

Publicly breastfeeding challenges entrenched gender dynamics

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Despite the fact that South Africa has a 30-year history of actively promoting breastfeeding through government campaigns, successfully leading to increased rates of breastfeeding in the country, attitudes towards breastfeeding in public often provoke heated reactions. Mothers are left uncomfortable and humiliated, while their babies are deprived of the nutritional and bonding benefits in the process.



“While the country’s four-month maternity leave policy is two months short of the South African government’s advocacy of exclusive breastfeeding for a baby’s first six months of life, corporates can support new mothers by facilitating breastfeeding opportunities when they return to the workplace,” says Amanda Rogaly, founder of BabyYumYum, one of South Africa’s leading parenting platforms.

Current practice in other countries has seen legislation implemented around lactating mothers, creating a culture that accepts breastfeeding at work and in public spaces. Brazil fines businesses or organisations preventing women from publically breastfeeding, aiming to officially counteract prejudice towards nursing mothers.⁽¹⁾ While some countries in North Europe and North America have implemented legislation to protect the right to breastfeed in public⁽²⁾, other countries like Vietnam are creating campaigns to encourage an organic breastfeeding culture⁽³⁾.

In South Africa breastfeeding is protected at work under the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, allowing feeding mothers two breaks of 30 min per day to feed their baby or express milk until the child is six months.⁽⁴⁾ However, interventions are still needed to facilitate corporates in changing attitudes and supporting nursing mothers in their work environment.



"Addressing issues of women breastfeeding in the workplace is a natural part of the evolution of women's rights," comments Amanda. "Women in the workplace is to a large extent still in its infancy. If we think back to the historical women's march to the Union Buildings in 1956, it is only 62 years ago (and commemorated as Women's Month in August each year). Although this was a powerful protest against the apartheid government's pass laws, it also highlighted the struggle of women's rights, calling for a non-racist and non-sexist South Africa.

So where is South Africa today in terms of gender equality in the workplace, six decades after this historical protest? Statistics South Africa reveals these figures⁽⁵⁾:

While women comprise 51% of the total population, they remain relatively unrepresented in positions of authority and power. According to labour data release for Q2 of 2017, 44 in every 100 employed individuals are women. However, women fill 44% of skilled posts, which includes managers, professionals and technicians, a figure which has remained unchanged since September 2002.

Stats SA cites figures of women comprising 32% of Supreme Court of Appeal judges, 31% of advocates, 30% of ambassadors and 24% of heads of state-owned enterprises. Additionally, of the Top 40 JSE listed companies, Maria Ramos is the only female CEO⁽⁶⁾.

"When seen in this context, management's sanctioning of breastfeeding in the working environment has evolutionary implications for women in the workplace," comments Amanda. "These figures show that we still have a way to go in creating equal opportunities for men and women which in turn will facilitate accommodating the natural cycles of life, of which maternity (and breastfeeding) play a central role."

Few things change in the world without a powerful incident serving as a key catalyst - be it a demonstration of 20,000 women walking to the Union Buildings or a corporate such as Spur taking a stand to draw attention and create the opportunity for change.

"With this in mind, we encourage people throughout SA - both in the public and in the workplace - to play a role in creating change through tolerance of an activity that is perfectly natural. We challenge corporates to follow Spur's example and take a stand in elevating the nourishing activity of breastfeeding as a fundamental part of our common humanity.

Together we can foster a culture of acceptance and tolerance, while contributing to strengthening and developing the next generation of adults in our country," concludes the BabyYumYum founder.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/19/brazil-law-breastfeeding-mothers-fine-sao-paulo>
2. <http://medcraveonline.com/JPNC/JPNC-01-00040.php>
3. <http://www.who.int/en/news-room/feature-stories/detail/viet-nam-breastfeeding-campaign-normalizes-practice-improves-rates>
4. <http://www.labour.gov.za/DOL/legislation/codes-of-good-ractice/Basic%20Conditions%20of%20Employment/code-of-good-practice-on-pregnancy>
5. <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=10325>
6. <https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/the-one-female-listed-on-the-top-40-of-jse-companies-10705262>

This article was originally published on [BabyYumYum](#), read it here: [Mums delighted as Spur supports breastfeeding](#)

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