

## Am I Black Enough to Be A Black Breastfeeding Advocate?

Are stereotypes among black women destroying efforts to increase our breastfeeding rates.

By Kimberly Seals Allers

There is a pervasive and damaging stereotype among African Americans about what a black breastfeeding mother looks like and therefore, by extension, who can legitimately represent our community in breastfeeding advocacy, and it undermines the important work of saving black women and ensuring healthy, thriving black babies.

Apparently, I do not fit the stereotype.

The problem is not necessarily that these stereotypes exist. Stereotypes exist in any culture, black, white, brown or blue. In fact, breastfeeding itself is complicated by layers upon layers of stereotypes.

For example, the prevailing stereotype among white mothers is that women like Angelina Jolie Gisele Bundchen and Gwen Stefani breastfeed. These women are affluent, successful, fabulous, stylish and very much to be envied and emulated. In the white world, there is a lifestyle cache to breastfeeding, and often a “bad mother” judgment if you don’t. This is a marked change of events considering that in the early 1900’s it was white, wealthy women who led the march to formula feeding. People of color followed. But when white elites backtracked and made breast-feeding hip and in style again, most African-Americans didn’t buy it.

In fact, in the African American community, the stereotype is that “Earth Mothers” breastfeed. Not the black elite. You know the Erykah Badu’s, the sisters with beautiful African print cloth head wraps, who wear their hair in its natural state, eat raw foods or a vegan diet and delivered their babies “naturally” at home or in birthing tubs. I adore these black women.

I, on the other hand, am rarely seen without 3 to 4” heels and a designer handbag. My hair is chemically relaxed and I’m not afraid to weave in a few tracks when I want to feel fabulous. I often prefer (organic) meat with my meat. I don’t wear Kente cloth or cowry shells. Oh and hold on to your uterus, because, even though I ended up having two C-sections, my original birth plan said one thing: Epidural, please. In bold letters.

Yet, I enthusiastically breastfed both of my children for 15- and 13-months respectively. I struggled, laughed, cried, sacrificed, ooh and aahhh-ed through those months even when my well-intentioned mother said, “Breastfeeding is for poor people,” and I had minimal social support and zero multi-generational support.

The nuanced challenges of breastfeeding while black persist regardless of your hair, wardrobe or lifestyle choices.

But lately, I sense the stereotypes among black women becoming a greater obstacle to my intent and purpose as I work to increase awareness of breastfeeding in our vulnerable communities and think about innovative ways to address the 40-year racial disparity in breastfeeding rates that transcends socio-economic lines. When I walk into a room of other breastfeeding supportive black women to learn from them and exchange ideas, I often sense more side-eye glances based on my background and appearance, than let’s roll-up-our-sleeves love.

It’s isolating to feel like an outsider in a room of brown faces.

Part of this stereotypical identity problem is likely that we are still stigmatized by what I call the “National Geographic effect.” That is, for years the only images we saw of black women breastfeeding were women from Africa—tribal women with elongated earrings and dangling breasts. And perhaps because that is our media-fed association with breastfeeding, even some African American women have subconsciously subscribed to that identity. Therefore, the women who dress in a more “Afrocentric” style with hair and accessories reminiscent of the Motherland are more accepted as “authentic” black breastfeeders.

The rest of us are inauthentic, Westernized imposters, I suppose.

This distortion is compounded by the lack of counterbalance. We have yet to have our heavy-hitter breastfeeding celebrity mom add the mainstream lifestyle cache to the black breastfeeding experience. Yes, we have Laila Ali and other celebrity moms publicly supporting breastfeeding. But we haven’t had a Hollywood mom (or enough of them) of the same stature as Angelina or Demi Moore come out and make breastfeeding a trendy, lifestyle choice thing to do. I have written about this gaping hole for years. Halle Berry could have been this person. I pray Beyonce will be this person.

Whatever the root, these stereotypes are catastrophic because they impair the urgent work that needs to be done. Consciously or subconsciously subscribing to the media’s typecasting of who breastfeeds and who doesn’t in the black community won’t help combat the fact that our black babies are still dying at 2.4 times the rate of white infants before their first birthday. A disparity the CDC estimates could shrink by 50% simply by increasing breastfeeding rates among African American moms.

Does my bling mean a thing, when respiratory infections, asthma and childhood obesity run rampant among our infants and children and studies show that exclusive breastfeeding can significantly reduce these risks? When our neighborhoods are virtual deserts when it comes to meaningful breastfeeding resources and support while they are simultaneously flooded with aggressive infant formula marketing?

Does the state of our hair really matter when black women are dying from childbirth related complications at four times the rate of white women? In New York City, the problem is particularly acute—black women are nearly eight times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than whites. In California, black women accounted for only 6 percent of births in the state, but they represented 22 percent of pregnancy-related deaths in 2002 and 2003. Breastfeeding has health benefits for the mother too.

Meanwhile, we fail to realize that dividing lines have been used to weaken black Americans and destroy our communities for years. Since the days of slavery, color has been used as a tool of separation and preferential treatment among African Americans. The residue of the “house” and “field” Negro divide has long remained with us. And when color hasn’t divided up, we have found class, ethnicity, education and even, bourgeois versus “ghetto” to separate us.

The strength of any culture or people who have ever achieved anything has been in their willingness to stick together, protect each other, and be their sister’s keeper.

And even in my (sample sale) Jimmy Choo’s, I am my sister’s keeper.

Just as the “authentic” black experience is just as varied as the skin tones in which we come, so is the black breastfeeding experience. We are all in this together. We need to dispel these myths and broaden our minds about what a black breastfeeding mom looks like or risk stifling much-needed voices and ideas, and excluding scores of black women. Risk creating a self-inflicted

wound to the critical mission of making sure every black infant has fair and equal access to the best first food—breast milk.

So please bring the kale crisps and I'll bring the crème brulee and together we will self-define and redefine black breastfeeding and transform the first food experience for every black mother and child. Who's with me?