

BREASTFEEDING AS A BLACK WOMAN IN MODERN DAY UK

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As a breastfeeding practitioner, Black woman, breastfeeding mama and a doula, I hear the phrase, why don't we see many black women breastfeeding? I am told by my counterparts (read Caucasian) that Black women have a high rate of breastfeeding and that we don't see many of them at support groups because they have lots of support from families.

Not all of this is true. African women and Caribbean women have different experiences and support systems and it is different for each island, each country and even within families.

HISTORY

Let's look at the history of the beautiful Black breast. Let's look

back a couple of hundred years. Natural term weaning was the norm.

When breastfeeding, indigenous cultures would wear traditional dress. They would babywear and carry the baby/child. Sometimes the breasts are laid bare, not to sexualise them, not for the men's enjoyment, but for convenience, for easy access for hungry babies and toddlers. This was natural and common place and men were also known to let babies suckle upon their own nipples if the mother wasn't there to soothe baby. Aunts and grandmothers were known to nurse the baby if mother was not around and this was the norm. It really did take the village to raise the child.

Church, missionaries, colonisers, whatever you want to call them, then came along and tried to change the status quo..... sexualizing the black body, calling it indecent and offensive or exotic, making them cover up and bringing shame upon a natural, nurturing aspect of child-



rearing. I'm not going to go into the detail about it, history speaks for itself, you just need to do the research.

During slavery, slave owners would use the Black breast as a wet nurse for their own children. They set restrictions on when or if a Black breast could nourish the Black baby. They saw how the Black breast nourished and strengthened the Black baby and toddler. They saw the results within the Black community when they were allowed to breastfeed their own babies and wanted all of that goodness for their own children. They got selfish and didn't want to share, so claimed it as their own.

Now I know some of you reading this are thinking, here she goes pulling the slave card. Slavery may have been in the past, but the treatment and injustice upon the Black body still goes on today. Within the UK, the disparities when it comes to the treatment and the support for Black people during and after birth as well as during postnatal support and for those seeking breastfeeding support speak for themselves and the statistics are getting worse.

Sexualisation of the Black body (and breast) happens from an early age. Black females are sexualised. They are taught that their body isn't

theirs, taught that they have to cover up, dress a certain way, style their hair a certain way or they are seen to be less than their peers. Their bodies and traditional ways are over-policed. Women of colour, and those wearing traditional dress, have been sexualised and censored.

In Hawaii, the movements and clothes associated with traditional dance are considered 'acceptable'. When it's from an African or Caribbean tradition, the same movements and style of clothing are seen as overt, promiscuous and sexualised.

Growing up as a Black woman in the UK, you hear stories of how your elders are/were treated during birth and after birth by hospital staff, nurses and midwives and by health visitors. My maternal family come from a small island in the Caribbean. My mother was born in 1950s. She had four children and didn't breastfeed more than six months with any of us. My sister gave birth in 2004. She breastfed for around one year. No one else has breastfed past six months in my family except me.

I have a big family. On my mother's side, my grandmother has 13 grandchildren, 10 great grandchildren, four great-great grandchildren. Of these 27 children, 10 were breastfed at birth, two

were still breastfed after six months. One was still breastfeeding after one year and at three years, one is still going, that child is mine.

From my research and experience, this is not an indication of what happens in all other families within the Caribbean. Each island has a different approach and attitudes to breastfeeding, but it happens in quite a few families. Breastfeeding attitudes can even change vastly within different regions within the same island. Caribbean rates can differ significantly from those countries in the African continent.

When talking to other Black women the stories, I have heard are all very similar. They didn't get breastfeeding advice or support from health visitors or midwives. They didn't know there was special breastfeeding organisations. They have all been told in one way or another that they have insufficient milk or that formula is better for baby. Some had told me harrowing stories about abuse they have received after birth when they have requested breastfeeding support.

One mother told me a story about how when she asked for help, a midwife attempted to put the baby to the breast and the baby was very sleepy. The midwife said, "just open up your mouth you Little Black Bastard."



Photo: Vanisha

One mother told of how she asked for help when she couldn't get the baby to open her mouth enough as she had large nipples. The midwife came over, looked at her breasts and called over her colleagues to, 'come look at these saucer nipples'.

One mother was told by a nurse that her breasts were too big to breastfeed and she would smother her baby and if she wanted to breastfeed so bad, 'she should let her man suck on them if she wanted to breastfeed'.

Tell me Black women are not eroticised or fetishized.

My breastfeeding story almost ended before it began.

My son was born non-responsive and was rushed to the neonatal unit to be resuscitated and monitored. We didn't get the golden hour to establish feeding. Due to complications and a postnatal haemorrhage, I didn't get to see him until six hours later. My son had complications and we were in hospital for about two weeks.

After two days, I was told I was being discharged so that I could look after my other children (I don't have any other children) but it was assumed that as a 39yr old black woman I would have shed loads of children at home. They didn't even look at my file before making this decision which would have impacted on my breastfeeding journey especially as my son was in the neonatal unit

I'll let that sink in

I was never asked whether I wanted to breastfeed or not. I did however find out after one week or so that there was a pumping room for mothers. This information was not given by the hospital staff but from a fellow neonatal breastfeeding mother. Her child was in the same room as mine and I was going back and forth every 2-3 hrs from my ward on the 3rd floor to neonatal

on the 2nd floor and she asked why I didn't either use the pump room or ask for the pump so that I could pump from my bed and get a little bit of rest.

My story is sadly not an unusual one and I have heard lots of similar stories about how women of colour have been treated differently than their white counterparts. You only need to look at the MBRRACE-UK report published 1/11/18

Tell me there is no inherent bias, that there is no institutionalised racism towards women of colour within the system.

SUPPORT AND REPRESENTATION

What I'm talking about here is not equality for all but about equity. It's about what we put out, what and who we actively support. It's about what we do all day every day and not just for Black breastfeeding week.

Some of you may wonder what all the above has to do with breastfeeding.

Women of colour/Black women have historically not fared well with medical professions. They hear stories from their elders, sisters' friends about their own experiences and treatment by medical

professionals and, like it or not, breastfeeding practitioners are likened to midwives, health visitors and the like.

To change the narrative you need to hear the story because you cannot change what you don't know.

In this day, an age of social media, stories of mistreatment of people of colour during pregnancy, labour, the postnatal period and stories about misdiagnosis resulting in complications and sometimes death can make people wary of seeking help and support from people outside their circle.

When supporting Black women/ women of colour there are factors like those above that influence their decision to breastfeed. They influence who and from where they seek breastfeeding support. That has influenced the attitude toward breastfeeding for the people around them who may or may not support their decision to breastfeed.

Breastfeeding organisations are predominantly white and do not represent the world we live in today.

If I was a 20-something year old pregnant black woman and was thinking about breastfeeding tell me, what resources are out there that

show me positive images of women from my community breastfeeding, that you as an organisation have published or posted on your social media? Have you engaged with my peers, supported strategies and campaigns to get more pictures and information to all women who wish to breastfeed that are not being represented?

Why would I, as a black person come to your organization for support to breastfeed a baby?

How many of you have seen a Black breast, close-up that's not your own, one with cracked nipples?

Can you tell the visual signs of nipple damage on Black nipples of different shades?

Do you know how to identify or help women of colour/women of different shades identify if they may have mastitis?

Because all the information is written for women of caucasian skin tone which talks about pink nipples, skin redness and that the affected breast can appear lumpy and red.....

Some instances of mastitis on darker skin have been misdiagnosed as a blocked milk duct because doctors and midwives have not been educated on how to diagnose

mastitis on darker skin. If some doctors and medical professionals don't know, how can the nursing parent know what to look for or even where or how to seek help?

If you search for pictures of breasts with mastitis, thrush and nipple damage you will be hard pressed to find any pictures depicting women that are not caucasian.

Here are somethings to think on the next time a woman of colour comes to you for help or support whether you are a family member, professional or a friend:

- Do we know how to find the information to help them if you don't know the answer to their question?
- If you are unsure about what to say, do you know who to signpost them to so that you can help them with the information they need ?
- Can you factually tell a mother of colour what signs and symptoms to look out for if they are worried about mastitis?
- What factual resources can we refer her to that she can identify with?



When I started my breastfeeding journey as a black woman I didn't have the answers to any of these questions, but the literature is out there and the pictures are out there, we just need to look.

Let's end implicit and explicit racism.

Let's support women of all colours.

Bring in knowledgeable educators to teach us how we can better support all women.

Reach out to Black breastfeeding supporters, doulas and midwives for pictures and resources to support parents and their partners on their breastfeeding journey.