

A painting depicting a woman in a white lace top breastfeeding her child. The woman is shown from the chest up, looking down at the child. The child is lying on its back, wrapped in a white cloth, and is being held by the woman. The background is a textured, light-colored wall. The overall style is that of a classical or modernist painting.

Ubuntu Lactivism: An Afro-centric Approach to Breastfeeding Activism

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Presentation Layout

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Introduction

- Breastfeeding is considered a key strategy in reducing infant mortality rates and is therefore recommended by international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) [1].
- According to Systematic Reviews of the WHO, breastfeeding has short- and long-term health effects ranging from the reduced risk of hospitalization due to respiratory infections and death from complications related to diarrhea in the first two years of life, while it reduces the risk of developing chronic diseases such as hypertension later in life [2]. Thus EBF is economically beneficial.

EBF indicators

- S.A has some of the lowest EBF in Africa of 32%, with an infant mortality rate of 23.123 deaths per live 1000 births [4].
- With 27% rate of stunting due to chronic malnutrition in the first 1000 days of life [5].
- In response to the call by WHO and UNICEF , South Africa introduced the Tshwane Declaration in 2011.
- Despite all these commitments and agreements, in the recent past we have seen women in South Africa being discriminated, harassed and at times banished from public spaces for merely responding to their maternal instinct.
- These incidences took place in clothing stores, restaurants, public transports and waiting rooms of private health facilities.
- In this presentation public space refers to any place where a mother and her child are legally permitted to be which can be publicly or privately owned.

Legislative threats to public breastfeeding

- S.A has not done enough legislatively to protect breastfeeding.
- Section 9 Chapter 2, part 3, of the South African Sexual Offences and Related Matters Act 32 of 2007 still prohibits “persons 18 years or older to cause or compel anyone 18 years or older to witness exposure of or display of genital organs, anus or female breasts [6].
- Act 32 was first introduced by the apartheid government in 1957 but was then called the Immorality Act meaning a democratic dispensation is upholding colonial and apartheid laws.
- RtHB page 4, bullet 2, sentence 3 seems to discriminate and exclude mothers who practice ATM.

Western-centric perception of the female breast

- The perception of female breasts as sexual organs is a contradiction to the African way of life, as in most African cultures both men and women lived topless.
- As a result of colonization and apartheid Western values were imposed on African people.
- Western liberal societies are obsessed with the gratification of self, which created a breeding ground for the sexual objectification and commodification of women.
- In Western societies, breastfeeding in public is often met with objections and discomfort, reflecting a skewed perception of breastfeeding as sexual rather than an act of nourishment for infants.
- This hyper-sexualisation of female breasts, driven by the greed and self-interest inherent in Western liberal societies, has detrimental effects on mothers who seek to breastfeed their infants, not just in terms of nutrition but also in emotional well-being.

Western-centric perception of the female breast

- The categorisation or perception of the public exposure of female breasts as lewd and inappropriate is, arguably, a result of the explicit commodification and sexualisation of women's bodies [7].
- In a capitalist neoliberal society, the role of the mother in breastfeeding has been influenced by the bourgeois nuclear family set-up.
- Where motherhood has become associated with consumerism, as represented by the so-called “yummy mummies” or celebrity mothers.

Globalization of Western culture

- The term “yummy mummy”, which is commonly used in contemporary Britain, refers to a sexually attractive woman who perceives motherhood as a status of opulence and portrays it as the “ultimate standard for the modern woman”, particularly within the bourgeoisie [8].
- The concept of motherhood has been commodified, sexualised and exploited for profit gain rather than being viewed as a sacred experience [9].

Yummy mummy lifestyle

- The promotion of this unrealistic and unattainable image of motherhood has the potential to demean and confuse “traditional” mothers, causing their experience of motherhood to be stressful instead of fulfilling.
- The “yummy mummy” lifestyle is often marketed by celebrities who present alternative feeding (formula) as a fashionable and classy practice, utilising expensive infant formula brands and feeding bottles with an appetite for designer products.



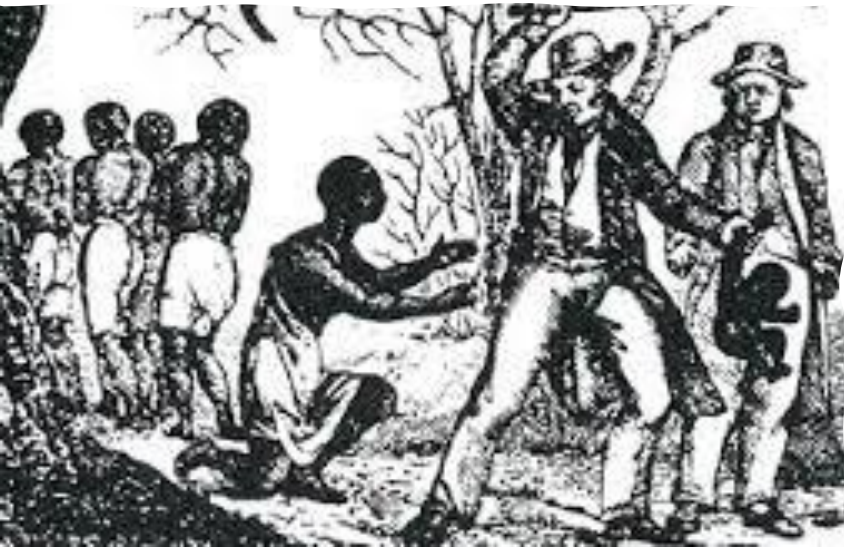
Commodification of motherhood

- The commodification and exploitation of motherhood for economic purposes have resulted in women being treated as instruments to be utilised, not only as sexual objects but also as tools for capital reproduction in the pursuit of producing more bodies for the workforce and consumers of capitalist products.
- African women have suffered the most exploitation of their womanhood and motherhood dating back to the slave trade era.
- Thus, the concept of lactating slaves.



Lactating slaves

- In the slave era, African women were forcefully separated from their infants to nurse the infants of their enslavers.
- Their motherhood was sold for capital gains.
- Advertisements were printed in newspapers, such as the Rio de Janeiro newspaper on 13 November 1827, with captions such as “For sale, two wet nurses, from their first pregnancies, on the rua de S. José, n. 22, basement” [10].



Financial exploitation of African motherhood

- Enslaved African mothers were denied the right to breastfeed their own infant thus an alternative feed was required.
- Infant formula became the feed of choice for these mothers.

Private Sales.
Healthy Young Wet Nurse.
Capers & Heyward
Offer at private sale, a young and healthy WET NURSE. For further particulars, apply at our office, SOUTH SIDE ADGERS' WHARF.
June 7. smw3

TO BE HIRED,
A Healthy Black WET NURSE, without a child, with a good breast of milk. Enquire of Mrs. Dawson, at Mr. Patrick Hind's, in Beaufain-street
October 24. 6

FOR SALE—A Wet Nurse, about nineteen years of age, with her second child, six weeks old, will be sold low for cash, fully guaranteed. Also—A first-rate Seamstress, who can cut out and fit well. Also—Several first-rate House Servants, Mechanics and Field Hands. Those who wish to purchase would do well to call on the undersigned before buying elsewhere.
19 tw* J. W. BOAZMAN, 157 Gravier st.

Financial exploitation of African motherhood

- A society with a profound consumerist culture that perceives women as sexual objects is likely to have a distorted perception of the biological functions of women's bodies, as well as their role as agents of morality and socialisation in the family and society at large.
- In post-colonial and post-apartheid S.A the exploitation of African motherhood persists as most African mothers are denied the right to breastfeed their infants due to being under domestic servitude.

Moral arguments for breastfeeding advocacy

- Breast milk is the most basic and most natural form of infant feeding and thus is protected by Chapter 2, Section 28 (1) (c) of the Constitution “Every child has the right to basic nutrition...”[11].
- Due to its effectiveness in reducing the risk of hospitalization in infants, reducing infant mortality rates, and reducing the risk of developing chronic illnesses later in life, thus reducing the burden on the health system and fiscus of the country, exclusive breastfeeding should be regarded as a moral imperative.
- Any act of discrimination and harassment towards breastfeeding mothers constitutes a human rights violation and as a society bound by the Tshwane Declaration we have a moral and legal obligation to create a conducive environment for these mothers.
- I propose a breastfeeding activism movement called Ubuntu Lactivism, mandated by the Tshwane Declaration.

What is Ubuntu Lactivism?

- Ubuntu is a *Nguni* word that is synonymous with many other African languages and translates to 'humanness' in English [12].
- Ubuntu is an African worldview or philosophy based on the principles of communitarianism, humanness, reciprocity, and solidarity, which is a contrast to the individualistic utilitarian nature of modern Western philosophy [12].
- On the other hand, the word lactivism refers to a set of 'activism' practices carried out by breastfeeding women that are portrayed through openly breastfeeding, either online or publicly [13].

- Activism refers to 'action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine [14].
- *Ubuntu lactivism* should be taken to mean an Afrocentric public health activism movement for the support, promotion, and protection of the right to breastfeed anywhere and anytime, which is rooted in the principles of communitarianism, humanness, reciprocity, and solidarity.

Purpose of *Ubuntu Lactivism*

- The primary objective of this movement is to protect the right to breastfeed and to breastfeed on behalf of the vulnerable who have been marginalized and deprived of a voice.
- The other objective is to desexualize breastfeeding and promote it as a natural, safe, sustainable, healthy, and environmentally friendly act of nourishing a child.
- Ubuntu lactivism is an activism movement that acknowledges our interconnectedness as a society and can help unify the voice of support behind the government's efforts to meet the EBF targets.

- Breastfeeding affects society not only the mother, the child, and the immediate family but the community as a whole; therefore, it is society's moral imperative to create suitable and enabling conditions for successful breastfeeding.
- Due to the interconnected and interdependent nature of communitarian societies, which I argue that South Africa is predominantly, it is in the collective's best interest that mothers who are willing and able to breastfeed exclusively be supported and all potential barriers be eliminated [12].

conclusion

- Breastfeeding activism should be reflective of the values and norms of the majority and provide a voice for the marginalized as breastfeeding is a right and not a privilege.
- We need to take a communitarian approach to breastfeeding advocacy as it is for the common good and thus should be a collective responsibility. Just like the Sepedi aphorism says; *Tau tša hloka seboka di šitwa ke nare e hlotša.*
- The continued commodification and sexualisation of women undermine our efforts to improve EBF rates and is un-African.

Recommendations

- Explicit exemption of breastfeeding from public indecency laws.
- Criminalization of discrimination and harassment of mothers who breastfeed in public spaces.
- Educate society that breastfeeding is a right, not a privilege.
- Centre Ubuntu philosophy in breastfeeding advocacy.

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