. In this context family has to come forward and support the mother in every possible manner they can instead of bothering her for the same.

ANY TIME, ANY PLACE, ANYWHERE?

Dr Gill Thomson who is a part of the Maternal and Infant Nutrition and Nurture Unit at the University of Central Lancashire explained that as a country we need to do more to give women that confidence and freedom to breastfeed their babies anywhere they want.

We all have a role to play in promoting acceptance of breastfeeding. If more mothers feed their babies in public, it will increase awareness and become a normal and everyday occurrence. If mothers hide away themselves in wraps, smocks and blankets we may be perpetuating the idea that it is shameful or embarrassing. If a mother is worried about breastfeeding in public ask other mums, midwife or health visitor for good places to feed in the local area and keep an eye out for Breastfeeding Friendly or Breastfeeding Welcome stickers. Breastfeeding can be a beautiful bonding experience, it's free and it can boost a mother's health as well as her baby. Something that is great, really should be encouraged not stigmatised.

BREASTFEEDING IN INDIA AND AROUND THE GLOBE

There has been multiple instances in India when women breastfeeding in public have been challenged for engaging in a practice that should 'ideally' take place in the privacy of the indoors. The *EPW* report suggested that one such lactating mother who was called out at a mall in Kolkata was told by the shopping plaza's authorities, "please make sure you do your home chores at home and not in the mall... It's not like your baby needs to be breastfed at any moment so you need arrangements to be made for you at any public area to breastfeed your child"

This incident led to the countrywide campaign, #freedomtonurse by members of the online forum, Breastfeeding Support for Indian Mothers to create awareness about why a woman should not be asked to leave a premises if she is found nursing a child.

Regulations in other parts of the world, including European Union laws, state that it is perfectly legal for a woman to breastfeed in public and discrimination against such an incidence is illegal. However, there continue to be a number of incidences where breastfeeding women have been asked to leave cafés, restaurants, malls and other crowded spaces. As well, in 2017, when the image of a woman in Singapore breastfeeding on the subway went viral, it sparked a heated conversation about how she ought to have covered herself up. However, when a lactating mother travels with an infant, she has to choose from two alternatives: she can either use a public toilet or resort to breastfeed in the open if her baby start crying from hunger. And while breastfeeding in public continues to be a source of embarrassment for women, as washrooms, lactation rooms or baby care centres are not always readily available in every public space. A recent study pointed to this perplexity of women, who, in the absence of comfortable spaces in public had to resort to awkwardly feed an infant in places like a broom closet in an airport or under the cover of a tree. Just as the survey suggests, lack of proper infrastructure for lactating women, points to the inherent cracks in a social structure that continues to shame women, to either breastfeed at home or struggle to find a private space in public to feed a hungry child.

BREASTFEEDING IN PUBLIC CONTINUES TO BE CHALLENGE

The issue related of breastfeeding in public raises pertinent questions about how the activity is viewed in society and the lack of proper infrastructure in public places to feed infants. For years, the right of lactating mothers to feed a child in public has been an ongoing struggle that not only aims to deconstruct the notion of breastfeeding as a domestic chore but also attempts to normalize a practice that is considered taboo in multiple societies across the globe. Generally it becomes more awkward for a mother when a woman from the extended crowd raises her voice & opposes for breastfeeding in public.

According to a report on *The Swaddle*, a magazine cover that depicted a mother breastfeeding her child in a bid to highlight this issue, was criticized for its alleged sensationalism. This effectively drew away the focus from the stigma associated with this process and the lack of societal support required by lactating women to breastfeed whenever the child is hungry.

For lactating mothers and caregivers, the stigma around nursing infants is also related to the way female breasts are perceived in public. An *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)* Engage report noted that what is thought to be a source of nutrition for children is also an



object of sexual desire, so a breastfeeding, lactating woman runs the risk of being harassed or accused of indecent exposure if she chooses to feed an infant outside of her home.

STIGMAS OF BREASTFEEDING IN PUBLIC

Society has its own set of norms, values, and standards, and it is important to be aware of these if one hopes to overcome them or change them. Acker (2009) conducted a study that included 106 college students and 80 other adults who were shown a series of nine pictures of people doing various things in public and in private, two of which included breastfeeding. The pictures were identical except that in one the woman was in the privacy of her own home and in the other the woman was breastfeeding in public. The participants were asked to answer questions regarding positive evaluations, negative feelings, and normalcy of the activities shown. Based on participants' answers, Acker found three prominent explanations for a negative view of breastfeeding in public: unfamiliarity of this action, sexist attitudes, and hyper sexualization of breasts in society. Participants rated the picture of the mother breastfeeding in public much more negatively than the one of the mother breastfeeding in her own home, suggesting that women are simultaneously encouraged and discouraged to breastfeed and that the message being sent to mothers is that it is best to breastfeed as long as other people don't see it. She states that normalizing the image of breastfeeding in public would make it easier for mothers to imagine themselves this and would encourage community members to support this. Research shows that there are social stigmas surrounding breastfeeding in public, additionally it has been seen that personal challenges can come up when one considers breastfeeding in public. Johnston- Robledo, Wares, Fricker, and Pasek (2007) studied 275 American undergraduate women by having them complete a survey that included questions regarding their plans for feeding their babies, attitudes towards breastfeeding, concerns about breastfeeding, and self-objectification. The study found that many young women had already internalized cultural taboos surrounding breastfeeding and women who rated higher on self-objectification questions were more likely to anticipate feeling embarrassed or concerned about breastfeeding in public as compared to their counterparts. Researchers advise that in order for women to have the freedom to have positive and fulfilling breastfeeding experiences, the message of shame and self-consciousness that arises from society's restrictive and sexist cultural norms needs to be changed. Consistent with this research and information is another study that was conducted in the UK. Boyer (2012) conducted 11 interviews, surveyed 46 people, and investigated 180 website postings on a parenting website in search of women's experiences with breastfeeding in public. She found that many mothers reported negative experiences breastfeeding in public, including glares and negative comment from surrounding people

WHAT THE SURVEY SAYS?

According to Momspresso Medela Survey, 81% of mothers find the lack of proper feeding spaces to be the biggest challenge in breastfeeding their infants in public places.

The majority of them point out uncomfortable stares, hygiene issues, and lack of privacy to be their most significant deterrents. The most common response to breastfeeding in public is that it makes others feel uncomfortable. This stigma is highly influenced by the way female breasts are perceived in society. What is sought to be an essential source of nutrition for every infant, is also an oversexualized organ.

A report by Economic and Political Weekly highlights that a lactating woman runs the risk of being harassed or accused of indecent exposure if she chooses to feed an infant outside of the home. This stems from the typical notion of considering breastfeeding to be a 'domestic chore'.

But what if the baby is hungry outside? Should mothers be locking themselves in the house for 1-3 years?

HOW WE CAN OVERCOME THIS EMBARRASSING FEELING OF BREASTFEEDING IN PUBLIC?

- 1) Normalizing breastfeeding: Remember, breasts aren't sexual organs. Instead, they have been sexualized by media representations.
- 2) Address the lack of proper infrastructure in public places to feed infants: Designated nursing areas or lactating rooms should be kept in mind when designing and modifying public places. And these spaces shouldn't be extensions of washrooms that can be stinky or unhygienic.
- 3) An appropriate legal and institutional framework : It becomes crucial to ensure private, safe, and dignified breastfeeding in public spaces.



BREASTFEEDING LAWS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates introduced a rule in 2014 making it mandatory for women to breastfeed their children until they reach the age of two. An additional clause was included in children rights law, which also mandates that all government offices provide a nursery for working moms who choose to breastfeed their children as well as if a woman due to some health reasons is unable to breastfeed the infant the emirates' Federal National Council will supply her with a wet nurse.

Australia

As per section 7AA of the *Federal Sex Discrimination Act 1984* discrimination either directly or indirectly on the basis of breastfeeding is prohibited. Additionally, in 1964 Australian Breastfeeding Association was established in Melbourne, Victoria.

Britain

As per the *Equality law, 2010 of Britain* it is illegal for a business to discriminate on the basis of breastfeeding.

Pakistan

As per Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Protection of Breastfeeding and Child Nutrition Act 2015, it is mandatory for manufacturers to write on the containers of the products in bold that "Mother's milk is best for your baby and helps in preventing diarrhea and other illnesses" as well as promotion of packed milk by the health workers for the child up to the age of twelve months is prohibited.

Brazil

In Brazil, advertising and promotion of baby formula are illegal as well as to discriminate against breastfeeding in So Paulo incur a fine.

Norway

In Norway, it is permitted for women to take up to 36 weeks off work with 100 percent pay, or 46 weeks with 80 percent pay as well as similar to the laws of Pakistan advertising formula is prohibited.

Canada

Discrimination against women on the basis of breastfeeding is prohibited under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, however, Canada is one of the few countries which do not provide women with paid breastfeeding breaks. Despite the fact that over 26% of moms breastfeed, many are forced to discontinue owing to job constraints.

United States of America

In the USA total of 50 states allow public breastfeeding including the recent introduction in Utah and Idaho. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over 83 percent of American women attempted breastfeeding at least once in 2015. There are statutes in seventeen states that protect breastfeeding moms who are called to jury duty. Certain states provide the option to postpone for a year, while others give the option to be exempt.

Though there are various countries where breastfeeding is normalized and widely accepted by society for instance in France, Iceland, Czech Republic, Norway, Spain, Poland, and New Zealand, etc.

JUDICIAL SCENARIO OF BREASTFEEDING IN INDIA

In India, there is no statute which deals with breastfeeding as a result the prevalence and social acceptance of breastfeeding vary from region to region. In India, higher socioeconomic groups are less likely to breastfeed in public, whereas lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to do so. The court in *Dr. Shanti Mehra vs the State of Uttarakhand, 2016* while giving the judgment held that there should be a system for breastfeeding or nursing care at the workplace but till now no provision has been introduced by the government. Mr. Justice Kirubakaran while asking to declare breastfeeding a fundamental right of new-borns protected under Article 21 again asked the government to adopt a new law mandating the provision of breastfeeding facilities in public places and made it mandatory for government employees who take maternity leave to breastfeed their new-borns, as well as enacting penalties for officials who do not grant maternity leave.

Additionally, the court asked the government to exercise its power under article 249 of the constitution and pass a law making it obligatory for women to breastfeed their new-borns, as done in the United Arab Emirates. (See here) For the past few years, the court is trying to get various answers from the government but no actions have been taken to date. The court in *Ajit Datt v. Ethel Walters, 2000*



(4) AWC 3270 while observing these facts stated that no one can separate a child from a natural mother, even if it meant putting his life in peril. Adoption occurs after the child is no longer reliant on the natural mother for food and is capable of surviving without her.

In *Ruhi v. State of U.P., 2014* a three months baby was taken away from his mother. As a result, Noman's corpus (infant) was denied his natural right to breastfeed, which is critical for keeping him healthy and active at that age. Following his separation from his mother, the infant appears to have been top feeding, which could be a primary cause of persistent diarrhea. The claims that the mother was involved in the kidnapping of her husband's sister, they cannot take away the fundamental right of the infant to breastfeed.

The court in *Hardeep Kumar Sharma vs Madan Gopal Sharma, 2008* acknowledged the welfare of the kid and held that it should take precedence over the legal rights and given custody to the maternal aunt instead of the father of the child.

Section 37B in the Prevention of Food Adulteration Rules, 1955

In India Section 37B The Prevention of Food Adulteration Rules, 1955 deals with Labelling of infant milk substitute and infant food according to which the container of the food should indicate in a clear a statement **"MOTHER'S MILK IS BEST FOR YOUR BABY"** with certain other statements such as the product should be consumed only when prescribed by the health worker, etc.

The Karnataka High court recently in *Husna Banu v. the State of Karnataka, 2021* while hearing petitions involving the custody of a child between the biological mother and the foster mother has given a landmark judgment in which breastfeeding is held to be an inalienable right of lactating mothers, and this attribute of motherhood is a fundamental right protected under Article 21 (right to life) of the Constitution of India the single judge bench held by Justice Krishna S Dixit added that it is a case of concurrent rights where not only breastfeeding right of a lactating mother is protected but the right of the suckling infant for being breastfed is also protected.

Controversies in India

On the cover and within its new March edition, Grihalakshmi created history by displaying a breastfeeding mother and infant. Gilu Joseph, a 27-year-old model, poet, writer, and air hostess are featured on the cover, while an anonymous mother with her child is featured within the issue. Many people commented that they accept breastfeeding but expect women to keep private issues private, likened feeding an infant to other body functions that require privacy, and condemned Joseph for indulging in "nudity" in order to land a magazine cover.

In Kolkata, the employee of a shopping centre advised a mother who wanted to breastfeed her infant not to undertake such "house chores" in a shopping centre. When the dispute erupted, the manager of the shopping centre responded back by saying that breastfeeding is not permitted in stores and that the mother should have organized her day better because her infant did not require breastfeeding "at any time."

CONCLUSION

Even in the 21st century in many countries breastfeeding in public places is considered taboo as many people consider breastfeeding a private act that should not be done in public places. Many a times controversies arouse because of women breastfeeding their children in public places. On the other hand, in the countries where breastfeeding is normalized due to job concerns various women stop breastfeeding at earlier stages. In India, there was no law relating to breastfeeding recently while delivering the judgment, the Karnataka high court took a significant step toward acknowledging the importance of breastfeeding in contemporary India by making breastfeeding a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Indian constitution and protecting the right of a suckling infant to be breastfed. However, it cannot be overlooked that certain guidelines are required in order to educate the general public about the importance of breastfeeding it can be done by providing them with certain maternal benefits and making it mandatory for women to breastfeed, as well as providing them with an environment in a public place where they can easily breastfeed their infants. Everybody round the globe has to understand a small thing, It's not about a woman's right to breastfeed but it's a child right to eat.

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