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# Why do some consider public breastfeeding as inappropriate?

[Society & Culture](#)[1]

[Society & Culture](#)[1][breastfeeding](#) [2][Norway](#) [3][Forskning.no](#) [4]

Norwegian researchers warn against increasing puritanism and less rights for mothers.



*This article was originally published on Kilden - Information and news about gender research in Norway. [Read the original article](#)[5].*

When Ida Marie Henriksen conducted her fieldwork for her PhD about the cafe as public and social space, one group stood out in particular: breastfeeding mothers.

“There are so many women with prams in the cafes! They go there to socialise, and they go there because the cafe is a suitable place to breastfeed a baby,” says Henriksen.

The next thing she discovered was that people often remembered the first time they nursed in public. One of the interviewees described how she had practiced cafe breastfeeding before she actually took the step out and did it for real.

Henriksen has collected twenty-five stories about breastfeeding. Twenty of the mothers remembered their first public breastfeeding well, five did not remember.

“Many remember the first time they breastfeed in public, because they are particularly careful to do it right, to breastfeed in a socially acceptable manner,” says Henriksen.

None of the women in the material had experienced critical comments about public breastfeeding. However, they described unwritten rules for public breastfeeding. A certain discretion is required. You may show your breast, but not your nipple.

## **Miserable conditions for the nursing breast**

The topic public breastfeeding and where to draw the line for public breastfeeding appeared on the agenda with writer Ida Jackson’s blogpost ‘[Nei, jeg kommer ikke til å rulle inn puppen](#) [6]’ (‘No I won’t hide my breast’) this spring. It was later published online in the national newspaper Dagbladet.no. In her blog, Jackson writes about how she thought of Norway as extremely breastfeeding friendly, but, now that she is breastfeeding herself, she has realised that this is not the case.

“It is not surprising that many newly fledged mothers are reluctant about public breastfeeding,” Jackson writes, and relates stories about friends who bring a bottle if they’re going out in public. At Ammehjelpen’s (the breastfeeding help’s) Facebook group, there are several questions from mothers asking for example whether it is acceptable to breastfeed in Church during baptism, she writes.

“The nursing breast has a small and tight room in the public sphere, and ideally it goes back into the sexy bra where it belongs as soon as possible,” Jackson writes, and concludes that public breastfeeding is a political action.

### **Important not to exaggerate**

“I’m a bit ambivalent about these types of debate contributions,” says Ida Marie Henriksen.

“Posts such as this may result in women becoming more aware of public breastfeeding as an action they might receive negative comments about.”

Furthermore, this is not a big issue in Norway, according to Henriksen. Especially not if you compare Norway to countries such as the UK or the US, where research shows that public breastfeeding is highly politicised and complicated.

“Jackson’s post is good in the way that it supports women who might be insecure when it comes to public breastfeeding, and those who find it embarrassing. At the same time, breastfeeding is a matter of course in Norway, and public breastfeeding is part of our lifeworld. Jackson contributes to and fights for this lifeworld when she displays her breast. I like that.”

Studies show that many women in the UK find public breastfeeding embarrassing because the breast is so sexualised. They choose to feed their babies from a bottle and consequently contribute to a bottle-feeding culture.

Although the women that Henriksen has interviewed remember their first public breastfeeding well and some found it slightly difficult, they nevertheless decided to cross the threshold.

“Norwegian women also find the breastfeeding situation embarrassing and feel insecure the first time. But they choose to breastfeed in public and their experience is that it is unproblematic. Thus they continue, and contribute to maintaining our positive breastfeeding culture,” says the PhD candidate.

“We have a well established practice for this in Norway; the norm is that public breastfeeding is legitimate. It is important not to exaggerate and question this legitimacy.”

### **A clear limit**

Jackson has experienced that there are certain limits for when it is no longer acceptable to breastfeed in public. Her experience is in line with Henriksen’s findings.

“The older the child, the more comments I get,” Jackson writes. She has no intention of stopping. However, because of this statement, she has received a number of hate letters from female readers. They find Jackson selfish, they think it is common courtesy to use a bottle, and they write that her child will be bullied at school.

There is an unofficial limit for public breastfeeding around the time when the child is one year old, Henriksen writes in her article 'Kafépupp' ('Cafe breast'), published in the Norwegian journal *Sosiologisk Tidsskrift* (Journal of Sociology) a couple of years ago. But there is no particular age that is decisive for when the surroundings begin to find it unacceptable to breastfeed in public.

"It has to do with how big people assume the child to be and with what types of skills the child has acquired," says Henriksen.

"As soon as the child can walk or put its hand under your jumper to find the breast itself, the general attitude is that the child is too big for public breastfeeding. This may be seen in relation to the fact that mothers on maternity leave normally return to work around this time. It is therefore less normal to see children of this age being breastfed in public.

### **Stress and pressure and breastfeeding doctrines**

"If it really is the case that young women experience that public breastfeeding is considered unacceptable, then this is something completely new," says Therese Andrews. She is a researcher at Nordland Research Institute (Nordlandsforskning), and has done research on taboos related to breastfeeding.

In 2012–2013, Andrews interviewed approximately thirty women from Hordaland County about their breastfeeding experiences.

"Not breastfeeding infants is unacceptable," says Andrews.

The most conspicuous parts of the women's accounts about breastfeeding are related to stress and pressure.

"Stress is dominating, particularly the first months when it is most precarious. The pressure comes not only from outside and from professionals, but also from inside, from themselves and their inner circle."

The authorities' recommendation regarding exclusive breastfeeding the first six months is what Andrews refers to as a doctrine. According to Statistics Norway's survey on this topic from 2013, as little as seventeen per cent of Norwegian women breastfeed exclusively during the entire first six months. Forty-four per cent breastfeed exclusively the first four months.

"Several of the women felt that they failed if they didn't manage to follow the doctrine of six months' exclusive breastfeeding. It is part of the idea of being a good mother and doing the right thing. And of course they want to be the perfect mother."

But at the same time as the children are supposed to be breastfed in public when they are infants, there is a limit for when it is no longer acceptable, Andrews emphasises.

"It is not acceptable to breastfeed bigger babies, at least not if others than the closest family are present. The limit is drawn somewhere around the age of one and a half year and above."

### **Porn fixation and bashfulness**

"In our culture, debates concerning breastfeeding often become emotionally charged," says Birgitta Haga Gripsrud, postdoctoral researcher at the University of Stavanger.

"Breastfeeding constitutes a strong tension between nature and culture, biology and civilisation. There is clearly something at stake here. Ideas of sexuality, femininity and motherhood, which have implications for what is considered women's place and their position in the public space."

Gripsrud's PhD thesis from 2006 is about the Western world's historical and contemporary cultural fascination for breasts. As a postdoctoral researcher, she is still studying breasts, and is currently researching various aspects of breast cancer, most recently in a critical study of the human consequences of genetic testing as a means of detecting hereditary breast cancer.

Gripsrud can identify with what Jackson writes in her blogpost.

“Although it is many years ago, I can still clearly remember how invading it felt when a staff member in kindergarten almost barked at me that ‘you should have stopped [breastfeeding] before he started kindergarten’. It seemed as if it was a nuisance to her that my son was still breastfed at the age of twenty months.”

At the same time, Gripsrud emphasises, like Henriksen and Andrews, the strong Norwegian breastfeeding culture that is widely accepted among the population.

“But I wonder whether we're beginning to see some ‘Americanised’ tendencies in Norwegian society that are connected to a type of duplicity. On the one hand, we see an increased sexualisation, porn fixation and aesthetisation of the female body. On the other hand, we see an increased bashfulness in terms of everyday nudity and physical diversity. In the US, this has resulted in breastfeeding becoming politicised, and breastfeeding activists constitute their own feminist movement,” says Gripsrud.

“Women and children's space in Norway becomes more restricted if breastfeeding women feel that they have to use a bottle instead of breast when they are out in public. Perhaps Jackson's blogpost serves as a warning of how things are changing in Norwegian society. If this is the case, we are losing something important. It therefore has a certain symbolic value that Jackson fronts this case.”

### **The innocent and sexual bud**

According to Gripsrud, showing the nipple has not always been a taboo. In Renaissance culture, displaying a part of the nipple in the neckline was considered appealing. And after the second wave feminism of the 1970s, unlike today where bras are compulsory and increasingly padded, there was no real taboo on the visibility of women's nipples protruding from underneath their tops.

At the same time, the nipple is the most sexual part of the female breast, physiologically.

“In terms of breastfeeding, the nipple is the opening where the breast milk comes out while it also makes up a teat for the baby who stimulates breast milk production by sucking on it,” Gripsrud says, and continues:

“The nipple constitutes a sensitive part of the breast's anatomy. It has an erogenous tissue that can contract and become hard from stimulation or cold temperatures. Stimulation of the nipple can intensify labour contractions. And breastfeeding stimulates the uterus to contract after the baby is born. There are thus connections between women's breasts and uterus, and they may be regarded as parts of the same anatomical system – the genital organs.”

The female breast may in fact be compared to the penis.

“Like the penis, the breast is an organ that may stand out. It can take a clear protruding shape, it can become bigger in volume as a result of sexual excitement, it can be filled and emptied, and it has a nipple that can become erected. In this way, the breasts, as we carry them in the public space, are the most visible signs of the female sex.”

And today the sight of the sexualised nipple has become taboo. A friend told Jackson that public breastfeeding is equal to indecent exposure – an unacceptable sexual action directed towards random

strangers.

“It is as if we have become more puritan with regards to seeing the entire breast and the ambiguity it might possibly represent,” says Gripsrud.

Today, breasts are highly eroticised and pornographised both in everyday life and in the media, according to the researcher. At the same time, we have strong ideas of the maternal breast in relation to breastfeeding. Finally, the sexual breast is for many women a part of their feminine identity, which forms part of the sexual interplay with their partners.

“These three dimensions of the breast in many ways represent incompatible demands for femininity, since breastfeeding is associated with ‘purity’ and innocence, whereas sexuality is still in many ways tabooed.”

### **Mammals in a neoliberal world**

According to Gripsrud, breastfeeding has historically been considered the norm for infant nutrition. She is referring to the book *A History of the Breast* by historian Marilyn Yalom.

“There was no safe alternative to breastmilk until the end of the nineteenth century, and breastfeeding has therefore made the difference between life and death for infants through history.”

Historically, it has also been common to breastfeed until the child is at least two to three years old.

“As species, the human being is a mammal, and breastfeeding also emphasises our nature as biological beings,” says Gripsrud.

“Breastfeeding reveals the human being as vulnerable and relationally dependent; it thus challenges today’s dominant neoliberal discourse in which the autonomous human being is so highly cherished,” says Gripsrud.

How we think about biological differences between the female and the male body varies from culture to culture. It is peculiar to the Norwegian context that the feminists of the 1970s put breastfeeding and breastfeeding rights high on the agenda, according to the cultural researcher.

But the strong focus on breastfeeding in Norway is constantly put on trial, among other things by a battle for equality that emphasises equality between parents on the labour market. The official committee behind the government’s report on public funding for families recently suggested that the parental leave should be equally divided between mother and father.

The leader of the committee, Anne Lise Ellingsæter, professor at Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Oslo, has done research on how arguments related to breastfeeding are used in the debate concerning the distribution of parental leave.

According to Ellingsæter, the fathers’ rights conflict with official recommendations on breastfeeding. In an article published in *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning* (Norwegian Journal of Social Research) in 2011, the professor describes breastfeeding as a ‘new type of normative political conflict in which the fathers’ right to be a care person conflicts with the mothers’ right, or duty, to breastfeed.’

“The British social psychologist Wendy Hollway has recently uttered an important criticism of the dominant so-called progressive political measures that blindly equates fathers and mothers,” says Gripsrud.

“This policy is in danger of neglecting the obvious and decisive differences that lie within women’s potentially reproductive, life-giving qualities. Much of her identity is at stake when a woman becomes a

mother to a vulnerable and dependent creature who is closely connected to her body, both through pregnancy and breastfeeding. According to Hollway, we need to beware of an uncritical curtailment of mother's rights, for example when it comes to parental leave."

### Need for a new difference feminism?

Hollway states that feminism's necessary confrontation with biological determinism and its embrace of social constructivism – the idea that gender is primarily a social construction – may have left us with a deficient understanding of what it means to become a mother.

Mothering is always both cultural and biological. Moreover, it is closely connected to psychological processes, Hollway notes. Her research demonstrates that becoming a mother involves major emotional, physical, and relational changes for each individual mother.


"How is society supposed to leave room for women's physical experiences of becoming a mother and of motherhood, and what is at stake if this room is restricted?" Gripsrud asks and adds:

"Both Hollway and I recognise that fathers or another parent are important as well, but that mothers' need for parental leave may be different and should perhaps therefore continue to be prioritised."

In a society that is increasingly characterised by neoliberal ideas, paid work is valued above all else, according to the cultural researcher.

"As a result, we risk ignoring or disrespecting women's reproduction as production. In many ways, the new policy ideal is of the independent woman who goes back to work quickly and "takes it as a man", to put it very bluntly. For some women this is fine, for other mothers and children it does not feel OK," says Gripsrud.

"Perhaps time is ripe for the creation of a new maternalistic difference feminism? This would be as a political response to protect and defend a space for the identity changes of mothers, to uphold public breastfeeding as a necessary act of mothering, and to acknowledge the production and delivery of breastmilk as an important "natural resource" – also within the neoliberal society. Perhaps Ida Jackson is a new advocate for such a tendency."

 [Breastfeeding is considered a good practice in Norway, and it is an established norm that breastfeeding in public is legitimate. Nevertheless, mothers sometimes feel embarrassed or frowned upon. \(Illustrative photo: Colourbox\)](#) [7]

 [COLOURBOX24110913.jpg](#) [8]

[Breastfeeding protects mum's heart health](#) [9] [Victims of violence stop breastfeeding sooner](#) [10]  
[Ida Marie Henriksen's profile](#) [11]

[Ida Irene Bergstrøm, Kilden kjønnsforskning.no](#) [12]  
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**Links:**

- [1] <http://sciencenordic.com/category/section/society-culture>
- [2] <http://sciencenordic.com/breastfeeding>
- [3] <http://sciencenordic.com/category/countries/norway>
- [4] <http://sciencenordic.com/category/publisher/forskningno>
- [5] <http://kjonnsforskning.no/en/2017/06/public-breastfeeding-when-sexy-boob-becomes-baby-food>
- [6] <http://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/nei-jeg-kommer-ikke-til-a-rulle-inn-puppen/67506357>
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