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Why is Breastfeeding Scary?



Breastfeeding: it's good enough for the Saviour, why not for all?*

Daily morning TV presenter David Koch [today told his audience](#) that breastfeeding is something that should be done away from a public area – that women breastfeeding in 'high traffic areas' should be a 'bit discreeter'. He made these comments in response to a report that a woman breastfeeding at a public swimming pool in Queensland was told that she could not do so, and that she should move to another secluded area or leave.

This request is clearly in breach of s7AA(2) of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) ([added to the Act in 2011](#)), in that this woman was treated:

less favourably than, in circumstances that are the same or are not materially different, the discriminator treats or would treat someone who is not breastfeeding.

This set of circumstances raises three related questions: why the woman may have been asked to leave; why 'Kochie' would have agreed that this was appropriate; and why breastfeeding would ever require such legal protection.

While it is both men and women who may be offended by breastfeeding in public, in both cases this is a factor of the patriarchal nature of society. This manifests largely through the control of women's bodies - their [sexuality](#), their reproduction (see for example the so-called '[War on Women](#)') and even their breastfeeding.

Feminist scholars have for a long time analysed the genesis of this focus on the control of women's bodies. This body of work shows that through Greek and Roman times, European Middle Ages and Christian texts, through Industrialisation to modern times, Western culture has associated woman with nature and a lack of rationality, a lack of substance and an unruly and therefore threatening free spirit. This work identifies a (masculine) need for the domination of nature and the privileging of control over nature through science and culture, and indeed male domination over women, above the embodied experience of women as 'other' and the 'natural forces' of reproduction experienced by women.

Author [Marilyn French](#) for example documents a global history of social customs that embed principles of exclusion or control of women during menstruation, pregnancy, after intercourse and after childbirth. She posits, as [do other authors](#),

About Me



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I lecture in land law at James Cook University and I write and think about the nature of property and its representations in the law; about issues affecting women; about justice generally; and about legal education.

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that women are biologically constructed in a way that determines their place in society - as subordinate. French identifies that the ritual uncleanliness of women's bodily functions found in so many societies relates to their construction as part of an untamed nature that as a power in its own right, needs subjugation or domination.

Against this background, breastfeeding represents the biologically constructed, essential, natural woman - giver and sustainer of life. But in a patriarchal world, this belongs in its own sphere, separate - out of 'high traffic areas' and in women's own time. The public realm is reserved for properly public activities - those deemed so by the system of social mores that situates women and their biological functions as separate and private.

To compound this deeply ingrained attitude is the objectification of women and the uni-dimensional understanding of breasts as objects of heterosexual male sexual gratification. Sexualised breasts may be appropriate on the front covers of magazines in high traffic areas of newsagencies and all over the internet, but not on a [facebook page](#) or at the edge of a pool if used for feeding an infant.

Section 7AA of the *Sex Discrimination Act* recognises that this attitude to women prevails in our society. Such an attitude, if allowed to flourish, relegates breastfeeding women to the home or if they go out in public, relegates them to toilets and closets. Breastfeeding is not an inherently private activity - in the same way that eating other kinds of food is not an inherently private activity. Enforcing constraints on the feeding of a hungry or unsettled baby is a means of removing feeding mothers from the public sphere altogether.

Breastfeeding is not always an easy task. Feeding mothers deserve every support and are entitled to participate fully in public life in all its guises as does every other human. This is a question of basic justice.

* Image from <http://casteluzzo.com/2012/05/11/ramping-up-the-mommy-wars/>

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