

Gheyoh Ndzi, Ernestine (2024) I want universities to put breastfeeding on their gender pay gap agenda. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 8. pp. 1435-1436.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s41562-024-01925-5>

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Editor summary:

In the UK, unsupportive university policies force parents to make choices about how to feed their baby. Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi, an expert in employment law and advocate for parental rights, tells us why this needs to change.

I want universities to put breastfeeding on their gender pay gap agenda

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Unsupportive university policies force parents to make choices about how to feed their baby. Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi, an expert in employment law and advocate for parental rights in the UK, tells us why this needs to change.

It is shocking that mothers working in universities and even students that have babies struggle to get support to breastfeed or express breastmilk.

Here's an example, anonymized for privacy: a member of staff who had just returned to work after being on maternity leave for six months, explained to me how she was struggling to settle at work. She had never had a conversation with either HR or her line manager about breastfeeding, she could not find any policy/guide on breastfeeding, and she did not know anyone else that had breastfed upon return to work. She felt uncomfortable approaching her line manager who was a man because she was unsure how he would react. She tried expressing breastmilk in the toilet and could not stand the sight of it. She was in pain and so much discomfort each time her breast swelled up and sometimes started to leak. She would feel embarrassed as sometimes colleagues made jokes about her leaky breast. Unable to articulate her struggles, she asked her line manager for flexible working, which meant she would get to work at 10:00 and finish at 15:00 and to make up the rest of the hours working from home. Her line manager unfortunately declined her request. She then decided to stop breastfeeding and move on to formula feeding. While formula feeding worked well for her baby, the process of giving up breastfeeding when she was not ready made her reconsider her career as she said her mental health had been badly affected. She felt she could not be working where she was not supported. She is not the only person that I have spoken to that had such poor experience.

What I expect from universities is for them to have clear policies/guidance with designated facilities to support breastfeeding mothers. Not all parents choose or are able to breastfeed. But for those that do, breastfeeding can be important for health, employment, and the broader socio-economic landscape. For example, a UK study¹ demonstrated the potential economic benefits from improving breastfeeding rates, and there is also evidence² that breastfeeding can have a positive impact on the environment. Yet most UK universities – even those where this research is carried out - lack provisions for breastfeeding mothers among returning staff or students with infants.

I've found that some universities encourage staff to use first aid rooms or prayer rooms for breastfeeding/expressing breastmilk on campus. This is inappropriate. First aid rooms are usually associated with health emergencies, and prayer rooms are reserved for religious observance for a reason. Many universities lack explicit breastfeeding policies.

This negligence has consequences. According to recent data from [Advance HE](#), women in UK universities earn 14.2% less than men. Universities are taking actions to address this gender pay gap, such as reviewing their recruitment and promotion processes, and offering more flexible working arrangements. Yet, support for breastfeeding mothers is often not considered.

Let me explain why breastfeeding should be high on university gender pay gap agendas. The gender pay gap is often influenced by societal attitudes and expectations about the roles of men and women

in parenting and in the workforce. So, when a university refers mothers to first aid and prayer rooms, they are not making it easy for them to return to work. Consequently, staff are choosing to stay longer on maternity leave to breastfeed particularly if they can financially or make personal alternatives. First aid and prayer rooms are usually clearly signposted, but it's rare to see signage at universities for breastfeeding rooms. Perhaps one reason for this is that many universities restrict parents bringing their children to campus at all. But do these restrictions also apply when a staff or students need to bring their child on to campus for breastfeeding purposes? This is not always clear, and this ambiguity can add to the marginalisation experienced by mothers who wish to return to work.

In the UK, the introduction of shared parental leave policies in 2015 granted parents the option to share the mother's maternity leave. However, this necessitates the termination of the mother's maternity leave prior to the commencement of shared parental leave. This means that mothers who take advantage of shared parental leave face an earlier return to work. At some universities, shared parental leave does not come with the enhancements offered by maternity leave. For example, a university could be paying a mother full pay for the first 6 months of her maternity leave, but for shared parental leave, they would only offer the statutory rate which is currently about £688 per month. This discrepancy leaves mothers contemplating the financial implications of opting for shared parental leave, potentially forgoing it to retain the enhanced benefits of maternity leave. Furthermore, where there is no clear policy or support structure for breastfeeding mothers at work, the mother may not want to take shared parental leave because they want to stay longer on leave to breastfeed.

While most UK universities have designated Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) leads to ensure diversity and inclusivity in their practices and policies, breastfeeding issues often do not feature prominently on their EDI agendas. On the contrary, the lack of support for breastfeeding mothers signify that university practices are not inclusive and hence a barrier to gender equality. Despite achieving accolades such as the [Athena Swan awards](#), symbolising commitment to gender equality, universities continue to fall short in providing adequate support for breastfeeding mothers in the workplace.

Universities ought to exemplify the characteristics of a gender equality employer. To do this, they should:

- Provide designated breastfeeding rooms or areas on campus that are private, comfortable, and accessible to students, and staff who need to express milk or breastfeed.
- Allow for flexible scheduling and breaks for breastfeeding employees and students to express milk as needed.
- Include information on breastfeeding policies and resources in employee and student handbooks, as well as on the university website.
- Provide access to fridge for storing expressed milk, as well as access to clean water and facilities for cleaning and sterilizing breast pumps and other equipment.
- Encourage a culture of support for breastfeeding on campus, including promoting a positive and non-judgmental attitude towards breastfeeding in public spaces.
- Offer training for faculty and staff on how to support breastfeeding students and employees, including how to provide appropriate accommodations and how to address any issues or concerns that may arise.
- Enhance shared parental leave where maternity leave is enhanced.

These actions will give women in universities the freedom to make informed decision on how to feed their baby and for how long. And while supportive breastfeeding policies would help to correct workplace disparities, addressing the gender pay gap would likewise have benefits for breastfeeding

rates. Financial stability and job security can make it easier for women to breastfeed for longer. Women who are financially stable and have job security may be more likely to take the time they need to establish breastfeeding and may be less likely to face pressure to return to work before they are ready. The impact of these policies would not only support the current generation of women but would also benefit the health and wellbeing of the future generation of children who may themselves wish to attend university.

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Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests