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## Breastfeeding is *NOT* Home Chore A Wake-Up Call that Mindsets Need to Change

*To just say that the social attitude towards breastfeeding needs to change is an understatement. What is the most natural life process between a mother and an infant, not to mention the nutritional importance of it, is still met with prejudice and public discomfort. It is time to look beyond.*

### Priti Mahara

The recent incident at one of the leading shopping malls in South Kolkata has drawn a lot of flak on social media from people across India, especially new mothers. The mall administration, on seeing a mother breastfeeding her baby daughter in the mall, reportedly asked her to feed the child in the toilet due to a lack of a separate baby care room. When she posted a review of the mall in light of this incident on social media, she was shamed by the mall's social media executive, who in turn suggested that she must do her "home chores at home and not in the mall or at least plan it beforehand".

Though this incident has brought the issue under the spotlight again, the 29 year old mother is not alone in her ordeal. Time and again, nursing mothers are either discouraged or prohibited from breastfeeding their children in public. Recently, a Malayalam actress was shamed by huge number of people on social media for allowing a magazine to use a picture of her breastfeeding an infant child on its cover. It was only last year, however, when an Australian senator was said to have 'made history' when she breastfed her baby girl while addressing a Parliament session. It is strange, to say the least, when such a universal life process that comes fiercely recommended by doctors, is bound by such prejudice.

The Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) Guidelines 2016 prepared by the Indian academy of pediatricians say this about Nursing in Public (NIP): "Mothers should feel comfortable to nurse in public. All efforts should be taken to remove hurdles impeding breastfeeding in public places, special areas / rooms shall be identified/ constructed or established in places like Bus stands, Railway stations, Airports etc."

In reality, however, these guidelines are often overlooked in public spaces and new mothers have to face not only rebuke and judgmental glances from people around, but also major discomfort in terms of absent infrastructure.

For infants, breastfeeding is not only their way to deal with hunger, but is also a process that helps calm them down when they are irritated or disturbed for any reason. How a process as natural as eating can be equated with a 'home chore' is not only questionable, but outrageous.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding until babies are six months old as children are mostly likely to achieve optimal growth and development at this age. Depriving a child of her/his mother's breast milk is not only likely to affect her/his nourishment but also make the

child prone to longer-term health problems. In other words, breastfeeding a child until s/he is six months old can be seen in the same light as a fundamental right for nursing mothers, irrespective of the space she would be present in when her child needs to be breastfed.

An analysis of the breastfeeding data of West Bengal from NHFS 4(National Family Health Survey) shows that the percentage of breastfeeding children in the age group of 6-23 months receiving an adequate diet is 18 in urban and 19 in the rural setup. On the other hand, the percentage of children under 6 months of age exclusively breastfed in the state is 61 in urban and 50 in rural areas respectively.

According to an African proverb, "***It takes a village to raise a child.***" This essentially means that it takes the efforts of an entire community of different people in order to create the right environment for a child to grow to her/his full potential. The larger society needs to play a positive and conducive role in building an enabling environment for children. This does not shift the responsibility of the child from the parents, but just highlights the role the society has to play – a shift in the attitude towards making public spaces child friendly, is definitely one of them.

The larger issue of new mothers having to breastfeed their newborns in awkward spaces like changing rooms or toilets still persists. This issue must be addressed. If a nursing mother feels the need for privacy to comfortably feed her child, a toilet or a changing room is definitely not an alternative to a baby care room. The question, however, is that will increasing the number of baby care rooms or accessibility to them the answer to the change in mindset that is required? Maybe not.

The ordeal faced by many lactating mothers who are made to feel embarrassed when they breastfeed their infants in public is a clear indicator that the lack of dedicated spaces is an issue, but not the only one. A much graver and larger issue is the existing perception about an absolutely natural life process. The need of the hour is to sensitize people and change mindsets, of making people understand that a baby's hunger, nourishment or discomfort is not dependent on the availability of space or how it makes other people feel. This message not only needs to be made loud and clear, but also widespread.

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**Note to the Editor:**

**CRY - Child Rights and You** is an Indian NGO that believes in every child's right to a childhood - to live, learn, grow and play. For 4 decades, CRY and its 850 initiatives have worked with parents and communities to ensure Lasting Change in the lives of more than 2,000,000 underprivileged children, across 23 states in India. For more information please visit us at [www.cry.org](http://www.cry.org). For media enquiries contact: **Abhik Bhattacharya, Media Advocacy, CRY, email id: [abhik.bhattacharya@crymail.org](mailto:abhik.bhattacharya@crymail.org), phone no: +91 9051668304**