

Some Bus Drivers Ban Breastfeeding, Protesters Allege MTA officials apologize for the actions of a few but say there is no policy against nursing.

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A group of protesters accused Metropolitan Transportation Authority drivers of breaking a state law that allows women to breastfeed in public and picketed Tuesday outside its downtown Los Angeles headquarters.

MTA officials apologized for drivers who have asked women to stop breastfeeding, but said they have no policy that bans breastfeeding on buses or trains.

About 50 women nursed infants and wore shirts saying "Got breast milk?"

to call attention to the issue. Among them was Claudia Flores, who said she was asked twice by different drivers on Route 55 to stop nursing her daughter.

Luz Chacon, a health education coordinator for Maternal and Child Health Access, which organized the protest, said 15 other women have complained to her in the last couple of years that bus or rail passengers have asked them to stop breastfeeding.

"We think there are more instances of drivers doing this, but women aren't necessarily coming forward," she said.

Flores, who spoke through a Spanish translator, said she was first asked to stop in December, when she was on Route 55 from downtown Los Angeles.

The driver saw Flores, 32, in her in the rearview mirror and asked her to stop breastfeeding.

Flores said she showed the driver a card citing a 1997 state law that allows women to breastfeed in public. She said the bus driver laughed and tossed the card on the dashboard.

"I felt bad," she said. "I felt hurt, embarrassed and humiliated. But I knew I had the right. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to report this.' "

Flores brought her concerns to Maternal and Child Health Access, a nonprofit that helps low-income women and their families get health and social services. The organization contacted the MTA, and the MTA told the organization it would notify all bus drivers of the law.

But two weeks ago, another bus driver on the same route asked Flores to stop breastfeeding and accused her of public indecency, she said.

"I covered myself. You couldn't see flesh," Flores said.

Flores, who relies on buses for transportation, said she can't help nursing her 19-month-old daughter, Betsy, while she's on the bus. "If she's hungry, I am going to feed her."

Chacon, Flores and the other protesters called on the MTA to better educate drivers and put placards about the state law on buses and trains so other passengers do not create a hostile environment.

"It's unfortunate the public thinks it's indecency," Chacon said. "They relate the breast to sexuality, but in reality we're mammals and this is what we do."

MTA officials said they have received only two complaints about drivers banning breastfeeding, both from Flores.

"We're admitting we were wrong," said MTA spokesman Marc Littman. "But you've got to keep this in perspective: We've got 360 million boarding passengers on the bus and we have rail on top of it."

The agency is sending out a bulletin to 500 bus and train drivers with their Friday paychecks and plans to beef up training.

Carolyn Flowers, executive officer for operations, said many drivers already know the law, including one who she said told a complaining customer last week that women were allowed to breastfeed on buses.