

Vegan restaurant ban on cows' milk formula is another way to stigmatise mothers

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Bottle or breast isn't the only debate. Credit: Robert Przybysz/Shutterstock

A vegan restaurant in Spain has been both praised and criticised for banning the use of [infant formula derived from animals](#).

The first I knew about the ban was when it sparked considerable debate in the UK-based vegan Facebook groups, of which I, as a vegan, am a member. Some posters in the group suggested that the practice was OK – the restaurant in Spain (and indeed British restaurants too) should be allowed to ban any non-vegan food. Comparisons were made to steak being taken to the premises. Other people were more compassionate and understood why cows' [milk](#)-based infant formula may be the best option available to some parents.

Vegan or not, the banning of any infant formula from a public restaurant is inappropriate and harmful, not only to hungry babies but also to new mothers.

Vegan babies

Baby feeding is a minefield of a topic: search "vegan newborn diet" on Google and you'll receive more than 700,000 results, [promoting the idea](#) and [telling horror stories](#) from the first page.

The debate over giving young babies cows' milk or plant-based formula is not based on [the ethics of the dairy industry](#) alone. Babies can healthily be vegan from birth, and [breast milk is the ideal vegan milk](#). Where vegan mothers are unable to breastfeed or choose not to, the NHS [specifically recommends](#) cows-milk based formula – and not infant formula made from soya – as the best alternative to breast milk for babies aged under six months, unless one has been recommended by a health professional. Soya milk is not supported as a choice from birth because chemicals in the soya formula "could affect babies' reproductive development" and it is likely to damage babies' teeth more than breast or cows' milk.

But we're not here to debate whether it is right or wrong to raise a child as vegan, that is a choice to be made by a child's parents or guardians in

line with [guidance on how to do so healthily](#). The discussion here is over the fact that nothing should be done that stops a baby being fed when they need to be, in a healthy way that supports their growth and development.

Milk discrimination

The majority of formula available in the UK is [cows' milk-based](#), so, taking into account [NHS advice](#), we might expect that vegan mothers should all "just" breastfeed their babies, because breastfeeding is "natural" and "easy". But there are [many barriers](#) that make it [very difficult for some women](#) to breastfeed.

Once women feel that they have got the hang of breastfeeding, and are used to the general exhaustion of new parenthood, you might think they would be OK. But they aren't. The Equality Act provisions which relate to [infant feeding in public](#) have been poorly enforced. The legislation would make the Spanish restaurant ban illegal in the UK: the Equality Act 2010 treats "maternity" [as a protected characteristic](#) and women have protected status to breastfeed within business premises such as cafes, restaurants and shops. Despite this, [breastfeeding discrimination still happens](#).

While it is not completely clear if the legal rules extend to feeding babies with infant formula, the fact that the majority of women in the UK are not able to breastfeed [for as long as they would like to](#), means that it would likely be discriminatory to ban formula feeding mothers from a business.

But these kinds of bans cut deeper than just stopping parents being able to feed their babies in specific places. A large, [nationally representative survey](#) found that 11% of breastfeeding women have been stopped from breastfeeding in public and 43% felt uncomfortable breastfeeding in

public.

My own recent research has shown that mothers of young babies, and pregnant women, are asked intrusive questions about their feeding methods. These mums were frequently questioned over whether they are or will be breast or formula feeding – and unwelcome and often unhelpful advice is sent their way. Well-meaning it may be, but the comments became a source of anxiety and caused self-doubt.

Other research has supported our finding that, whichever way mothers feed their babies, they are often stigmatised and made to feel guilty. This leads to reduced satisfaction with infant feeding, which is bad for mothers well-being.

It may be easy to understand why a vegan restaurant would not want animal products on the premises, but this rule does more than simply protect a strict moral code. Bans such as this in countries so close to the UK show that however mothers choose to feed their babies they cannot escape scrutiny and stigma.

To refuse to allow cows' milk [infant formula](#) when it is the best option for formula-fed [babies](#) damages both parent and child health. Society should support [mothers](#), regardless of infant feeding method, and stop making them feel like their choices are bad.

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