

# Lactivism: between resistance and relaying the merchant capitalism of breast-feeding

## Abstract

With the growth of globalization and ultroliberalism, our society is governed by the dictatorship of market. Things, humans and values which must be sacred are sending to all price and to a low price. It is the same case for breast-feeding which is to be racked by merchant capitalism. This problem divided the defenders and the opponents of activism. The firsts claim that breast-feeding is benefit to the health of woman and child, whereas the latter discourages activism on the base of feminist capitalism which promote industrial and economical interests. Beyond this ideological conflict, this research reinforces the axiological virtus of activism for the society: the preservation of motherwood and the protection of family.

**Keywords:** lactivism, marching capitalism, breast-feeding, feminism, protection of family

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## Introduction

Breastfeeding is recognized as the most effective and appropriate method of feeding infants and young children. Breast milk contains many more biologically active substances than formula. Even though they may contain roughly the same amounts of nutrients, their quality is not equivalent.<sup>1</sup> The benefits of breastfeeding are recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO), which recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months after birth and at least two years, with safe and nutritionally appropriate complementary foods (WHO, 2015). However, in recent years, bottle feeding has become the norm and appears more as a mark of social advancement and purchasing power.<sup>2</sup>

This leads to an antagonism between those who praise and those who criticize breastfeeding. Following the WHO's position, breastfeeding advocates argue that it is the best way to feed a baby, in addition to being a woman's reappropriation of her own body.<sup>3,4</sup> Conversely, its detractors denounce an overestimation and idealization of the benefits of breastfeeding, which simultaneously leads to a return to biological norms to the detriment of women. Furthermore, the pro-breastfeeding movement is accused of paving the way for a flourishing market for its accessories.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in view of the economic gains from the market for breast milk substitutes, does the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding and its claim as a right of the mother not constitute an anti-capitalist resistance?

The dominant literature on the issue of breastfeeding focuses primarily on its health benefits for the child and the mother, its economic advantages for the family and the state,<sup>2</sup> as well as the defense and promotion of the right to breastfeed in public (Seabela, 2024).<sup>3,4</sup> However, few of them primarily address the anti-capitalist dimension of lactivism, a movement born in the wake of differentialist feminism that advocates for the recognition and promotion of breastfeeding as a woman's right. This theoretical study on lactivism aims to fill this gap.

Methodologically, we selected and analyzed a number of corpora dealing with breastfeeding, consisting of activist texts, political documents, and accounts from breastfeeding women. However,

given the broad scope of this study, this selection did not take into account spatiotemporal criteria. Thus, while situating activism within the broader field of feminism, this article analyzes its anti-capitalist character.

## Breastfeeding as a feminist demand

The issue of breastfeeding finds a particularly acute backdrop in feminist debates on human nature and the differentiation of the sexes as a source of the oppression of women. Indeed, while most feminist movements share the demand for equality in the treatment of men and women, they are not unanimous on the source of oppression and the strategies to be implemented for its abolition. Proponents of radical and egalitarian feminisms adopt similar attitudes regarding the etiology of discrimination. They base their discourse on the universality of human nature and attribute discrimination and the oppression of women to the differentiation of the sexes by patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, the female body and its reproductive capacities are denounced as the basis of her oppression. Consequently, these defenders of the unity of nature reject motherhood, and breastfeeding as its corollary, as an instrument of the alienation of women, who are forced to return to the home at the expense of their fulfillment.<sup>4</sup>

This position diverges from that of differentialist feminists who support the idea of a dual nature. They locate the source of female oppression not in the sexual differences they accept, but rather in their hierarchical ranking to the detriment of women. For these feminists, motherhood, and by extension breastfeeding, are specific aspects of femininity that should be valued (Pouliken, 2017).<sup>6,7</sup>

As for eco-feminists, who advocate a more feminine, tender, and apathetic relationship with nature, in contrast to masculine brutality geared towards exploitation and even destruction, they draw a parallel between male oppression of women and the oppression of nature through exploitation. Their fight against consumerism and its devastating effects on nature includes the promotion of extended breastfeeding. As a renunciation of formula milk, a product of violence against nature, breastfeeding constitutes an ecological act insofar as it slows down animal overexploitation as well as the pollution associated with the production and distribution processes.<sup>7</sup>

In opposition to egalitarian feminism, and as an extension of differentialist feminism, a subversive form of feminism called «lactivism» has emerged since the 2000s. This term, a contraction of «lactation» and «activism,» advocates for the freedom, recognition, promotion, and normalization of breastfeeding, particularly in public.<sup>3</sup> This movement arose following information and support campaigns for women who wish to breastfeed, led by breastfeeding advocacy groups, the most famous of which is La Leche League, founded in the United States in 1956.<sup>8</sup>

Lactivists argue that the decline in breastfeeding, fueled by the alliance between patriarchy and capitalism, is at the root of women's loss of power. By breastfeeding freely, women reclaim their bodies for the benefit of their infants and themselves. Hence, breastfeeding has become a central issue on the feminist agenda as a site of revolution and cultural insubordination. Thus, beyond the right to breastfeed, it is more the right to breastfeed in public that is claimed by lactivists. They see lactation rooms as a double-edged sword. Indeed, while these spaces are preferred by some women who value privacy, they continue to isolate others and reinforce the idea that breastfeeding is a prohibited act in public.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, breastfeeding is championed by its advocates as a matter of women's health, reproductive rights, and justice. This is a reaction to the neglect of this maternal right by the global women's rights movement, which primarily focuses on employment and reproductive freedom.<sup>10</sup> It is within this context that the 2007 symposium on breastfeeding and feminism, held in the United States, was organized to promote understanding and acceptance of breastfeeding as a women's reproductive right. Such an understanding should lead to the promotion of breastfeeding by ensuring the necessary social, economic, and political conditions for its success.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, as a feminist movement, lactivism encompasses both actions promoting breastfeeding and protests against the discrimination faced by mothers who breastfeed in public. It calls for a moral duty on the part of the community to defend mothers' right to breastfeed when and where they want without being stigmatized, as well as children's right to be breastfed in peace.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, while representing a reappropriation of the differentialist struggle regarding motherhood, lactivism also offers a critique of egalitarian feminism, which it considers complicit in the capitalist exploitation of women.

## Activism against capitalist feminism

Among the criticisms leveled by activism against classical feminism is its portrayal as complicit in the capitalist exploitation of women and mothers, in particular. By making Motherhood, an institution to be denounced and even avoided, is presented by this feminism as a source of perpetuation of women's economic, bodily, domestic, and sexual alienation.<sup>6</sup> Motherhood is perceived as the adversary of women's freedom and autonomy, since it confines them to the home. Breastfeeding, a component of motherhood, is part of this maternal institution from which women should free themselves.

This natural act is perceived in terms of hindering and excluding the mother from full-time work and imposing limitations on her movements. It is directed against the biological woman. It is the woman who wants to use her body in all its dimensions, not only sexually, but also as a pregnant woman, a woman in labor, and a breastfeeding mother, who is the object of egalitarian feminism. Its integration of masculine values and its aim, not of equality between men and women, but rather of a gender identity,<sup>4</sup> has led it to consider the non-breastfeeding as a means of liberating women from the sedentary lifestyle imposed by childcare.

This ideological stance, based on anti-naturalism, contributes to the development of the idea that motherhood is the enemy of women's self-determination and an obstacle to their fulfillment. Consequently, Abortion and contraception, as a woman's right to conceive if and when she wants, should free women from motherhood and allow them to compete with men professionally. The artificialization of maternal functions, including contraception, Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART), bottle-feeding, and soon the artificial womb, is underpinned by the same logic aimed at freeing women from the naturalist injunction of motherhood.<sup>4</sup>

This anti-natural maternal sentiment found fertile ground in the capitalist system, particularly with work outside the home. Women's access to employment, the organization of which seems to pit the interests of the company against those of the child, leads to the maternal diversion of breastfeeding. From the In the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution led to the increased use of wet nurses. Women who joined the factories were cared for by their babies. This was followed by...the almost universal artificialization of breastfeeding. Therefore, because of the negative impact of breastfeeding on maximizing working time and productivity, bottle-feeding is now being promoted as a model.<sup>1</sup>

The pursuit of profitability, pitting the capitalist interests of businesses against those of the child, also manifests itself in the infiltration of the political sphere through the establishment of a legal framework that restricts the time working mothers can dedicate to caring for their babies. Some labor laws limit maternity leave to less than six months, preventing mothers, despite their best intentions, from exclusively breastfeeding their children for the period recommended by the WHO. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, Article 130 of the labor code grants pregnant women 15 consecutive weeks of leave, including a maximum of nine weeks after delivery and six weeks before childbirth.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, even though Article 132 of this law recognizes the right of employed women - from the birth of their child and for a period of 15 months - to a break for breastfeeding for one hour per working day, some companies do not have adequate spaces for mothers wishing to breastfeed their children during working hours.

Torn between embarrassment, dependence, reduced purchasing power, and the well-being of their child, many mothers are forced, against their will, to choose work. Breastfeeding becomes, in effect, a luxury that many women cannot afford. Consequently, breast milk substitutes become widespread and prevalent, resulting in the growth of a breastfeeding market. Thus, through advertising, formula milk is popularized, despite being recognized as expensive and of poor quality compared to natural milk, which is free and highly nutritious for babies. This popularization is motivated not by quality, but simply by the commercialization of formula milk, which benefits and fuels capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the sale of breast milk substitutes, capitalism exploits various diseases caused, in both the baby and the mother, by the lack of breastfeeding and the use of formula. A pharmaceutical industry specializing in their treatment has been established.<sup>4</sup> This system profits from both breast milk substitutes and the production of medications and the treatment of resulting illnesses. It stems from the prohibition of breastfeeding, or at least the encouragement of infant formula use, generating revenue not only for the manufacturer but also for the pharmacist.

On this subject, Martine Herzog Evans regrets the silence of women regarding the health risks associated with not breastfeeding, in favor of the economic gains sought by both pharmaceutical companies

specializing in drug production and manufacturers of various breast milk substitutes. She is not surprised that among those opposed to breastfeeding are shareholders of companies marketing cow's milk substitutes for infants. For her, considerable economic and financial interests motivate keeping women ignorant and presenting them with distorted truths about artificial products. The goal is to make them believe that this choice has no consequences or few consequences.<sup>4</sup>

In this respect, the bottle seems to serve capitalism more than the working women, now subjugated, subjected to long working hours, and subjected to maternity tests to ensure they are not pregnant, for fear of hindering production. While capitalism has given women access to employment and freed them from housework, they have become slaves to the capitalist system, which forces them to become like men, that is, at the cost of not having time for a family and children.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside and serving this commercial capitalism of breastfeeding, underpinned by radical and egalitarian feminism, lies the appropriation of the female breast by male sexual desire. The sexualization of the maternal breast also contributes to the promotion of the artificialization of breastfeeding.

## The eroticization of the male breast in the service of capitalism

The prosperity of the breastfeeding market is also fueled by the instrumentalization of the breast, serving male sexual desire.<sup>14</sup> The eroticization of the female breast conveys an injunction to mothers to keep their breasts intact, in order to remain attractive and gain the esteem of their husbands. It has been shown that. In a purely private and family sphere, an increasing number of men are opposing their wives' right to breastfeed their children for sexual reasons. They believe that once the mother begins having sexual relations, she cannot breastfeed or have her breasts caressed. The father's needs become the priority and take precedence over those of the child.<sup>4</sup> From then on, the imposition of bottle feeding became an imperative.

Maria Llopis argues that this male tendency to prohibit, underestimate, or even discredit breastfeeding is a sign of intolerance and oppression of mothers, very few of whom experience sexual desire during the postpartum period. It also reflects a lack of understanding of the specific nature of the female body: "When we breastfeed, we produce prolactin, which limits our sexual desire for other people. The baby we hold in our arms is our sole object of desire. Thus, many women complain that their partners ask them to have sex when they don't want to. And many men complain that their partners are not sexually available".<sup>3</sup>

This fantasy surrounding the female breast also extends to public life. Breastfeeding in public is frowned upon, even pornographic, to the point of isolating and confining breastfeeding women to their homes. Clearly, this natural and benevolent act is experienced as a disgrace. It is reported that...Many women, in addition to being brutalized or considered immoral, simply for breastfeeding their babies in public, report the discomfort they feel breastfeeding in the hospital in front of others, or even – including at home – in front of their loved ones. Many women shut themselves away for weeks or months at home, feeling hostility or simply carrying a sense of modesty that stems from the unique role attributed to the breast in our societies. Even more serious, some women are assaulted, threatened, reprimanded like criminals, or ordered to leave public places for daring to breastfeed their child there".<sup>4</sup> There is a contrast between the tolerance shown towards nudity and sexual exhibitionism of women and men on beaches and in other public places; and the fact of a woman breastfeeding her baby without any exhibitionist intent.

Promoting bottle-feeding can also be viewed from the perspective of gender equality, aiming to involve men in the care of infants using artificial milk.<sup>14</sup> While not breastfeeding is sometimes claimed by women as an opportunity to have a little more rest time or work opportunity is sometimes a demand from men. They perceive breastfeeding as a privilege of mothers that excludes them from the relationship with the child. This method of feeding the baby would allow them to forge deep bonds with their children, a form of «second mothering».<sup>4</sup> This denunciation of the eroticization of the breast, as well as the opposition to the spread of breast milk substitutes, is part of a broader activist project aimed at combating, to some extent, capitalist hegemony. Thus, breastfeeding is presented as an anti-capitalist act.

## Activism or anti-capitalist breast

By highlighting the specificities of women, activists of laactivism claim to be naturalists, standing alongside differentialists. Sometimes called «femelleists,» the latter criticize patriarchy, which they consider to be at the service of capitalism by focusing its efforts on the production of material wealth to the detriment of relationships and care. In this, differentialists and laactivists stand against the notions of profitability and the material valuation of human existence. They believe it is necessary to consider activities related to the maintenance of life alongside market production and call for a greater appreciation of motherhood.<sup>6</sup>

It is within this framework that the activist demand for the freedom to breastfeed is situated, not only as a right of the child and the mother, but also as a means of preventing the health consequences exploited by capitalism. In a 2010 report on breastfeeding, Dominique Turck reveals that in countries where economic and hygiene conditions remain precarious, breastfeeding significantly reduces infant mortality. Conversely, in the absence of breastfeeding, the risk of death is 5.8 times higher for children aged 2 to 3 months and 2.6 times higher for those aged 6 to 8 months.

The same study specifies that in industrialized countries, breastfeeding is associated in infants with a lower risk of acute diarrhea, acute otitis, and severe respiratory infections. Breastfeeding is also associated with a reduced risk of asthma and eczema during the first 2-3 years of life in children at risk of allergies, as well as a reduced risk of obesity and overweight, type 1 and type 2 diabetes, celiac disease, inflammatory bowel disease, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).<sup>2</sup>

It is increasingly being demonstrated that breastfeeding also has beneficial effects on the mother's health. Those who do not breastfeed for short periods are at increased risk of breast cancer.<sup>3,4</sup> It is associated with a decrease in the incidence of premenopausal breast cancer and ovarian cancer, type 2 diabetes, and postpartum depression. It is also associated with a reduced risk of metabolic and cardiovascular diseases.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to its health benefits, prolonged breastfeeding generates direct and indirect economic benefits for families and the state. At the family level, it saves money on the costs associated with purchasing formula, medical consultations, medications, and hospitalization.<sup>15</sup> This positive impact of breastfeeding on the lives of children, mothers, families, and the entire community warrants support in creating the necessary conditions for safe breastfeeding.

The promotion of breastfeeding in the long term, this could represent a loss of potential revenue for the capitalist system, which derives economic gains from it. Several studies show

that... 'Breastfeeding or its refusal has significant impacts on the economy.' In Quebec, a study considering the 3 main pathologies (respiratory pathologies, acute otitis, acute diarrhea) that affect infants during their first year of life, estimated that if 60% of infants were exclusively breastfed for 3 months, this would represent an annual savings in health care of 5 million dollars.<sup>2</sup>

A 2001 study by the economic services of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, considering the direct costs of treating only cases of acute diarrhea, otitis, and enterocolitis, concluded that healthcare spending could be reduced by \$3.6 billion annually if breastfeeding rates were 75% at birth (compared to 64% in practice) and 50% at 6 months (compared to 29%). Another study published in the first half of 2010, taking into account all the health benefits reported by the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) in 2007, concluded that the annual reduction in healthcare spending would be \$10.5 billion or \$13 billion if 80% or 90% of infants living in the United States were exclusively breastfed until 6 months of age, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Lactivism, by supporting extended breastfeeding, appears to be anti-capitalist. It aligns perfectly with a new type of feminism that questions the world of work; this highly masculinized world, defined by and for men, without leaving room for the time of life, the time of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering, the time of the vulnerable and dependent child. It is about questioning the Women's rights at work, the defense of which has obstructed the fight for mothers' rights to breastfeed and children's rights to be breastfed, thus pitting work against children's well-being.<sup>4</sup>

For countries in the Global South, breastfeeding activism can be used as an opportunity to break with a certain colonial mentality characterized by mimicry, which translates into the imitation, a form of «copy-paste,» of lifestyles from former colonial powers,<sup>16</sup> and which could be perceived as an expression of social advancement. In some cases, bottle-feeding can appear as a marker of social promotion, luxury, and «civilization.» In this regard, some authors argue that formula feeding, for certain women with a high socioeconomic status, signifies a certain modernity.<sup>17,18</sup> The promotion of breastfeeding could also become an opportunity to overcome this obstacle, which could be described as epistemological, that hinders the dissemination of endogenous knowledge and know-how regarding lactation. Active use of breastfeeding activism would allow older women who have breastfed, as custodians of such knowledge, to provide training sessions for young women in labor and young mothers in order to pass it on to them.

As mentioned above, breastfeeding offers many advantages on various levels, justifying its promotion and support through public health policies. However, its promotion paradoxically seems to sow the seeds of a new market. Thus, while opposing it, breastfeeding activism can be accused of being subservient to capitalism.

## Is activism a vector of capitalism?

With the widespread adoption of breastfeeding, a market for lactation accessories has developed, often invisible, generating substantial profits for actors within the capitalist system. This is one of the criticisms leveled at breastfeeding activism by Courtney Jung. According to this American political scientist, the benefits of breastfeeding have been idealized and overestimated, particularly regarding protection against certain diseases. On the contrary, this method of breastfeeding is at the root of increased commercialization, entailing enormous costs in terms of purchasing special clothing, specialized bras, and nursing pads, in addition to consulting lactation

consultants and experts. Added to this is the mass production of breast pumps, bottles, cleaning supplies, storage bags, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

From this perspective, in industrialized countries where these materials are accessible to the majority of breastfeeding women, it is true that the promotion of breastfeeding can be seen as contributing to the emergence of a new market. Capitalism not only profits from the sale of breastfeeding equipment, but could also exploit, as it already does with formula feeding, the health consequences for the child resulting from the improper storage of milk and/or bottles, as well as for the mother following the systematic use of breast pumps. This undoubtedly tempers the fervor and anti-capitalist pretensions of breastfeeding activism.

Nevertheless, in a context where capitalism is now omnipresent, it is utopian to envision the promotion of values, however human they may be, devoid of its influence. Indeed, in the age of globalization, capitalism has become a defining phenomenon of our time, one from which it is often difficult to remain. It has shaped a world characterized by the commodification of all kinds of things.<sup>19</sup> In this context, the pursuit of profit now pervades everything, even activities devoid of commercial aims. Ultimately, all our vital activity is subject to this abstract and omnipresent force, without it being its primary objective. This is the case with the exploitation of certain spiritual events by capitalism.

Moments of prayer and pilgrimage, for example, are exploited by this system for the sale of liturgical objects such as rosaries, prayer books, etc., even though this is not their primary purpose. However, one cannot objectively characterize these events as complicit with capitalism. This seems to be the case with breastfeeding, which is exploited by capitalism, unlike the promotion of artificial feeding, whose main goal is profit. Therefore, the difference between capitalist and non-capitalist actions could lie in their fundamental aims. There does not appear to be any equivalence between the media promotion of not breastfeeding, which is essentially commercial, and the fight for breastfeeding, of which the commercialization of accessories is a consequence.

Conversely, activism could morph into naturalist radicalism, making breastfeeding the exclusive method of feeding children. Such a militant version would make breastfeeding a moral duty for women, to the point of generating intolerance towards those who, for other reasons, do not want to or cannot breastfeed. The activist argument that breastfeeding is artificially exploited for professional and/or sexual gain can be countered by the existence of other factors justifying this choice. It is sometimes dictated by the baby's dissatisfaction with breast milk, the use of certain medications, or the mother's insufficient milk production.<sup>20,21</sup> Moreover, the requirement of exclusive breastfeeding for six months fails to take into account the socioeconomic disparities between women. It automatically excludes women for whom extending maternity leave would have a significant impact on income, but also low-income women for whom artificial breastfeeding is the only way to ensure the survival of their household (Bashimbe et al. 2022).<sup>22</sup> For this category of women, an attempt at exclusive breastfeeding would be suicidal for the rest of their family.

In this context, better promotion of breastfeeding should involve states not only improving legislation to support mothers by granting them paid leave of up to six months, but also increasing the empowerment of unemployed mothers. Preventing the risk of intolerance suggests viewing breastfeeding more as a right for women who wish to breastfeed, rather than as a duty imposed on all indiscriminately. This is best explained by the concept of «ubuntu

lactivism» developed by Saebela Mosito<sup>11</sup> It embodies the idea of Afro-centric activism in favor of breastfeeding and breastfeeding in public, rooted in the principles of communitarianism, humanity, reciprocity, and solidarity. More than an ideology, ubuntu lactivism is a call for solidarity following resistance against the eroticization of the breast in the service of male desire, for tolerance of women who do not want to breastfeed and for support of those who want to breastfeed, even in public.

## Conclusion

The commitment to promoting and defending breastfeeding as a right of women, and mothers in particular, defines breastfeeding activism as a revolutionary and subversive form of feminism. For women, the choice to breastfeed becomes a confirmation of their freedom and a challenge to male domination and the economic interests stemming from the promotion of bottle-feeding. This valorization of breastfeeding implies a naturalistic character that diverges from the philosophy of classical feminism. This is why, in addition to potentially returning women to the home, breastfeeding is, not without reason, denounced as a vehicle for a new type of maternal market. However, considering the aims of breastfeeding leads us to reconsider this apparent paradox and to situate the values defended by breastfeeding activism within the global context, currently characterized by the omnipresence of capitalism. On the other hand, the radicalism of this movement, which could pave the way for intolerance, should be tempered by the demand for breastfeeding as a right and not as an imposition.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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