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Breastfeeding as Activism: Moving from Oppression to Emancipation

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Abstract: Women have a long history of oppression. Despite making great strides towards equality, some mothers find their experience of breastfeeding oppressive. Mothers who experience oppression related to breastfeeding may become emancipated and engage in breastfeeding activism.

Breastfeeding in America has a long history, dating back to the 1600s. During the last four centuries, breastfeeding rates have ebbed and flowed, and the fluctuations in breastfeeding practices have been influenced by a number of factors. American breastfeeding rates were highest in the 1600s and hit an historical low in 1970, when initiation rates were 28%, and only 8% of infants were still breastfeeding at three months (Thulier, 2009). More recently, in 2009, although breastfeeding was initiated in 76.9% of births, the rate of breastfeeding at one year was 25.5% (CDC, 2012).

A number of factors are involved in a woman's decision to initiate and continue breastfeeding, among which are societal and cultural views and dynamics. While breastfeeding is readily accepted as a women's issue, it is seldom considered a feminist one. In fact, although feminist theorists and writers have given attention to other issues of motherhood (women's health and menopause, for example), breastfeeding has been mostly ignored, seemingly because studying it would be problematic for feminists (Blum, 1993; Van Esterik, 1994). Van Esterik (1994) contends that by attending to breastfeeding, feminists would be privileging mothers over other women, which is contradictory to feminist principles. Moreover, breastfeeding is sex-specific and thus challenges the feminist tenet of gender-neutral childrearing (McCarter-Spaulding, 2008). One could argue, however, that those feminists who ignore the experience of breastfeeding women are contributing to the oppression experienced by many mothers who choose to breastfeed, whether their breastfeeding experience is successful or unsuccessful.

In contrast, breastfeeding can be liberating for women. Breastfeeding can serve as an opportunity for women to "embrace and enhance gender differences by fighting to remove the constraints placed on them by patriarchy and capitalism" (Thulier, 2009, p. 90). Breastfeeding can serve as emancipation for women by allowing them to take control of their bodies, challenge medical power, and oppose the sexualization of breasts. Women's emancipation via breastfeeding may occur at a private, individual level, or it could be more widespread in the form of activism activities. For example, breastfeeding activism may involve working to remove obstacles to breastfeeding, such as economic barriers and lack of support from health care professionals, family members, or employers. Indeed, "breastfeeding cannot be promoted without it also being supported socially, economically, and politically" (McCarter-Spaulding, 2008, p. 210). Thus, women who find that breastfeeding is a catalyst for emancipatory learning can become activists for this vital feminist issue.

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