

Feeding Cover Up

Kristal Snow Tomko was dining at the Big Fish Grille, in Wilmington, Illinois when her six-month-old son needed feeding so she began nursing. The manager soon approached her explaining that other customers felt uncomfortable. He asked Tomko to cover herself with a napkin or move to a more private spot. Kristal refused until the manager insisted that she stop nursing or move. She later explained on Facebook, "I went quietly and quickly to my van where I cried and nursed."¹ Her Facebook post was shared more than 1,000 times, and a number of other mothers threatened to hold a protest "nurse-in" at the restaurant.

This wasn't an isolated case. An American Airlines flight attendant told a nursing mother that she needed to put a blanket over her nursing son "because there are kids on this flight."² Complaining to customer service, the mother received a letter explaining the company's policy that nursing during flights should be "done with certain discretion and modesty" so as to not offend other passengers: "We believe it is reasonable to ask that the mothers' cover-up [sic] in an appropriate manner during feeding." In another incident, a lifeguard at a Moline IL YMCA told a nursing mother that she had to nurse her son in the bathroom, not poolside.³ "I thought, 'I'm not going to take her into the bathroom and feed her, because I don't even eat in the bathroom,'" the woman told a local news station. Even Facebook has been criticized for removing images of nursing mothers on the grounds that these photos violating the website's policies against nudity.⁴

In the Illinois cases, the law was on the women's side: "A mother may breastfeed her baby in any location, public or private, where the mother is otherwise authorized to be, irrespective of whether the nipple of the mother's breast is uncovered during or incidental to the breastfeeding."⁵ Many other states have similar statutes.

Some people believe that a woman's openly baring breast while feeding is obscene or indecent, and that such displays should not be allowed in public places – especially those frequented by children or teenagers. Others argue that laws requiring business owners to allow breastfeeding violates their rights to determine what happens in their establishments. Additionally, some contend that since many women do cover up when breastfeeding, the practice cannot be considered too onerous.

Advocates of public nursing disagree, arguing that it is often emotionally hurtful to be asked to cover up or to feed their children in a restroom. Tomko, for instance, reports, "I was made to feel embarrassed and shamed, as if I were doing something wrong." Many people are concerned that society already places too much pressure on mothers, and forcing them to cover up while feeding makes an already difficult job even harder; it can even be counterproductive, drawing more attention to the situation. Either way, they argue, women should be able to choose how and when to feed their babies. Some go further, arguing that those who are offended by the sight of a nursing mother are in the wrong. These critics maintain that breasts (or images of breasts) are not necessarily sexual, and that because breastfeeding is perfectly natural, nursing women have nothing to be ashamed about.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. When should business owners have a right to control the types of behaviors that are allowed in their businesses?
2. What does it mean to say that breastfeeding is natural? Does it matter morally whether or not an activity is natural in this sense? Why or why not?
3. Is it appropriate to feel offended or disgusted by the sight of a woman nursing a child? Why or why not?
4. Is there a morally relevant difference between a woman baring her breasts in order to feed her baby and a woman baring her breasts for other (non-sexual) purposes? Why or why not?

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tarahaele/2015/05/07/breastfeeding-in-public-illinois-restaurant-shows-how-to-right-a-wrong/>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/07/american-airlines-breastfeeding-flight-attendant_n_3719655.html

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/14/illinois-mom-breastfeeding-ymca_n_3927113.html

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/02/26/facebook-is-embroiled-in-yet-another-breastfeeding-photo-controversy/>

⁵ <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp?Name=093-0942>

