

A New Form of Segregation

BY CECILIA WINGFIELD CORNELIUS

ONE AFTERNOON MY mother, two daughters, and I went to have lunch at our favorite restaurant in Norfolk. It has been a tradition in our family to go there, and my daughters look forward to our experience each time. Unfortunately our last experience was not pleasant. After nursing my 5-month-old daughter at our table, I was confronted by another customer and told that I should nurse in a private location and that there was going to be a law passed to forbid nursing in public. I smiled at her, told her that was her opinion, and to have a nice day. As time went on, I thought about how this would affect new nursing mothers who may not be as secure with the process, and it bothered me. For the first time in my life, I felt that people were trying to segregate me, and I was able to relate to what many individuals have experienced in the past. People have been segregated for many reasons including race, sex, religion, and now breast feeding in public.

Mothers have the right to nurse in public at any time in any place. In 1999, a federal law was enacted to ensure a woman's right to breastfeed her child anywhere she had a right to be with her child, irrespective of whether the nipple of the mother's breast was revealed during or incidental to the breastfeeding. Virginia's state law exempts breastfeeding from their criminal statutes, clarifying that it is not a violation to breastfeed a child in any public place. It also gives woman the right to breastfeed on any property owned, leased or controlled by the Commonwealth (Va. Code Ann. 18.2-387). The indecent exposure law states that every person who intentionally makes an obscene display or exposure of his person, or the private parts thereof, in any public place, or in any place where others are present, or procures another to so expose himself, shall be guilty of a Class 1 misdemeanor. No person shall be deemed to be in violation of this section for breastfeeding a child in any public place or any place where others are present (Va. Code Ann 18.2-387). In 1996 the City of Philadelphia not only prohibited discriminating against breastfeeding mothers but also prohibited segregating breastfeeding mothers. If these are our federal and state laws, why do people still try to segregate nursing mothers?

Breastfeeding is important for the lives and futures of our children. James P. Grant, the Executive Director of UNICEF, has cited

studies showing, for example, that babies who are not breastfed have higher rates of death, meningitis, childhood leukemia and other cancers, diabetes, respiratory illnesses, bacterial and viral infections, diarrhoeal diseases, otitis media, allergies, obesity and developmental delays. Woman who do not breast feed demonstrate a higher risk for breast and ovarian cancers. Breastfeeding is proven to be the best choice for mothers and babies and needs to be supported.

Mothers who breastfeed make many sacrifices and need encouragement in order to be successful. Woman who breastfeed are often up through the night and can not ask their husbands to take their shift as easily as mothers who feed their babies formula. They can not leave for extended amounts of time without pumping bottles and making special preparations. Breastfeeding mothers believe in what they are doing and make sacrifices because it is what is best for their babies. Unfortunately, these mothers often do not feel supported and are not confident to nurse in public places.

Babies should be nursed on demand, and often this is every two hours, from the beginning of one feeding to the beginning of the next. That time frame does not give mothers enough time to go somewhere and make it home before the next feeding. I know many new mothers who stay home because they are concerned that their baby may get hungry and they don't feel comfortable nursing in public. This can lead to post partum depression or the ending of nursing. Some mothers only feel comfortable nursing in bathrooms or dressing rooms when in public. It is a shame that mothers feel they have to be segregated from public locations and that they are not aware of their rights. Bathrooms are the last place that babies should be fed. You never see a bathroom with tables and chairs in it for people to eat their meals there.

Our society needs to educate themselves about the rights of nursing mothers, the benefits of nursing babies, and support breastfeeding in public. If someone has a problem with seeing it, they should turn their head or go somewhere more private instead of asking the nursing mother to do so. There is something wrong with our society when Hooter's billboards and restaurants are accepted but breastfeeding in public is not. Individuals who have a problem with nursing in public

need to do some self reflection and evaluate why they feel this way. It is the best gift mothers can give their children and their support is deserved.

Breastfeeding in public is not only a necessary choice, it is the right choice. The legal system continues to recognize and encourage this act and the rest of society needs to

support it as well. Unfortunately, views and opinions are not easily changed; however, as individuals become more educated about this topic, they will. Breastfeeding in public is a natural, beautiful act that every mother has the right to do anywhere at any time. In the future, it is my dream that when breastfeeding mothers are confronted it won't be negative; it will be positive and by smiling faces saying "lucky baby." ●

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