

#FREETHENIPPLE

A Manifesto for Body Equality

Tracing the Movement from Viral Hashtag to
Human Right

Compiled & Researched
2026

LANDRY INDUSTRIES PRESS

2026

CONTENTS

PART I: ORIGINS — THE ANATOMY OF A MOVEMENT

- 1 The Nipple as Battleground
- 2 Lina Esco and the Birth of a Hashtag (2012–2014)
- 3 Going Global — Protests, Solidarity, and Backlash

PART II: THE DIGITAL WAR — CENSORSHIP, ALGORITHMS, AND THE ERASURE OF ART

- 4 The Invisible Hashtag
- 5 A Timeline of Digital Censorship
- 6 The 2026 Resurgence — Don't Delete Art × Free the Nipple
- 7 The Algorithmic Gaze

PART III: THE LEGAL LANDSCAPE — COURTS, CONSTITUTIONS, AND THE RIGHT TO BARE

- 8 Topfreedom in the Courts
- 9 Constitutional Arguments
- 10 The Trans Dimension — Beyond the Binary

PART IV: CULTURE AND REPRESENTATION — BREASTS IN ART, HISTORY, AND THE MALE GAZE

- 11 30,000 Years of the Nude
- 12 The Male Gaze, Reprogrammed
- 13 Breastfeeding, Bodies, and Bio-Politics

PART V: INTERSECTIONALITY — WHOSE NIPPLE? WHOSE FREEDOM?

- 14 Race, Size, and the Policed Body
- 15 Global Perspectives
- 16 The Commercialization of Resistance

PART VI: THE FUTURE — BEYOND THE NIPPLE

- 17 Platform Accountability
- 18 The Nipple as Nucleus
- 19 A New Body Politics
- 20 The Manifesto

PART I

ORIGINS

The Anatomy of a Movement

THE NIPPLE AS BATTLEGROUND

Why the nipple? Of all the body parts available for political reclamation, why this small, circular tissue that biology designed to nourish the young? The answer lies not in the body itself, but in what centuries of patriarchal culture have projected onto it: shame, obscenity, prohibition, and power.

The nipple is perhaps the smallest body part with the largest political footprint. It is simultaneously reviled as obscene and celebrated as erotic, criminalized on female bodies yet naturalized on male ones, demanded as nourishment by infants yet banned from public performance by mothers. It occupies the paradoxical space where biology, law, desire, commerce, and morality collide—and in that collision lies an entire architecture of gendered power.

This is why Lina Esco, American actress and director, chose the nipple as her Trojan horse for a much larger conversation about equality, censorship, and bodily autonomy. "The nipple is the nucleus where it all begins," Esco would later say, and in that simple declaration lies the entire theoretical apparatus of the movement that would bear her name.

"The nipple is not the problem. The problem is a society that has sexualized one body and criminalized another."

THE GENDERED DOUBLE STANDARD

The central outrage of #FreeTheNipple is simple: male nipples are treated as neutral, biological, ordinary. They appear in magazines, on billboards, in films, on social media without restriction. A man can walk down the street shirtless with impunity in almost every jurisdiction in the United States and Europe. This is so normalized that we barely register it as the consequence of a deliberate legal and cultural choice.

Female nipples, by contrast, are treated as inherently obscene. They are the ultimate prohibition—the body part that, more than genitalia, more than buttocks, more than any other erogenous zone, is treated as intrinsically indecent. To expose a female nipple is to commit an act of transgression, an offense against public decency, a violation of law in most jurisdictions.

This double standard is not biological. It is not natural. It is not neutral. It is the product of centuries of ideological labor, enshrined in law, encoded into social norms, reproduced through institutions, and—in the 21st century—automated into the code of technology platforms.

The biology is identical. The mammary gland produces milk. The nipple is the outlet through which that milk travels. Whether that gland is attached to a male body or a female body, whether it is capable of lactation or not, the tissue is the same. Yet the law, society, and technology treat these identical tissues as fundamentally different.

THE NIPPLE AS TROJAN HORSE

This is where the genius of #FreeTheNipple becomes apparent. By insisting on the equality of nipples—the radical idea that a female nipple is not inherently more obscene than a male one—the movement opens a door to a vast space of political conversation. It becomes a Trojan horse for debates about:

- **Gender Equality:** If two identical body parts are treated differently based solely on the gender of the person they're attached to, what does that say about the law's commitment to equal protection?

- **Bodily Autonomy:** Who has the right to regulate what people do with their own bodies? Who decides what is obscene, decorous, or appropriate?
- **Censorship:** How do platforms police content? On what grounds? With what accountability? And how do algorithmic systems replicate and amplify gendered bias?
- **Motherhood and Reproduction:** If breastfeeding nipples are hidden, shame-managed, and constantly policed, what does that say about how we value the work of reproduction and nourishment?
- **Art and Expression:** Can the human body be depicted in art, photography, and self-representation without being treated as pornographic?
- **Sexual Autonomy:** Who owns the narrative about what is sexual? Who gets to define the meaning of nakedness?

The nipple, in other words, is a metonym for the entire landscape of gender justice. To fight for the nipple is to fight for bodily autonomy, reproductive freedom, artistic expression, racial justice, trans rights, and freedom from surveillance and control.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this book, we use the terms "female nipple," "male nipple," and "female-presenting nipple" as they appear in platform policy and legal discourse. We recognize these terms are imperfect—they conflate biological sex with gender and exclude non-binary bodies. In Part III and Part V, we explore these limitations in depth and discuss how #FreeTheNipple is expanding to encompass trans and non-binary bodies whose nipples have been rendered invisible or illegible by the binary logic of censorship policies.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS: FROM VICTORIAN MODESTY TO THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

The regulation of the female nipple is not new. It is the product of a long history of laws, religious doctrines, and cultural norms designed to control female bodies and maintain patriarchal social order.

In Victorian England, the nipple was so dangerous that even clothing had to hide it from view. Dresses were constructed to flatten the breast. Corsets were designed to obscure the body's contours. The very idea that a nipple might protrude against fabric, that its shape might be visible, was treated as scandalous. The word "breast" was considered too explicit; "bosom" was the acceptable term.

This was not about protecting innocence or preventing sexual arousal. It was about enforcing a rigid social hierarchy in which women's bodies were property—the property of fathers, then husbands, then states. Making women's bodies invisible, making them ashamed of their embodiment, was a tool of control.

The 20th century brought waves of liberation movements. Women won the right to vote, to work, to obtain credit in their own names. Bathing suits became briefer. Bras were burned (and reinvented). The sexual revolution promised a loosening of restrictive sexual norms.

And yet the nipple remained forbidden. Even as society became more permissive about sexuality, about nakedness, about the display of flesh, the female nipple remained the last taboo. It was as if culture could tolerate sexual liberation—could tolerate the consumption of female bodies by the male gaze—but could not tolerate female agency, female control over the meaning of female bodies, female refusal to be objects of desire.

This is the historical moment in which #FreeTheNipple emerges: a moment when society has largely accepted the naked female body as an object for consumption, but has not accepted the naked female body as an agent of its own meaning-making.

THE LEGAL ARCHITECTURE OF OBSCENITY

In the United States, the obscenity doctrine is built on an entirely subjective standard. Drawing from *Miller v. California* (1973), the Supreme Court defined obscenity as material that, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest in sex; depicts sexual conduct in a patently offensive way; and lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

This is where the nipple becomes truly dangerous—not because of anything inherent to the nipple itself, but because obscenity is defined by subjective reaction. What appeals to one person's "prurient interest" may not appeal to another's. What one person finds "patently offensive" may seem ordinary to another.

The nipple, therefore, becomes a test case for the limits of this obscenity framework. A female nipple on a non-sexual body (a person sunbathing, a mother breastfeeding, a political protester) cannot be said to appeal to prurient interest in sex, yet it is routinely treated as obscene by law enforcement and social institutions. The nipple exposes the incoherence at the heart of obscenity law: it reveals that what the law actually prohibits is not obscenity but female bodily autonomy.

LINA ESCO AND THE BIRTH OF A HASHTAG (2012–2014)

Li na Esco did not set out to start a movement. What she did was make a film, and what happened next revealed how desperate society had become to maintain control over female bodies, even in the age of digital liberation.

Esco, a California-born actress known for her work in television and film, decided in 2012 to direct a documentary-style film titled *Free the Nipple*. The film was a provocative exploration of censorship, the sexualization of the female body, and the arbitrary double standard that criminalizes female toplessness. It featured women in New York engaging in acts of political nudity, documenting their arrests and the legal battles that followed.

The film itself was modest in scope. It was screened at film festivals. It generated discussion in independent cinema circles. But when Facebook and other social media platforms began removing promotional clips for the film—when the platforms could not tolerate even the image of a female nipple in a documentary context—something shifted.

2012

Lina Esco begins development of *Free the Nipple* documentary, inspired by the 1990 New York legalization of female toplessness.

2012–2013

Film production includes documentation of toplessness activism and arrests in New York City. Esco and participants are arrested multiple times.

2013

Film completed and begins festival circuit. Generates attention at independent film festivals.

2014

Facebook removes promotional images and teaser clips for the film. Esco and allies organize social media campaign using #FreeTheNipple hashtag to fight platform censorship.

2014

Hashtag goes viral. Celebrity amplification begins. Movement reaches international attention.

WHY NEW YORK? THE 1990 PRECEDENT

Esco's choice to focus on New York was deliberate and informed by legal precedent. In 1990, New York became the first state to explicitly legalize female toplessness through case law. A woman arrested for toplessness challenged the state statute, arguing that it violated equal protection by criminalizing female but not male toplessness. The court agreed. Female breasts, the court reasoned, are not inherently sexual. Male chests are not inherently non-sexual. To criminalize one and not the other on the basis of gender violated equal protection principles.

This was radical. This was the legal foundation on which Esco would later build her movement.

Yet decades after this ruling, the law remained largely unenforced. Women who exposed their breasts were still arrested. Police continued to treat female toplessness as a public offense. The letter of the law had changed; the reality of enforcement had not. This is the paradox that #FreeTheNipple would make visible: legal rights without the social power to enforce them.

In 2005, a woman arrested for going topless in New York received \$29,000 in damages in a civil suit against the city—a settlement that finally brought enforcement into line with the law. But still, this victory was limited to one woman, one settlement, one jurisdiction. The broader culture remained hostile to female toplessness.

THE VIRAL MOMENT: FACEBOOK AS CENSOR

What transformed Esco's film into a movement was not the content of the film itself, but the action of Facebook. When the platform removed promotional images and teaser clips—when it deemed the documentary about censorship too censorious to be promoted—it revealed the hidden machinery of digital control.

Esco and her allies responded by creating the hashtag #FreeTheNipple. The irony was devastating: a hashtag about fighting censorship became the vehicle for precisely that fight. Users began posting images of famous female nipples from art history, from news photographs, from personal photography, all tagged with #FreeTheNipple. The movement became a direct challenge to the platform's authority to define what was acceptable to display, to discuss, to see.

This is where the genius of digital activism reveals itself. On Instagram, #FreeTheNipple would eventually become the platform's first "hidden" hashtag—a designation that meant the hashtag itself would not appear in search results, and posts tagged with it would not appear in feeds unless users specifically sought them out. In other words, the platform took the extreme step of making the hashtag invisible, attempting to quarantine the speech it sought to suppress.

But this suppression only amplified the message. By making #FreeTheNipple invisible, Instagram made visible the reality of algorithmic censorship. It was no longer possible to pretend that platform policies were neutral, objective standards of community safety. The platform was actively, deliberately, systematically hiding speech about bodily autonomy and gender equality.

CELEBRITY AMPLIFICATION AND THE MAINSTREAMING OF DISSENT

The moment that transformed #FreeTheNipple from a marginal activist project to a genuinely mainstream phenomenon came through celebrity participation. In 2014, several celebrities began engaging with the hashtag and the movement, lending their platforms and their cultural capital to the cause.

Miley Cyrus, in the midst of her own career-defining provocations around sexuality and bodily autonomy, expressed support for the movement. Scout Willis, daughter of Bruce Willis and Demi Moore, participated in toplessness activism in New York and spoke publicly about why she believed in the movement's goals. Rihanna, whose entire career has been marked by a willingness to challenge sexual norms and aesthetic conventions, lent her voice to the conversation.

Lena Dunham, whose television series *Girls* had already sparked significant conversation about female nudity and its representation on screen, supported the movement. Chelsea Handler, a comedian known for her willingness to discuss taboo subjects, engaged publicly with #FreeTheNipple. Chrissy Teigen, a model and social media personality with massive following, voiced support for the basic premise: that female bodies should not be criminalized or censored in ways that male bodies were not.

This celebrity amplification was crucial. It was not enough for marginalized activists to call for change; the movement needed mainstream visibility, and mainstream visibility required

celebrity participation. This is a sobering commentary on the structure of attention in contemporary media, but it is the reality we inhabit.

"The moment celebrities engaged with #FreeTheNipple, the conversation shifted from the margins to the mainstream. But it also transformed the movement into something different—more palatable, less radical, more absorbed into celebrity culture and away from structural change."

The celebrity participation, while crucial for visibility, also domesticated the movement. It became easier to discuss #FreeTheNipple in mainstream media once it had celebrity endorsement. But it also became easier to reduce it to a superficial stance, a fashionable cause célèbre, rather than a serious challenge to the legal and algorithmic structures that control female bodies.

THE MOVEMENT TAKES SHAPE

By late 2014, #FreeTheNipple had transformed from a campaign to fight Facebook censorship into something much larger: a movement for bodily autonomy, gender equality, and freedom of expression. Local activist groups began forming. Planned protests were organized. The conversation expanded beyond social media into mainstream journalism, academic discourse, and legal advocacy.

What Esco had created was not just a hashtag or a meme, but a framework—a way of understanding the regulation of female bodies as a problem of justice, not just taste or morality. The nipple became legible as a political issue, and once it became legible as a political issue, it was possible to organize around it, to make demands, to imagine different futures.

This is the power of movements: they create new ways of seeing. They transform what was previously naturalized—"this is just how things are"—into something that is recognized as a choice, a choice that can be contested and changed.

GOING GLOBAL — PROTESTS, SOLIDARITY, AND BACKLASH

Movements are not born in isolation. They travel. They evolve. They find new contexts, new participants, new meanings as they move across borders and cultures. This is what happened to #FreeTheNipple as it became a genuinely global phenomenon.

ICELAND 2015: DIGITAL HARASSMENT AND PARLIAMENTARY SOLIDARITY

In 2015, the campaign gained attention in Iceland when a teenage activist named Adda Smaradottir began advocating for topfreedom rights. Smaradottir, like Esco, understood that the regulation of female toplessness was fundamentally a question of gender equality. She began organizing and speaking publicly about the issue.

What followed was predictable and depressing: Smaradottir faced intense online harassment. Critics questioned her age, her motives, her sexuality, her mental health. The abuse was coordinated and systematic—a classic pattern of digital misogyny designed to silence a young woman who dared to speak about female bodily autonomy.

But in Iceland, something unexpected happened. Björt Ólafsdóttir, an Icelandic Member of Parliament, posted a topless photograph of herself in solidarity with Smaradottir and the movement. This was not a subtle gesture. It was direct, political action. A sitting member of parliament used her own body as a statement about gender equality and the absurdity of criminalizing female toplessness.

The photograph went viral. It generated discussion not just in Iceland but internationally. It demonstrated that #FreeTheNipple was not just a movement of young radicals or celebrities seeking attention, but something with genuine traction among elected officials and women in positions of institutional power.

TAIPEI 2015: FACEBOOK CENSORSHIP GOES INTERNATIONAL

In Taiwan, #FreeTheNipple took on particular significance in a society with complex attitudes toward female sexuality and modesty. In Taipei, five women organized a private toplessness protest in 2015. The action was peaceful, political, symbolic. They were not seeking to provoke or to shock; they were making an argument about bodily autonomy and gender equality.

Yet when the images of the protest were posted to Facebook, the platform removed them. The censorship was immediate, automatic, algorithmic. Facebook had determined that female nipples violated its "community guidelines" and suppressed the speech. The women were not arrested by the state; they were censored by a corporation.

This became a crucial moment in the development of #FreeTheNipple: the recognition that the real power to suppress speech had shifted from governments to technology platforms. A woman could engage in perfectly legal political protest and still have that speech removed, still have her image censored, still have her ability to communicate suppressed—not by judicial process, not by due process, but by the algorithmic decision of a technology corporation.

BRIGHTON, ENGLAND: ANNUAL MARCHES AND THE BUILDING OF COMMUNITY

In Brighton, England, #FreeTheNipple took on the form of annual marches beginning in 2016. These were organized protests, timed events, deliberate spectacles designed to make

female toplessness visible and normal in the urban landscape.

The Brighton marches were significant for several reasons. First, they transformed #FreeTheNipple from a digital phenomenon into a lived, embodied, street-based action. The movement became not just something you could see online, but something you could participate in, something you could feel in your body as you marched through public space claiming the right to bare your chest.

Second, the marches generated a sustained organizational infrastructure. The "Free the Nipple Brighton" collective was formed to coordinate these annual events, to provide support to participants, to engage with local government and law enforcement. This was not just spontaneous protest; it was movement-building.

Third, the marches demonstrated that there was genuine sustained support for the movement's basic premise. Year after year, people showed up. They were willing to expose themselves, literally, to risk arrest, to endure mockery and ridicule, because they believed in the principle of bodily autonomy and gender equality.

BERNIE SANDERS RALLIES 2016: FEDERAL LITIGATION AND THE EXPANSION OF LEGAL STRATEGY

The Bernie Sanders presidential campaign rallies of 2016 became sites of #FreeTheNipple action. At multiple Sanders rallies, activists organized topless protests, using the visibility of the campaign and the media presence to amplify their message about gender equality and bodily autonomy.

Two of these protesters, Anni Ma and Tiernan Hebron, were arrested by the Los Angeles Police Department after participating in a topless protest at a Sanders rally. But unlike many of the arrests that had preceded this moment, Ma and Hebron responded by filing a federal lawsuit against the LAPD. They argued that their arrest violated their constitutional rights to equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment.

This was a significant escalation in legal strategy. #FreeTheNipple was no longer just a cultural movement or a social media campaign; it was becoming a constitutional litigation strategy. The lawsuit would eventually contribute to broader legal arguments about the unconstitutionality of gender-based dress codes and the violation of equal protection when the state criminalizes female toplessness while permitting male toplessness.

BERLIN 2026: THE MOVEMENT CONTINUES

As we approach the second half of 2026, #FreeTheNipple has achieved a kind of institutional permanence. In July 2026, a Free the Nipple bike ride protest took place at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany. The protest drew participants from across Europe and beyond, demonstrating that the movement has become a genuinely transnational phenomenon.

The fact that #FreeTheNipple protests are still occurring, still drawing crowds, still attracting media attention, more than a decade after Esco's original film, speaks to something important: this is not a passing fad or a temporary viral moment. It is a sustained movement rooted in genuine grievances about bodily autonomy, gender equality, and the right to self-representation.

"A movement survives when it addresses a real problem. Twelve years after Lina Esco's original film, thousands of people around the world still believe that female bodies deserve the same right to bare themselves without legal consequence as male bodies do. That persistent belief is the movement."

BACKLASH AND THE FORCES OF RESISTANCE

It is important to note that #FreeTheNipple has not been met with uniform support. The movement has generated significant backlash from religious conservatives, from those invested in maintaining traditional gender norms, from people who genuinely believe that female toplessness represents a threat to social order and moral decency.

This backlash has been particularly intense in conservative jurisdictions and religious communities. It has manifested in legal challenges, in attempts to codify prohibition of female toplessness into law, in online harassment campaigns against activists, and in arguments that the movement represents a kind of cultural degeneracy or the abandonment of feminine modesty.

But the backlash itself is telling. It reveals the stakes of the issue. No one would generate this much opposition to something they did not feel threatened by. The fact that so many people have devoted significant energy to opposing #FreeTheNipple is evidence that the movement has successfully made the political character of the regulation of female bodies visible.

In a world where female toplessness truly had no political significance, where it was treated as simply a matter of personal preference or decorum, there would be no need for organized backlash. The backlash exists because people understand—even if they do not consciously articulate this understanding—that female toplessness represents a threat to patriarchal control of female bodies and female representation.

PART II

THE DIGITAL WAR

Censorship, Algorithms, and the Erasure of Art

THE INVISIBLE HASHTAG

If you type #FreeTheNipple into the Instagram search bar, you will encounter a message: "This Hashtag Is Hidden." Below that, Instagram offers you the choice to "See Posts" or "Learn More," but the default state is invisibility. The hashtag is there, but it is hidden. Posts tagged with it will not appear in your feed. The search will not suggest it. To find the hashtag, you must deliberately, consciously, seek it out.

This is a peculiar form of censorship. Instagram has not prohibited #FreeTheNipple outright. It still exists. You can still post it. But it has been rendered invisible. It has been quarantined. It has been relegated to a kind of digital Siberia where it continues to exist but does not circulate, does not reach audiences, does not participate in the normal flow of social media discourse.

This is what we might call the new face of digital censorship: not removal, but invisibility; not prohibition, but de-amplification; not the deletion of speech, but the suppression of its reach. It is censorship carried out not through heavy-handed deletion, but through algorithmic suppression—the subtle manipulation of visibility and reach that makes speech technically legal but practically impossible to disseminate.

THE "HIDDEN HASHTAG" DESIGNATION

Instagram's decision to hide the #FreeTheNipple hashtag was ostensibly based on what the platform calls its "community guidelines." These guidelines claim to prohibit content that is sexually explicit, that sexualizes bodies, that violates standards of public decency. The argument goes: #FreeTheNipple, as a hashtag associated with female toplessness, violates these guidelines and therefore warrants suppression.

But this explanation obscures more than it reveals. There is nothing inherently sexually explicit about the hashtag #FreeTheNipple. The hashtag is about a political movement. It is about bodily autonomy and gender equality. Many posts tagged with #FreeTheNipple are not sexually explicit at all; they are political arguments, news stories, artistic images, discussions of legal and constitutional issues.

Moreover, the "hidden hashtag" designation is not applied uniformly. Instagram has not hidden hashtags associated with male bodies, even when those hashtags are used to disseminate sexually explicit content. The designation is applied disproportionately to hashtags associated with female bodies and female-centered activism.

This reveals what is really happening: the platform is not neutrally enforcing community guidelines. It is making a political choice. It has decided that content associated with #FreeTheNipple is too dangerous to allow to circulate freely, and it has used its technical power to suppress that circulation.

THE WORKAROUND CULTURE: ANNUAL HASHTAGS AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF SPEECH

In response to the hiding of #FreeTheNipple, activists and users developed a workaround. They began tagging posts with variant hashtags: #FreeTheNipple2021, #FreeTheNipple2022, #FreeTheNipple2023, and so on. Each year, users would switch to the new year-dated hashtag, creating an endless parade of new hashtags designed to circumvent Instagram's suppression.

This workaround reveals something crucial about the nature of censorship in the age of algorithms: it is an endless arms race. As soon as platforms identify and suppress one hashtag, activists create new ones. The platform does not suppress the new ones immediately, because the algorithmic systems that identify problematic content are not real-time and universal. There is a lag, a gap, a space in which new speech can circulate before it is suppressed.

But this workaround also imposes a cost on the movement. By fragmenting the hashtag across years, the movement loses the cumulative power of a unified tag. Posts are scattered across multiple hashtags, making it harder for new people to discover the movement, harder to build collective identity, harder to create the sense of a unified global phenomenon. The movement becomes fragmented, atomized, less visible as a coherent whole.

This is the subtle power of algorithmic suppression: it does not kill speech, but it transforms the conditions under which speech can circulate. It makes speech more difficult, more fragmented, more costly to produce and distribute. It creates a kind of friction that slows down the movement of ideas while maintaining the appearance of neutrality.

ALGORITHMIC PATRIARCHY AND THE ENFORCEMENT OF GENDER NORMS AT SCALE

What is happening with #FreeTheNipple on Instagram is part of a broader phenomenon: what we might call "algorithmic patriarchy." This is the way that algorithmic systems—designed by humans, trained on data that reflects historical patterns of discrimination, guided by corporate policies that prioritize profit over justice—systematically enforce gendered norms and suppress gender-equality movements.

The suppression of #FreeTheNipple is not an accident or an oversight. It is a deliberate choice, embedded in policy, encoded into algorithms, carried out at scale by automated systems. Every time someone tries to search for #FreeTheNipple on Instagram, the algorithm suppresses the hashtag. Every time a user posts with the hashtag, the algorithm downranks that post in feeds, making it less visible to other users. Every time a person tries to follow the hashtag, the platform makes it difficult.

This is not unique to #FreeTheNipple. Across platforms, across hashtags, we see this pattern: movements for gender equality, for bodily autonomy, for the visibility of female and marginalized bodies are suppressed, downranked, hidden, made invisible by algorithmic

systems that claim to enforce neutral "community standards" but in fact enforce patriarchal norms.

The result is a kind of systematic erasure carried out not by government censors or overt institutional discrimination, but by the algorithm—the mathematical system that determines what billions of people see every day. The algorithm has become the primary mechanism through which contemporary patriarchy enforces itself.

A TIMELINE OF DIGITAL CENSORSHIP (2008–2026)

The suppression of #FreeTheNipple is not an isolated incident. It is part of a long history of platform censorship directed at female bodies, breasts, nipples, and motherhood. To understand the current moment, we must trace this history—a history written in the content moderation decisions of technology platforms, in the complaints of users whose speech has been suppressed, in the activism of those who have fought back against this censorship.

2008–2014: THE FACEBOOK BREASTFEEDING WARS

In 2008, Facebook began removing photographs of women breastfeeding. The policy was explicit: any image that showed a breast in the act of nursing was considered a violation of the platform's community standards and was subject to deletion. Nipples, in other words, were obscene—but only female nipples, and only in certain contexts, and particularly when those nipples were engaged in the act of nourishing a child.

This sparked immediate and sustained resistance. Women began uploading breastfeeding images in coordinated campaigns. Activists organized "nurse-ins" in which they would go to Facebook headquarters and breastfeed in public. The campaign was explicitly designed to highlight the hypocrisy and gender bias of Facebook's policies.

Years of petitions and activism followed. Slowly, Facebook began to shift its policies. The company eventually recognized that breastfeeding images could be posted without violating community standards, but only within strict limitations. Images had to be clearly of a breastfeeding act, not of breasts more generally. The rationale was that breastfeeding was a

"natural" function and therefore not obscene, whereas images of breasts presented as objects of attraction or sexual interest were prohibited.

This distinction—between "functional" and "sexual" breast images—would become a recurring theme in platform policy. It created the illusion that Facebook was simply enforcing reasonable standards when in fact it was enforcing a deeply gendered distinction that had no male equivalent. Men's chests were never required to be "functional" in order to be displayed; they could simply exist, naturally and without justification.

The 2008–2014 period of the breastfeeding wars was crucial because it established that women and mothers would fight for their right to be visible on social media, and it established that platforms could be forced to change their policies through sustained activism. It also established a template: that platforms would make minor concessions, establish carve-outs for particular contexts, while maintaining the fundamental principle that female breasts were fundamentally more problematic than male chests.

2010: YOUTUBE AND THE CENSORSHIP OF EXPERIMENTAL ART

In 2010, YouTube removed two experimental films by artist Amy Greenfield: *Element* and *Tides*. Both films featured images of the female body and were considered artistic works, created by an acclaimed experimental filmmaker. Yet YouTube deemed them to violate its community standards and took them down.

This sparked a broader conversation about the censorship of art. The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) intervened, arguing that artistic speech deserved protection even when it featured nudity. After intervention from these organizations, YouTube restored Greenfield's films, setting an important precedent that artistic nudity should receive some protection on digital platforms.

But the precedent was limited. YouTube did not change its fundamental policy; it simply recognized that art, in some contexts, might deserve an exception. The underlying principle—that nudity is problematic and requires justification—remained in place. Artists had to prove that their work was “art” in order to avoid censorship. The burden was on them to justify their speech. The default remained suppression.

2011–2019: THE L'ORIGINE DU MONDE CASE AND THE SIX-YEAR LEGAL BATTLE

The most significant and sustained battle over platform censorship during this period came through the case of Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (The Origin of the World), a famous 19th-century painting that explicitly depicts female genitalia. The painting is a masterpiece of art history, held in prestigious museums, celebrated in academic discourse. Yet when the image of this painting was posted to Facebook, the platform removed it.

Frédéric Durand-Baïssas, a French teacher, posted the Courbet image as part of an educational discussion of art history. Facebook removed the image and suspended his account. Durand-Baïssas responded by suing Facebook for wrongful suppression of his speech.

The case dragged on for six years. In 2011, Facebook suspended Durand-Baïssas's account. The case was eventually heard by a Paris court, which ruled that Facebook had wrongfully shut down the account. The court recognized that artistic and educational speech about famous artworks deserved protection, even when those artworks featured nude bodies or explicit imagery. It was a significant victory for free speech and artistic freedom.

But the victory was limited. Facebook, while complying with the court order and restoring the account, continued to prohibit most photographic nudity. The company carved out an exception for famous artworks—images of Courbet, Michelangelo, and other canonical artists could be shared—but the underlying policy remained: photographic nudity of female bodies was presumptively obscene and subject to removal.

The L'Origine du Monde case revealed something crucial: that Facebook was willing to go to court, willing to fight its users and civil society organizations, in order to maintain control over the visibility of female bodies. The platform did not think its breastfeeding policy or its nudity policy was wrong; it thought these policies were justified. It took sustained legal action and a court judgment to force even minimal concessions.

2015: COURTNEY DEMONE'S #DOIHAVEBOOBSNOW AND THE COLLAPSE OF BINARY LOGIC

In 2015, Canadian trans activist Courtney Demone conducted a remarkable piece of performance activism. As Demone underwent hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in her transition, she documented the changes to her body on social media. She posted photographs before and after, creating a visual record of embodied transformation.

What Demone discovered was that platform moderation policies were not based on consistent rules, but on assumptions about gender. When she posted images of her body as a pre-transition person, the images were allowed. As her appearance became more traditionally feminine, as her body developed breasts and presented as female, the same platform began flagging and removing the images. The algorithm was responding not to any change in the content of the images—she was simply showing her own body—but to the perceived gender of the person in the images.

Demone's work, which she called #DoIHaveBoobsNow, was brilliant precisely because it revealed the incoherence and discriminatory effects of binary-based moderation. The algorithm could not process a body that moved across gender categories. It could not understand that a person might have been one gender and then become another. It could not comprehend that the same body, the same breasts, the same chest could move from being "acceptable" to being "obscene" simply because of a perceived change in the gender of the person presenting it.

The #DoIHaveBoobsNow project became a kind of visual proof of what trans activists and scholars have long argued: that gender is not a fixed biological category, and systems built on binary gender categories will inevitably fail, become incoherent, and reproduce discrimination. In Demone's case, the discrimination was automated, algorithmic, and based on the platform's inability to see trans people and trans bodies clearly.

2018: FACEBOOK CENSORS THE VENUS OF WILLENDORF

In 2018, Facebook reached a new low (or perhaps a new high, depending on one's perspective). The platform removed an image of the Venus of Willendorf, a 30,000-year-old figurine that is one of humanity's most ancient artistic representations of the female body. The image was not sexually explicit; it was a photograph of an artwork held in an Austrian museum. Yet Facebook deemed it to violate its community standards and deleted it.

The incident was absurd enough to generate significant media attention and public outcry. Facebook had successfully created a spectacle in which a Paleolithic art object was censored for obscenity. The platform had attempted to expand its authority over the representation of human bodies so far into the past, so far into the realm of established art history and museum collections, that the absurdity became undeniable.

Facebook eventually apologized and restored some versions of the image. The episode underscored the limits of automated moderation systems. Algorithms, trained on large datasets, often cannot distinguish between obscene content and artistic content. They cannot understand context. They cannot see the difference between a 30,000-year-old artwork held in a museum and an image designed to sexually arouse. The algorithm simply sees an image of a body with breasts and applies its rule: female breasts = obscene.

The Venus of Willendorf incident was important because it demonstrated, in undeniable fashion, that platform censorship is not based on rational principles or consistent standards. It

is based on crude algorithmic approximations that result in censoring art, history, education, and speech that clearly deserves protection.

2019: #WETHENIPPLE AND THE SPENCER TUNICK SPECTACLE

On June 2, 2019, the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) organized a protest outside Facebook's headquarters in New York. The protest was organized with renowned photographer Spencer Tunick, famous for his large-scale nude photography projects. Over 125 nude protesters gathered outside Facebook's offices and posed for photographs, with one condition: they covered their nipples with images of male nipples.

The spectacle was brilliant. Here were 125 naked bodies, but the nipples were covered. The bodies were technically in compliance with Facebook's community standards, because they did not display female nipples. Yet the entire point of the protest was to highlight the gender inequality embedded in that standard. By covering female nipples with images of male nipples, the protesters made visible what the platform was doing: treating identical body parts differently based on the gender of the person they were attached to.

The campaign was called #WeTheNipple, a direct reference to #FreeTheNipple. It was a perfectly choreographed piece of political theater—the kind of activist work that makes the invisible visible, that transforms an abstract policy complaint into a concrete visual statement that is difficult to ignore.

The NCAC and the participants used the spectacle to call for meaningful policy reform. They did not ask Facebook to delete the nudity policy; they asked the platform to recognize that gender equality requires treating male and female bodies according to the same standards. The request was simple, rational, grounded in principles of equal treatment. Yet Facebook did not respond meaningfully to the protest. The platform made no substantial changes to its moderation policies.

2020: #IWANTTOSEENYOME AND THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND SIZE

In 2020, the campaign #IWantToSeeNyome drew international attention to the disproportionate censorship of certain bodies. The campaign centered on plus-size Black model Nyome Nicholas-Williams, whose topless portrait was repeatedly removed from Instagram despite not being sexually explicit, not violating the stated community standards, and not being meaningfully different from images of thin, white, conventionally attractive women that appeared without restriction on the platform.

Nicholas-Williams's work is artistic and political. She uses her body, her blackness, her size, her nudity, to challenge the narrow standards of beauty and acceptability that dominate visual culture. Her photographs are celebrations of her own embodiment, claims of the right to take up space, declarations that fat, black, naked bodies deserve to be visible.

Yet Instagram censored her. Repeatedly. The pattern was undeniable: images of certain bodies were treated as acceptable, while images of other bodies—specifically fat bodies and black bodies—were treated as obscene and removed. The campaign #IWantToSeeNyome made visible what had long been suspected: that platform moderation is not neutral, that it disproportionately affects marginalized bodies, that algorithms are trained on and reproduce the biases of a society that privileges thin, white, conventionally attractive bodies.

After sustained pressure from #IWantToSeeNyome and widespread media coverage, Instagram pledged to review its policies. But as with so many platform commitments, the actual changes were minimal. The platform acknowledged the problem in principle, but did not fundamentally restructure its approach to content moderation.

2021: VIENNA'S CREATIVE RESISTANCE AND THE GOLDEN LION

In a particularly creative response to platform censorship, the Vienna Tourist Board launched what it called the "Vienna Strips on OnlyFans" campaign. Recognizing that Instagram, Facebook, and other mainstream social media platforms were unwilling to allow the display of artistic nudity, the campaign deliberately moved to OnlyFans, a subscription-based platform designed specifically to allow creators to share content that might be censored elsewhere.

The campaign was both a practical solution to platform censorship and a political statement. By moving to OnlyFans, the Vienna Tourist Board made visible the fact that certain platforms have become unusable for artistic and educational purposes, and that creators and institutions are forced to seek out alternative platforms, often ones designed for sex work and sexual content, simply to be able to display their work.

The campaign won more than 40 awards, including a prestigious Golden Lion at the Cannes advertising festival. This was remarkable: an advertising campaign built on the principle of platform resistance had achieved major international recognition. The Vienna Tourist Board had won awards not for promoting tourism, but for making visible the censorship of art.

The success of the Vienna campaign revealed something important: that mainstream audiences, advertising professionals, and cultural arbiters were increasingly aware that platform censorship had become a problem. There was growing recognition, even among established institutions, that the way technology platforms moderated content was excessive, inconsistent, and harmful to artistic freedom and public discourse.

2021: PEDRO ALMODÓVAR AND THE MADRES PARALELAS POSTER

In 2021, Instagram removed a promotional poster for Pedro Almodóvar's film *Madres Paralelas* (Parallel Mothers). The poster featured an image that included breasts, and Instagram

deemed it to violate its community standards. The film itself, a serious drama about motherhood and family, was censored because of the artistic nudity in the poster.

After public pressure and widespread media coverage, Instagram apologized and restored posts sharing the Almodóvar movie poster. But the incident was telling: even major artistic works, even promotional materials for films by celebrated directors, were subject to automatic censorship by the platform's moderation systems.

It was becoming increasingly clear that platform censorship was not targeted at genuinely harmful content, but was instead a kind of blunt instrument that censored art, education, history, activism, and speech simply because these works contained images of breasts or nudity. The platforms had constructed a policy regime in which any display of female breasts was presumptively prohibited, and the burden was on users, artists, and institutions to prove that their speech deserved an exception.

2026: THE RESURGENCE AND THE FUTURE OF CENSORSHIP

As we move into the latter part of 2026, it is clear that platform censorship of female bodies has not diminished. If anything, it has become more sophisticated. The platforms have learned to hide suppression behind rhetoric about "community safety" and "algorithm improvement." They have become skilled at making minimal concessions while maintaining the fundamental structure of censorship.

What is different in 2026 is the level of organized resistance. The #FreeTheNipple movement has matured. It has developed legal strategies, cultural strategies, technological workarounds. It has built coalitions with artists, activists, academics, and civil society organizations. And it has succeeded in making visible what was previously hidden: that platform censorship is a political choice, not a neutral enforcement of objective standards.

THE 2026 RESURGENCE — DON'T DELETE ART × FREE THE NIPPLE

In March 2026, a new collaboration emerged that would become one of the most significant moments in the evolution of the #FreeTheNipple movement. The Don't Delete Art organization, an international collective dedicated to fighting platform censorship of art, launched a two-month social media collaboration with Free the Nipple. This was not merely a hashtag campaign or a symbolic gesture; it was a substantive, coordinated effort to make visible the systematic suppression of artistic expression by technology platforms and to demand meaningful policy reform.

THE ORIGINS OF DON'T DELETE ART

Don't Delete Art emerged earlier in 2026 as an international response to what had become an epidemic of platform censorship of artistic nudity. The organization recognized that artists, photographers, and institutions were being systematically suppressed by social media platforms, and that this suppression was not incidental to how platforms functioned but was central to their business model.

Technology platforms had discovered a perverse incentive structure: content moderation could not actually be accomplished through human review of all posted content, because there was too much content. Instead, platforms deployed increasingly sophisticated algorithmic systems that censored content automatically, making split-second decisions based on machine learning models trained on massive datasets. These systems were cheap to operate and relatively invisible to users, which made them profitable. But they were also crude, over-inclusive, and systematically biased against artistic representations of the body.

Don't Delete Art's response was to build a movement of artists, activists, academics, and civil society organizations dedicated to naming this censorship and demanding change. The organization understood that this was not just a problem of individual artists being censored; it was a structural problem with how platforms had decided to govern speech and content.

THE COLLABORATION BEGINS: INSTAGRAM TAKEOVERS AND DIGITAL PANELS

When Don't Delete Art and Free the Nipple joined forces in March 2026, the collaboration took several forms. First, there were Instagram takeovers, in which activists, artists, and scholars would temporarily control official accounts to share content, perspective, and analysis about platform censorship. These takeovers made visible voices that platforms had otherwise suppressed, and they created space for nuanced discussion of why the censorship of female bodies and artistic nudity was a problem.

Second, the collaboration organized live panels with scholars and activists. These panels featured leading voices in feminist theory, art history, digital rights, and platform studies. Scholars like Safiya U. Noble, author of *Algorithms of Oppression*, spoke about how algorithmic systems reproduce and amplify bias. Soraya Chemaly, author of *Rage Becomes Her*, discussed how the regulation of female bodies online is a form of gendered power. Lee Rowland from the National Coalition Against Censorship discussed legal frameworks for protecting artistic speech. Carolina Pasti, an art historian, presented works of art that had been censored by platforms and discussed their historical and cultural significance.

Third, the collaboration featured artists. Rather than merely discussing censorship in the abstract, the campaign showcased work—visual art, photography, performance documentation—that had been suppressed by platforms. By presenting this work directly to audiences, the campaign made it possible to see what censorship had taken away, what became invisible when platforms suppressed content.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE LOSE?

The campaign's central question was deceptively simple: "What do we all lose when we accept the overbroad enforcement of 'community guidelines'?" This question shifted the frame. It was not just about individual creators being censored; it was about collective loss. When platforms suppress artistic expression, when they censor the representation of female bodies, when they make certain ways of seeing and being invisible, what do we lose as a society?

What do we lose when artists cannot show their work? When photographers cannot practice their craft? When activists cannot document the realities of their bodies and their lives? When art history cannot be discussed and taught? When the breadth of human embodiment cannot be represented in our most important public spaces?

The question prompted reflection on what many people had come to take for granted: that technology platforms owned the spaces in which we shared our lives, our work, our images, and that these platforms could suppress whatever they wanted under the guise of enforcing "community standards."

KEY VOICES AND INTELLECTUAL LEADERSHIP

The collaboration brought together some of the most important thinkers and activists working on these issues. Carolina Pasti, an art historian, presented works of art that had been censored by social media platforms—from classical nudes to contemporary works—and discussed how the censorship of these images represents a loss of cultural memory and historical understanding. Her work demonstrated that when platforms censor artistic nudity, they are not just suppressing content; they are suppressing art history itself.

Soraya Chemaly, author of *Rage Becomes Her*, brought insights from her research on how technology platforms disproportionately censor women's expression. Chemaly's work had documented how female activists, particularly women of color and LGBTQ women, experience systematic suppression of their speech on social media. The collaboration gave her

platform to connect this broader phenomenon of gender-based censorship to the specific issue of platform censorship of female bodies and breasts.

Safiya U. Noble, author of *Algorithms of Oppression*, contributed crucial analysis about how algorithmic systems, designed by predominantly white male teams at technology companies, systematically reproduce the biases of the designers and the training data. Noble's work had shown that algorithms trained on datasets that reflect historical discrimination will continue to discriminate. Applied to the issue of platform censorship, this analysis suggested that the bias against female bodies, against black bodies, against fat bodies in platform moderation systems was not accidental but was built into the very architecture of the algorithmic systems.

Lee Rowland from the National Coalition Against Censorship provided legal expertise and spoke about the constitutional and legal frameworks that should protect artistic speech from platform censorship. Rowland's work had tracked the growing recognition, among courts and civil society organizations, that platform censorship of artistic speech needed to be reformed.

TWO MONTHS OF SUSTAINED VISIBILITY

The collaboration ran for two months—March through April 2026—providing sustained visibility to the issue of platform censorship. Unlike a single viral moment or a one-off campaign, the two-month timeline allowed for cumulative impact. Artists could submit work. Activists could organize. Scholars could contribute analysis. Communities could gather and discuss.

The campaign generated significant media coverage. Major publications covered the collaboration, platform censorship, and the need for reform. Academic conferences featured panels about the collaboration. It had become impossible to ignore that platform censorship of artistic expression was a serious problem that deserved serious attention.

Notably, the platforms themselves did not respond particularly well. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok made no significant policy changes in response to the campaign. They released statements reaffirming their commitment to "community safety" and their right to moderate content. But the campaign had succeeded in shifting the frame: it was no longer possible to accept the platforms' claims to neutrality or their assertion that they were simply enforcing reasonable standards. The campaign had made visible what had been hidden.

LEGACY AND IMPLICATIONS

The Don't Delete Art × Free the Nipple collaboration of 2026 represented a maturation of the movement. It was no longer just a hashtag. It was no longer just celebrities posting topless photos. It was a serious, intellectually grounded, strategically sophisticated movement that had built alliances with scholars, lawyers, artists, and activists dedicated to the proposition that platforms should not have the right to censor artistic expression of the human body.

The collaboration also represented a broader shift in how these issues were being understood. The conversation was no longer framed as being about whether female bodies should be sexualized or whether modesty was important. The conversation had shifted to a question of power: who gets to decide what can be seen? Who owns the spaces in which we share images and ideas? Do technology companies have the right to censor art, history, and activism? Should the regulation of bodies remain in the hands of corporations, or should it be subject to democratic deliberation and legal accountability?

THE ALGORITHMIC GAZE

When we talk about algorithmic censorship of female bodies, we are really talking about a new form of the male gaze. The concept of the "male gaze," developed by film theorist Laura Mulvey and refined by subsequent feminist scholarship, describes how visual culture trains us to see the world through a masculine perspective, how women's bodies are presented to be looked at, consumed, and enjoyed by a masculine subject.

What happens when this male gaze is encoded into algorithms? What happens when the centuries-old tradition of depicting women as objects for masculine consumption is automated, scaled, and embedded into the systems that govern what billions of people see?

The result is algorithmic patriarchy: a system in which the male gaze is not just reproduced but is mechanized, universalized, and rendered invisible through the rhetoric of neutral technical standards.

HOW AI MODERATION REPLICATES AND AMPLIFIES PATRIARCHAL BIAS

Content moderation systems work by training machine learning models on datasets of labeled images. A dataset might contain thousands or millions of images labeled as "acceptable" or "violation." The algorithm learns to identify patterns that distinguish between these categories and applies those patterns to new images.

The problem is that these datasets reflect the values and biases of whoever created them. If a dataset is created by a team of predominantly white male engineers at a technology company, the dataset will reflect the priorities and biases of that team. If the historical training data comes

from internet images, which have historically shown predominantly white, thin, conventionally attractive bodies, the algorithm will be trained to see these bodies as the norm and other bodies as deviations.

When it comes to the moderation of nudity, the datasets used to train these systems have frequently come from pornographic datasets. The algorithm is trained to identify nudity by learning from pornography. This has the perverse effect of training the algorithm to see all nudity through the lens of pornography, to interpret all images of bodies as potentially sexual, to apply the same standards of judgment that apply to explicit sexual content to artistic images, educational images, and personal photographs.

Moreover, these datasets were created with assumptions about gender already baked in. The algorithm is not trained to see "nudity" in general; it is trained to see "female nudity" as problematic. Male nudity is treated differently. The algorithmic system has learned to apply different standards to different bodies based on gender.

THE "FEMALE-PRESENTING NIPPLE" PROBLEM

Platform policies often use the language of "female-presenting nipple" to describe what they prohibit. This phrase reveals the paradox at the heart of algorithmic moderation: the algorithm cannot actually know the gender of the person in an image. It can make statistical inferences based on visual features, but these inferences are probabilistic and error-prone. The algorithm is making assumptions about gender based on body characteristics, and these assumptions will often be wrong, particularly for trans people, non-binary people, and anyone whose body does not conform to conventional gender presentation.

A trans man might have breasts and therefore be treated by the algorithm as having female-presenting nipples, even though the person does not identify as female. A trans woman might have a typically male-appearing chest and therefore be treated by the algorithm as having male nipples, even though the person does identify as female. Non-binary people are entirely invisible to these binary categories.

The use of "female-presenting" rather than "female" is supposed to acknowledge this uncertainty, to create space for people whose bodies do not conform to conventional gender presentation. In practice, it creates new problems. The policy remains fundamentally binary: bodies are either female-presenting or male-presenting, with no third category. The uncertainty is acknowledged in language but not resolved in policy.

SHADOW-BANNING, ENGAGEMENT THROTTLING, AND THE SILENCING OF FEMINIST DISCOURSE

Beyond outright removal, platforms employ more subtle forms of suppression. Shadow-banning is a practice in which posts or accounts are made invisible to other users without being explicitly deleted or flagged. The content is still there, but it does not appear in feeds, search results, or recommendations. Users do not know they have been shadow-banned; they simply notice that their engagement drops dramatically.

Engagement throttling is a related phenomenon: posts are not removed, but they are downranked in the algorithm, shown to fewer people, less promoted in feeds and recommendations. The effect is similar to shadow-banning: the speech is technically allowed but is practically suppressed.

Accounts discussing #FreeTheNipple, feminist theory, bodily autonomy, or reproductive justice have reported experiencing these forms of suppression. Activists have documented sharp dips in their engagement following posts on these topics. The engagement returns to normal after they stop posting about contested topics, suggesting that the suppression is targeted.

This is the new face of censorship: not removal, but invisibility; not prohibition, but suppression. It is harder to fight, harder to document, harder to prove. A user cannot point to a deleted post and say, "The platform censored me." Instead, they have to argue that their engagement metrics have dropped in ways that suggest suppression—which is easy to dismiss as coincidence or as the algorithm simply not finding their content compelling.

CODED RESISTANCE: WORKAROUNDS AND LINGUISTIC INNOVATION

Activists have developed various strategies to evade algorithmic censorship. These strategies range from the obvious (creating new hashtags each year) to the more creative and sophisticated (using coded language and visual techniques to communicate meaning while avoiding algorithmic detection).

One example is the use of alternative spellings and coded language. Abortion activists on TikTok have used phrases like "legal camping" to refer to helping people seek abortion access, knowing that posts with the explicit word "abortion" are more likely to be flagged or downranked by algorithms. Similarly, activists discussing reproductive justice have used euphemisms and coded terms to discuss topics they know will be suppressed.

This kind of coded resistance is clever and, in the short term, effective. But it also imposes a cost. Speech becomes harder to understand. The meaning becomes obscured. New people trying to learn about these movements have difficulty finding them and understanding them. The suppression forces activists to communicate in ways that are less clear, less accessible, less effective for reaching new audiences.

In a deeper sense, this linguistic adaptation represents a victory for censorship. The platforms have not removed the speech, but they have made it harder to communicate. They have forced activists to develop new languages, new codes, new workarounds. The suppression is not absolute, but it is pervasive and costly.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ALGORITHMIC SUPPRESSION

Why do platforms choose to suppress content about #FreeTheNipple, reproductive justice, and other feminist topics? The answer lies in the political economy of social media. Platforms

are not neutral infrastructure; they are businesses designed to generate advertising revenue.

Advertisers have political preferences. They do not want their advertisements appearing next to controversial content. They do not want to be associated with political activism, particularly feminist activism. So platforms, designed to maximize advertiser revenue, have incentives to suppress controversial speech, particularly speech that challenges gender norms or advocates for body autonomy.

Moreover, suppressing radical speech—speech that advocates for structural change—keeps the platform on the right side of power. Technology companies operate within broader political and economic systems. They have interests in maintaining social stability, in not challenging the status quo too aggressively. Suppressing radical feminist speech is a way of protecting their own position within existing power structures.

The result is an algorithmic system that systematically favors conformity over challenge, that favors traditional gender norms over feminist alternatives, that favors the status quo over visions of transformation. This is not because the engineers who designed the algorithm are consciously sexist, though some of them may be. It is because the entire structure of the platform—the profit motive, the advertising model, the political interests of the company—creates incentives for algorithmic patriarchy.

PART III

THE LEGAL LANDSCAPE

Courts, Constitutions, and the Right to Bare

TOPFREEDOM IN THE COURTS

The legal history of topfreedom—the right of people to go without a shirt in public—is the history of how gender gets written into law. It is the story of how identical body parts are treated differently by the legal system based solely on the gender of the person they are attached to.

This chapter traces that legal history, from the point at which male toplessness became normalized and legalized, through the present day efforts to extend that right to women.

THE 1930S: CLARK GABLE AND THE NORMALIZATION OF MALE TOPLESSNESS

The legal history of male toplessness in the United States begins in 1934 with *It Happened One Night*, a Hollywood film in which actor Clark Gable appeared shirtless on screen. The scene created a stir. At the time, shirtlessness was considered somewhat transgressive, and there was genuine concern that Gable's bare chest would scandalize audiences.

But instead of maintaining prohibitions on male toplessness, American culture moved in the opposite direction. The sight of a male chest became normalized, desexualized, treated as ordinary. By the 1950s, male toplessness at the beach, in the street, at public events, was completely unremarkable. No one was arrested for going shirtless. No one was prosecuted. The body part simply stopped being a subject of legal regulation.

What caused this shift? The answer is instructive: culture changed, and law followed. As male toplessness became more common and accepted, laws criminalizing male toplessness became harder to enforce and easier to challenge. City ordinances that had criminalized male

toplessness were struck down or simply abandoned. By the 1960s and 1970s, male toplessness had achieved such normalization that it had ceased to be a legal issue at all.

The Coney Island example is particularly telling. For much of the 20th century, Coney Island beaches had ordinances prohibiting male toplessness. Men who appeared shirtless on the beach could be arrested and fined. But over time, these ordinances became unenforceable. Police could not arrest every shirtless man on the beach. Social norms changed. The law, unable to keep up with changing practice and culture, gradually fell away.

THE 1980S EXPANSION: NEW YORK AND THE EXTENSION OF TOPLESSNESS RIGHTS TO WOMEN

The legal case for female toplessness was built on the precedent of male toplessness. If the law had once criminalized male toplessness but had stopped doing so, what was the legal justification for continuing to criminalize female toplessness? This was the question at the heart of the New York case in the 1980s and beyond.

In the 1980s, a woman was arrested in New York for going topless in public. She challenged the arrest, arguing that the state statute criminalizing female toplessness violated equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The statute, she argued, was a gender-based classification that was not justified by any legitimate state interest.

In 1990, a New York court agreed. The court ruled that female breasts are not inherently sexual, that male chests are not inherently non-sexual, and that to criminalize one and not the other on the basis of gender violated equal protection principles. The court struck down the statute, making female toplessness legal in New York.

This was a landmark decision. It was the first state court to explicitly legalize female toplessness on constitutional grounds. It established the legal principle that gender-based clothing regulations are subject to heightened scrutiny and that the state must have a substantial justification for regulating female bodies differently from male bodies.

But the decision, while legally significant, was limited in its practical effects. Just because female toplessness was legal in New York did not mean it was safe, accepted, or practiced. Police officers, unclear about the new legal landscape, continued to arrest women who went topless. Women who went topless faced harassment, abuse, and social stigma. The law had changed, but the culture and practice of enforcement had not.

2005: THE SETTLEMENT AND THE DEMAND FOR ACTUAL EQUALITY

In 2005, more than fifteen years after the New York court decision, a woman was arrested for going topless in New York. Despite the legal precedent established in 1990, police and prosecutors continued to enforce toplessness prohibitions against women. The woman sued the city, arguing that the arrest violated her constitutional rights under the precedent established by the earlier court case.

The city settled the lawsuit, agreeing to pay \$29,000 in damages. This settlement was symbolically important: it represented a recognition, at the institutional level, that the earlier court decision had established a real legal right. But it was also revealing: fifteen years had passed since the court decision, and the city still had not brought its enforcement practices into line with the law.

The \$29,000 settlement was significant enough to make visible that a problem existed. It was large enough to represent a real cost to the city. But it was small enough that it could be treated as a minor issue, an anomaly, an aberration from normal practice, rather than evidence of systematic violation of women's constitutional rights.

2019: FREE THE NIPPLE FORT COLLINS AND THE FEDERAL COURT VICTORY

In 2019, a case called *Free the Nipple Fort Collins v. City of Fort Collins* resulted in a significant federal court victory. The case involved activists challenging the constitutionality of local ordinances that criminalized female but not male toplessness. The federal court ruled in favor of the activists, finding that the ordinance violated the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection guarantee.

Moreover, the court's decision had broader implications. The ruling applied to six states: Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Kansas, and Oklahoma. In these jurisdictions, it became illegal to criminalize female toplessness while permitting male toplessness. The decision established a legal precedent that would be hard to overturn without directly contradicting the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Free the Nipple Fort Collins victory was the largest geographic expansion of toplessness rights since the 1990 New York decision. It demonstrated that the constitutional arguments for gender equality in toplessness law were sound, that courts were increasingly willing to strike down gender-based clothing regulations, and that the legal landscape was shifting in favor of equality.

But even this victory had limits. Six states is not the whole country. Many states and municipalities still have ordinances criminalizing female toplessness. Many states have not been subject to federal court challenges. The legal landscape remains a patchwork, with toplessness legal in some places and illegal in others, depending on jurisdiction, on whether a case has been brought and won, on the particular statutes that exist in that place.

THE OCEAN CITY, MARYLAND CASE AND THE LIMITS OF LEGAL VICTORY

The Ocean City, Maryland case illustrates the challenges of trying to change law through litigation alone. Despite legal victories in New York and in the six states covered by the Free the

Nipple Fort Collins ruling, Ocean City maintained and enforced ordinances criminalizing female toplessness.

Activists challenged the ordinance. They made arguments based on the precedents established in New York and in other jurisdictions. But because Ocean City and Maryland had not been directly subject to a federal court ruling on this issue, the city was able to maintain its ordinance. They claimed it was justified by legitimate local interests in promoting public decency and protecting minors from exposure to adult nudity.

The Ocean City case revealed the weakness of state-by-state litigation strategy. Legal change, when achieved through court decisions, is often geographically limited. A victory in New York does not automatically apply in Maryland. A federal appeals court decision in one circuit does not bind courts in another circuit. The legal landscape remains fragmented, and efforts to achieve systemic change through litigation must be pursued persistently, jurisdiction by jurisdiction, often with uncertainty about whether any particular jurisdiction will join the ranks of those recognizing female toplessness as a constitutional right.

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS: WHERE RIGHTS EXIST AND WHERE THEY ARE CRIMINALIZED

Toplessness law varies dramatically across the world. In many countries, particularly in Europe, female toplessness is legal and is treated as an unremarkable aspect of beach and park culture. Women sunbathe topless in France, Germany, Spain, and many other European nations without legal consequence.

In other countries, particularly in conservative jurisdictions and in regions where religious law significantly influences civil law, female toplessness is not just illegal but may be subject to severe criminal penalties. In some countries, women who expose their breasts can be charged with indecency offenses, face imprisonment, or in extreme cases be subject to violence under the law or as a result of fundamentalist enforcement of religious norms.

This global variation reveals that toplessness law is not based on biological or functional differences between male and female chests. It is based on cultural values, on different societies' attitudes toward gender, modesty, sexuality, and the body. The fact that these values differ so dramatically across cultures suggests that toplessness law is more about cultural arbitrariness than about any universal principle or objective standard.

CONSTITUTIONAL ARGUMENTS

The constitutional case against gender-based toplessness laws rests on three primary arguments, each grounded in fundamental principles of American constitutional law: Equal Protection, Free Expression, and bodily autonomy. These arguments are not merely legalistic quibbles; they strike at the heart of how we understand freedom, equality, and the relationship between individuals and the state.

EQUAL PROTECTION AND THE GENDER-BASED CLASSIFICATION

The Fourteenth Amendment provides that no state shall "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." This clause has been interpreted to prohibit states from making distinctions based on gender unless those distinctions serve an important governmental interest and are substantially related to achieving that interest (the "intermediate scrutiny" standard).

Toplessness statutes that criminalize female but not male toplessness are explicit gender-based classifications. They state, in plain language, that it is illegal for women to do something that is legal for men to do. Under intermediate scrutiny, the state would need to articulate an important governmental interest served by this gender-based distinction and demonstrate that the distinction is substantially related to that interest.

What could that governmental interest be? The typical argument is that the state has an interest in protecting public decency or protecting minors from exposure to adult nudity. But these arguments face significant problems. First, if the state's interest is protecting against naked bodies, why is it only protecting against female naked bodies? Male naked bodies are no

less naked. This inconsistency suggests that the real interest is not in protecting against nudity per se, but in maintaining traditional gender norms and maintaining male dominance over the public sphere.

Second, the government has never been considered to have a legitimate interest in enforcing particular standards of dress, modesty, or gender presentation, at least not in a way that would satisfy constitutional scrutiny. A state could not, for example, prohibit women from wearing pants while permitting men to do so. A state could not require men to wear skirts. The idea that the government can use criminal law to enforce gender-based dress codes is fundamentally at odds with liberal constitutional principles about individual liberty and freedom from arbitrary government control.

FREE EXPRESSION: THE NIPPLE AS SPEECH

A second constitutional argument treats toplessness as a form of protected expression under the First Amendment. This argument builds on cases like *Texas v. Johnson*, in which the Supreme Court recognized that flag burning is protected speech, and *Barnes v. Glen Theatre, Inc.*, in which the Court recognized that nude dancing can constitute protected expression.

The argument is that going topless can be a form of political speech, a way of expressing ideas about bodily autonomy, gender equality, and the arbitrary nature of gender-based legal restrictions. When a woman goes topless as an act of political protest, when she is making a statement about equality and freedom, she is engaging in the kind of expressive conduct that the First Amendment protects.

This argument faces more uncertainty than the equal protection argument. The Supreme Court has been somewhat hostile to the claim that nude or partially nude conduct is protected speech. But the argument still has force, particularly when the conduct is clearly political in nature, when it is aimed at making a statement about constitutional rights and gender equality.

THE ANATOMICAL ARGUMENT: MAMMARY GLANDS ARE NOT SEXUAL ORGANS

A third argument, made by activists like Anni Ma, challenges the underlying assumption that female breasts are inherently sexual or indecent. The argument is simple: breasts are mammary glands. Their biological function is to produce milk for nursing. The nipple is not a sexual organ; it is the outlet through which milk travels. There is nothing inherently indecent about a body part whose function is nurturing and nourishment.

This argument challenges what Anni Ma calls the "sexualization" of the breast. She argues that while breasts may be objects of sexual attraction—just as many body parts can be—their biological function is not sexual. Therefore, the state's interest in regulating breasts as though they were inherently sexual is not justified. The state cannot prohibit people from displaying their mammary glands on the grounds that those glands might be sexually attractive to some people; that would be a form of thought policing, a prohibition on the basis of what someone might think about the displayed body part.

THE PLATFORM DIMENSION: PLATFORM TERMS OF SERVICE VS. NATIONAL LAW

The constitutional arguments about toplessness law have traditionally been framed as disputes between individuals and the state. But the emergence of platform censorship as a primary mechanism through which female toplessness is suppressed has added a new dimension to these arguments.

Technology platforms are not the state, so the First Amendment does not directly constrain their conduct. They are private companies and can generally decide what content to allow on their platforms. However, this creates a perverse situation in which platforms can enforce censorship that would be unconstitutional if carried out by the government.

Facebook claims the right to prohibit female nipples on the basis of its terms of service. If a state tried to enforce the same prohibition, it would face constitutional challenge on equal protection and possibly free expression grounds. But because Facebook is a private company, it can enforce the prohibition without constitutional constraints.

The *L'Origine du Monde* case raised these issues acutely. A Paris court ruled that Facebook had wrongfully shut down an account for sharing an artistic image. The court recognized that there were limits to a platform's right to censor art. But platforms continue to maintain that they have the right to enforce their community standards, even when those standards would be unconstitutional if enforced by the government.

This points to a deeper constitutional problem: the privatization of censorship. When platforms become the primary public squares in which people communicate, and when those platforms censor speech that the government could not constitutionally prohibit, something important has been lost. The constitutional protections against censorship become meaningless if the primary spaces in which speech circulates are not subject to constitutional constraints.

THE TRANS DIMENSION — BEYOND THE BINARY

Courtney Demone's #DoIHaveBoobsNow project revealed something that binary-based policy frameworks could not accommodate: that gender is not fixed, that bodies change, that a person's gender identity may not match the gender assigned at birth, and that systems built on binary categories will inevitably fail to account for the complexity and fluidity of human embodiment and identity.

The #FreeTheNipple movement, originally framed around "female" and "male" nipples, has increasingly had to confront the reality that these binary categories do not capture the full diversity of human bodies and identities. Trans people, non-binary people, and others whose gender does not fit neatly into male/female binaries have found themselves either invisible in the movement or subjected to policies that do not adequately address their experiences.

THE COLLAPSE OF BINARY MODERATION LOGIC

As Courtney Demone documented in her #DoIHaveBoobsNow project, the moment a body moves across gender categories, the algorithmic logic that governs platform moderation breaks down. Demone's body did not change; her gender presentation changed. As she transitioned, the algorithm's treatment of her photographs shifted. Content that had been allowed became prohibited. The algorithm could not process a person whose gender identity did not match the gender it inferred from body characteristics.

This revealed a fundamental incoherence in binary-based moderation systems. If the policy is that "female nipples" are prohibited but "male nipples" are allowed, then what happens when

a person transitions from male to female or female to male? When does the prohibition kick in? Is it based on the person's internal sense of their gender, which the algorithm cannot access? Is it based on the visual appearance of the body, which may not match the person's gender identity? Is it based on medical transition, which most people do not publicly document?

The answer, in Demone's case, was that the algorithm made its best guess based on visual features—features like the shape and size of the chest, the presence or absence of visible breasts—and applied different policies based on that guess. When the visual features suggested male, the policy of allowing nipples applied. When the visual features suggested female, the policy of prohibiting nipples applied. The person's actual gender identity was irrelevant to the algorithm's decision-making.

HOW "FEMALE-PRESENTING NIPPLE" POLICIES FAIL TRANS AND NON-BINARY BODIES

Platform policies often use the phrase "female-presenting nipple" to create space for ambiguity. The language suggests that the prohibition is not about gender identity (which the platform does not and cannot actually know) but about appearance (which the algorithm can, imperfectly, infer from visual features).

But this "solution" creates new problems. First, it formalizes a system in which bodies are categorized based on appearance rather than identity. A trans man whose body presents as female-appearing would have their nipples treated as problematic, even though the person is a man. A trans woman whose body presents as male-appearing would have their nipples treated as nonproblematic, even though the person is a woman.

Second, the phrase "female-presenting" retains the binary. There is no "non-binary-presenting" category. Non-binary people are still forced into one of two categories, based on what the algorithm or moderator guesses their presentation to be. The policy gestures toward inclusivity while actually excluding non-binary people entirely.

Third, the distinction between identity and presentation is itself problematic. It assumes that there is a clean line between how someone presents and how they identify, and that platforms can make decisions based on presentation without affecting identity. In reality, constant misgendering—having your gender guessed wrong, having your body treated as the wrong gender—is a form of harm. Policies that are "only" based on presentation are not neutral; they are a form of systematic gendering, imposing an external gender category on people's bodies regardless of their actual identity.

THE INTERSECTION OF TRANS RIGHTS AND TOPFREEDOM

The question of whose bodies get policed is central to both trans rights activism and topfreedom activism. Why are some bodies treated as dangerous and in need of regulation, while other bodies are allowed to move through public space with impunity? Why do some bodies require constant surveillance, documentation, and control, while others are free?

For trans people, the regulation of their bodies takes particular forms. Trans people are subjected to medical surveillance, to questions about their bodies, to restrictions on public space participation that cisgender people do not face. Going into public as a visibly trans person involves navigating constant threat of violence, legal challenge, and social hostility. The body becomes a site of political struggle.

For women and feminized people, the regulation of bodies is about controlling sexuality, controlling reproduction, controlling visibility in public space. The prohibition on female toplessness is part of a broader system of controlling how female bodies are allowed to exist in public.

For trans people, these systems of regulation intersect. A trans man might face pressure to hide a chest that has been feminized through development or hormone replacement therapy, to cover it in ways that cisgender men do not. A trans woman might face pressure to present an

idealized form of femininity in order to be recognized as female. Non-binary people might face pressure to conform to one binary category or the other, with their refusal to conform treated as a form of provocation or defiance.

The #FreeTheNipple movement, properly understood, is a movement about the right of all people to exist in their bodies, in the form those bodies take, without constant regulation, surveillance, and control. This includes trans people. This includes people whose bodies do not conform to conventional gender presentation. This includes people whose existence itself is treated as a form of provocation.

TOWARD AN INTERSECTIONAL TOPFREEDOM POLITICS

The challenge for the #FreeTheNipple movement going forward is to develop a topfreedom politics that is genuinely intersectional, that accounts for how the regulation of bodies intersects with gender, race, trans status, disability status, and other dimensions of identity and social position.

This means moving beyond a simple male/female binary. It means developing language and frameworks that can account for trans men, trans women, non-binary people, and others whose embodied existence does not fit neatly into binary categories. It means understanding that the regulation of bodies is not uniform, that some bodies face harsher regulation than others, and that a truly liberatory topfreedom politics must attend to these differences.

It also means recognizing that topfreedom is not just about the right to go shirtless. It is about the right to move through public space in one's own body, in whatever form that body takes, without facing legal prosecution, social violence, or institutional discipline. It is about a fundamental transformation in how we relate to embodiment, to gender, to the public sphere, and to each other.

PART IV

CULTURE AND REPRESENTATION

Breasts in Art, History, and the Male Gaze

30,000 YEARS OF THE NUDE

The representation of the human body in art is one of humanity's most ancient practices.

From the Venus of Willendorf, a 30,000-year-old figurine carved from limestone, to the sculptural traditions of classical Greece and Rome, to the paintings of the Italian Renaissance, to contemporary photography and installation art, the human body—particularly the female body—has been a central subject of artistic expression.

What does it mean that when Facebook censors the Venus of Willendorf, it is censoring not contemporary artwork but art history itself? What does it mean that a Paleolithic artifact, created millennia before the existence of any concept of "obscenity" or "decency," is deemed to violate community standards by a 21st-century technology platform?

The answer is that the regulation of artistic representation is never neutral. It is always about power—about who gets to decide what can be seen, whose vision is deemed acceptable, whose bodies are rendered visible or invisible in cultural representation.

THE VENUS OF WILLENDORF AND THE PREHISTORY OF REPRESENTATION

The Venus of Willendorf is a small figurine, about 4.3 inches tall, carved from limestone more than 30,000 years ago. It depicts a female figure with exaggerated breasts, belly, and thighs, with minimal attention to facial features or limbs. It is one of the oldest known representations of the human body.

Scholars have debated the meaning of this figurine for centuries. Some have argued that it represents fertility and was used in fertility rites. Others have argued that it represents the

artist's own partner or family member. Some have suggested that it represents an idealized female form, an object of beauty or desire. Others have resisted the sexualization of the figurine, arguing that it represents something entirely different from what contemporary viewers assume.

What is clear is that the Venus of Willendorf represents a human body, rendered in art, with attention to the body's form. It is not sexually explicit by any reasonable definition—there are no genitalia depicted, no sexualized activity, no explicit sexual reference. It is a representation of embodiment.

Yet Facebook's algorithm, trained on datasets reflecting contemporary assumptions about obscenity and the sexualization of breasts, identified the image as violating community standards. The algorithm could not distinguish between a 30,000-year-old artwork held in a museum and contemporary sexually explicit content. It applied the same rule: breasts = obscene.

COURBET'S L'ORIGINE DU MONDE AND THE EXPLICITNESS OF ART

Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (The Origin of the World), painted in 1866, is far more explicit than the Venus of Willendorf. The painting depicts female genitalia in graphic, unmistakable detail. It is a close-up image of a vulva, without context, without a face, just the explicit anatomical depiction of the female sexual anatomy.

The painting was scandalous when it was created and has remained controversial ever since. It violates conventions of artistic decorum. It presents female sexuality not as something mediated through romance or desire or artistic idealization, but as something blunt, direct, unavoidable. The painting refuses to soften or aestheticize female sexuality; it insists on its visibility and its literal reality.

Yet this painting is held in major museums, taught in art history classes, celebrated as a masterpiece of 19th-century art. It appears in textbooks, in exhibitions, in academic journals. Its artistic and historical significance is beyond question. It is, by any reasonable standard, an important artwork deserving of protection.

That Facebook censored this artwork when it was posted online is a damning indictment of platform moderation systems. The company could not distinguish between a famous artwork and pornography. It applied a crude rule—explicit genitalia = obscene—without any consideration of context, artistic merit, or historical significance. The platform had effectively declared itself the arbiter of what art could be seen, what representations were acceptable, what bodies could be depicted.

THE CLASSICAL NUDE AND THE AESTHETICIZATION OF THE FEMALE BODY

Western art history is largely organized around the tradition of the nude. From classical Greece through the Renaissance and into modernity, the representation of the human body, particularly the female body, has been central to artistic practice and aesthetic theory.

But the classical nude tradition is not innocent. It represents a particular way of seeing the female body: the body as aesthetic object, as something to be looked at, appreciated, consumed. The classical nude tradition was built on what we might call the aestheticization of feminine passivity. The female body appears, is presented, is displayed for the gaze of an imagined viewer. The female figure does not look back; does not assert agency; does not demand recognition as a subject rather than an object.

Feminist art history, particularly the work of scholars like Laura Mulvey and Lynda Nead, has critiqued this tradition. They have argued that the classical nude is not a neutral representation of the human body, but is a gendered representation that encodes particular power relations. The nude is a way of naturalizing the consumption of female bodies, of

making it seem aesthetic and refined rather than what it is: a visual economy in which female bodies are produced for male consumption.

WHEN ART BECOMES "OBSCENE": THE SHIFTING BOUNDARIES OF REPRESENTATION

What is obscene? When does a representation of the body cross the line from art into pornography, from acceptable expression into something deemed unfit for public display? These questions have been debated in courts, in legislatures, in art institutions, and in culture at large.

The legal doctrine of obscenity, as established in cases like *Miller v. California*, attempts to answer these questions through a three-part test: does the work appeal to prurient interest; does it depict sexual conduct in a patently offensive way; and does it lack artistic, literary, political, or scientific value? This test is supposed to protect serious art and artistic expression while allowing regulation of genuinely obscene materials.

But the problem with this framework is that it grants enormous power to whoever is making the judgment. What appeals to prurient interest? What is patently offensive? What constitutes artistic value? These are highly subjective judgments, and they are inevitably influenced by the viewer's own values, biases, and cultural assumptions.

When Facebook's algorithm applies an obscenity judgment to the Venus of Willendorf, it is not making a reasoned decision based on the legal test for obscenity. It is applying a crude pattern-matching algorithm trained on data that reflects the biases of its creators. The algorithm cannot understand artistic intent. It cannot weigh whether the image has serious artistic value. It can only recognize visual features and apply a rule.

The result is a flattening of culture, a reduction of art to visual features, a system in which anything that resembles obscene content is treated as obscene, regardless of context, intent, or

artistic merit. It is a new kind of censorship, one that operates at the level of visual recognition rather than at the level of meaning and interpretation.

THE MALE GAZE, REPROGRAMMED

Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" remains one of the most powerful tools we have for understanding how gendered power operates through visual culture. In her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argued that cinema does not present a neutral view of the world, but encodes a particular perspective—a masculine perspective—in which women are presented as objects for the gaze of an imagined male viewer.

The male gaze is not just about seeing; it is about power. It is a way of organizing visual culture that makes women objects of consumption and men subjects of action. It naturalizes the consumption of female bodies, makes it seem aesthetic and refined, while obscuring the power relations it encodes.

What happens when this male gaze is reprogrammed, automated, and embedded into algorithmic systems that determine what billions of people see every day? What happens when the centuries-old tradition of female objectification is translated into machine learning algorithms and deployed at scale?

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA PROFITS FROM FEMALE BODIES WHILE CENSORING FEMALE AGENCY

Technology platforms have created a peculiar and contradictory system. On one hand, platforms profit enormously from the visual representation of female bodies. Instagram is built on the aestheticization of female bodies. TikTok profits from the performance of femininity. OnlyFans has built a multi-billion-dollar business on the basis of allowing creators—predominantly women—to monetize intimate images and content.

Yet these same platforms censor female bodies. They remove breastfeeding images. They censor toplessness. They suppress images of menstruation, of birth, of miscarriage, of anything that represents female embodiment outside the context of aesthetic consumption. They allow the sexualized display of female bodies but censor the autonomous display of female bodies.

This is the logic of the male gaze reprogrammed. Platforms allow female bodies to be displayed when those displays are sexualized, aestheticized, presented as objects of consumption. But they censor female bodies when those bodies are presented as agents, as makers of meaning, as subjects rather than objects. They allow the female body insofar as it can be consumed, but not insofar as it asserts control over its own representation.

THE PARADOX: MONETIZING SEXUALIZATION WHILE PROHIBITING NON-SEXUAL NUDITY

This generates a perverse paradox that lies at the heart of platform economics. Platforms profit from the sexualized display of female bodies. Instagram influencers, many of them women, have built entire careers and substantial incomes around the aestheticization and display of their bodies. Algorithms promote aestheticized, sexualized content because such content generates engagement and clicks.

Yet these same platforms prohibit non-sexual nudity. They censor breastfeeding. They censor toplessness. They censor any display of the female body that is not aestheticized, sexualized, presented as an object of desire. The result is a system that says: display your body in ways that are sexually appealing, and we will help you profit from it. Display your body in ways that are not sexually appealing, and we will censor it.

This is not a neutral policy. It is an active shaping of what kinds of female embodiment can be represented, what stories can be told about female bodies, what possibilities for self-representation are available. It is a system that profits from the commodification and

sexualization of female bodies while suppressing alternative, more autonomous forms of female representation.

ARTIVISM AND THE REFUSAL OF OBJECTIFICATION

In response to this system, artists and activists have developed what we might call "artivism"—art that is simultaneously aesthetic and political, work that uses artistic practice to challenge and resist the structures of power that constrain representation.

These artists create images that represent embodiment outside the logic of the male gaze. They create representations of fat bodies, of disabled bodies, of aging bodies, of bodies that do not conform to conventional beauty standards. They create images of menstruation, of pregnancy, of birth, of postpartum bodies. They create work that insists that all bodies are worthy of representation, that all ways of being embodied are worth seeing.

This work is explicitly designed to shift gendered narratives. As one artist collective noted: "We create images that represent our shared values, images that shift gendered narratives that permeate their lives." These are images that do not objectify, that do not present the body as something to be consumed, that do not encode the male gaze. They present bodies as agents, as bearers of meaning, as subjects of their own story.

Naturally, this work is heavily censored by social media platforms. It violates the logic that platforms have built into their systems. It presents bodies in ways that are not sexualized, not aestheticized, not designed to be consumed. It asserts that bodies have meaning beyond their visual appeal, that embodiment is about more than looking good for others.

The censorship of artivism is particularly telling. It reveals that what platforms are really defending is not against obscenity or indecency, but against the assertion of female agency and autonomous representation. The platforms are comfortable with the commodification of

female bodies. What they cannot tolerate is the refusal to be commodified, the insistence on autonomous meaning-making, the demand to be seen as a subject rather than an object.

BREASTFEEDING, BODIES, AND BIO-POLITICS

The struggle over breastfeeding images on social media is not primarily about aesthetics or decency. It is about bio-politics—about how power operates on and through the body, about how the state and social institutions regulate reproduction, nourishment, and the work of care that is predominantly performed by women.

The censorship of breastfeeding images is a form of violence against mothers, against reproduction, against the female body in its most socially necessary function. To hide, shame, and criminalize breastfeeding is to send a message: your reproductive labor is not valued, your body is obscene, your child's nourishment should be hidden from public view.

THE 2008–2014 FACEBOOK BREASTFEEDING WARS AND THEIR LEGACY

In 2008, Facebook began systematically removing photographs of women breastfeeding. The platform took the position that images of breastfeeding violated its community standards and were therefore subject to deletion. Mothers who posted photographs of themselves nursing their children had those photographs removed.

This sparked years of activism and petition drives. Mothers organized, coordinated their efforts, and mounted sustained campaigns to force Facebook to change its policy. They organized "nurse-ins" in which women would go to Facebook headquarters and breastfeed in public, literally embodying the act that the platform was attempting to suppress.

Over time, Facebook gradually shifted its position. The company came to recognize that breastfeeding was a natural bodily function and that suppressing images of breastfeeding was indefensible. The policy was revised to allow images of breastfeeding, with the proviso that such images had to be clearly of the act of nursing, not of breasts more generally.

This carve-out—for breastfeeding specifically—is telling. It suggests that Facebook does not actually prohibit images of breasts because breasts are inherently obscene. Rather, it prohibits images of breasts when those images are not performing a recognized biological function. Breastfeeding is allowed because it can be justified by reference to the biological function of reproduction and nourishment. Non-breastfeeding nudity cannot be justified in the same way and is therefore prohibited.

This logic reveals the patriarchal rationality at work. Female bodies are allowed to be displayed when they are performing reproductive or nourishment functions, when they are serving biological purposes defined by nature. But when female bodies are simply existing, simply being displayed, simply asserting their own visibility independent of any functional justification, they are prohibited. The body is acceptable only insofar as it is serving purposes beyond itself.

THE POLITICS OF THE LACTATING BODY

The lactating body—the body that produces milk, that nourishes—is radically ambiguous in patriarchal culture. On one hand, it is the ultimate symbol of motherhood, of feminine virtue, of maternal love and sacrifice. On the other hand, it is marked as obscene, as something to be hidden, as something that should not be visible in public space.

This ambiguity is not accidental. It is the product of how patriarchal culture seeks to preserve the reproductive labor of women while denying women autonomy and control over that labor. Motherhood should be honored, but mothers should be invisible. Reproduction should be valued, but mothers should not be seen.

The prohibition on breastfeeding images in public space is one manifestation of this logic. It requires mothers to hide their reproductive labor. It requires that the act of nourishing one's child be performed in private, hidden from public view, rendered invisible. The message is clear: your reproductive function is necessary, but it should not be seen, should not be acknowledged, should not intrude upon public space.

MADRES PARALELAS AND THE MATERNAL BODY IN ART AND CULTURE

Pedro Almodóvar's film *Madres Paralelas* engages directly with the politics of the maternal body. The film is about motherhood, about aging, about the bodies of women navigating the demands and experiences of reproduction. It centers the maternal body as a site of meaning, of experience, of complexity and depth.

The fact that Instagram censored the promotional poster for this film is significant. The poster featured maternal imagery, images of the body engaged in reproduction and motherhood. Instagram deemed this to violate its community standards. The film itself, which deals with profoundly important themes about women's lives and experiences, was censored because its promotional imagery did not conform to platform standards of acceptability.

After public pressure, Instagram restored the poster. But the incident reveals how platforms police not just images, but the stories that can be told about female bodies. By censoring promotional imagery for a film about motherhood, Instagram was asserting control over what narratives about motherhood could be circulated, which visions of maternal experience could be visible, which stories about women's lives could be told.

THE REINFORCEMENT OF SEXUALIZATION AND THE SUPPRESSION OF MATERNAL RECOGNITION

Here is the core injustice: the constant policing and hiding of breastfeeding images reinforces the sexualization of maternal bodies. By requiring that breastfeeding be hidden, by treating it as something shameful or obscene, society sends the message that the maternal breast is not a biological apparatus for nourishment but is fundamentally sexual. The breast is sexualized precisely by the attempt to hide its non-sexual, reproductive function.

When mothers are required to cover themselves while breastfeeding, when they are told to go to bathrooms or private spaces to nurse, when breastfeeding images are censored online, the cultural message is not that breastfeeding is a respectable biological function. The message is that the maternal body is obscene, that a mother's body is not fit for public view, that the work of nurturing is something shameful.

This has profound effects on how mothers are treated, how reproduction is valued, how women's bodily autonomy is constrained. It contributes to the devaluation of maternal labor, to the treatment of mothers as something less than full participants in public life, to the ideology that women's bodies exist primarily for reproduction and that reproduction should be hidden, shameful, and controlled.

The project of #FreeTheNipple must include reclaiming the visibility of breastfeeding. Not as obscenity, but as ordinary bodily function. Not as something sexual, but as the work of nourishing the young. The nipple, in its reproductive function, is as much deserving of visibility and recognition as the nipple in any other context. To free the nipple is to assert the right of mothers to nurse in public, to make breastfeeding visible, to reclaim the maternal body as a body worthy of recognition and respect.

PART V

INTERSECTIONALITY

Whose Nipple? Whose Freedom?

RACE, SIZE, AND THE POLICED BODY

The #FreeTheNipple movement emerged from the experiences of women whose gender oppression was their primary political experience. But as the movement has developed and matured, it has had to confront a crucial reality: that the regulation of bodies is not uniform, that some bodies are policed more heavily than others, and that the struggle for bodily autonomy must attend to the specific ways that race, class, size, disability, and other dimensions of identity intersect with gender to shape how bodies are regulated and controlled.

The campaign #IWantToSeeNyome made this intersectionality visible. When plus-size Black model Nyome Nicholas-Williams' topless portrait was repeatedly removed from Instagram despite being identical in form to images of thin, white, conventionally attractive women that appeared without restriction, it became clear that platform moderation is not based on consistent standards applied uniformly to all bodies. It is based on biased systems that police certain bodies more heavily than others.

#IWANTTOSEENYOME AND THE DISPROPORTIONATE CENSORSHIP OF BLACK BODIES

Nyome Nicholas-Williams is an artist and activist who uses her body—her Blackness, her size, her nudity—as a medium for political expression and artistic meaning-making. Her work celebrates embodiment, challenges narrow beauty standards, and asserts the visibility and value of bodies that are marginalized and rendered invisible in mainstream culture.

When Nicholas-Williams posted topless artistic portraits to Instagram, the platform repeatedly removed them. The removal pattern was undeniable: images of Nicholas-Williams were removed while similar or identical images posted by other users (typically thin, white

users) appeared without restriction. The moderation system was not applying consistent standards; it was applying discriminatory standards that treated Black bodies as more problematic, more dangerous, more obscene than white bodies.

The campaign #IWantToSeeNyome drew attention to this pattern. It documented the discrimination. It made visible what users had long suspected: that platform moderation systems are racist, that algorithmic systems are trained on data that reflects white supremacy, that the standards applied to content moderation systematically disadvantage Black creators and Black bodies.

The research backing up these suspicions has been substantial. Studies have shown that content moderation systems disproportionately remove content from Black users, that hate speech directed at Black people is less likely to be removed than hate speech directed at white people, and that the visual recognition systems used in content moderation are trained on datasets that are predominantly white, leading to biased recognition of non-white faces and bodies.

ALGORITHMIC BIAS AND THE TRAINING DATA PROBLEM

Algorithmic bias in content moderation systems stems from a fundamental problem: the datasets used to train these systems reflect historical patterns of discrimination and are themselves biased. When a machine learning system is trained to identify "obscene" content, the training dataset used to teach the system will reflect whatever biases exist in how obscenity is defined in the culture that created the dataset.

Obscenity has historically been defined in gendered and racialized terms. The obscene body has been understood as particularly female, particularly Black, particularly non-normative. When a dataset is trained on images that have been labeled as obscene according to these

gendered and racialized definitions, the resulting algorithm will inherit and perpetuate these biases.

Safiya U. Noble's research on "Algorithms of Oppression" has documented this pattern across multiple domains. Algorithms used for facial recognition, for hiring, for predictive policing, all show the same basic pattern: they are trained on biased data, they learn to replicate and amplify those biases, and the result is algorithmic discrimination that appears neutral and objective but in fact systematically disadvantages marginalized groups.

In the context of content moderation, this means that the algorithmic systems trained to identify obscene content are particularly likely to flag content from Black creators, from fat creators, from creators of color. The algorithm has learned that these bodies are more likely to be labeled as obscene, and therefore treats them as more likely to violate community standards.

THE ERASURE OF FAT BODIES, DARK SKIN, AND NON-NORMATIVE BEAUTY

The disproportionate removal of content from creators with marginalized bodies is not incidental to how platform moderation works. It is systematic. It reflects the biases of the training data, the priorities of the platform companies, and the broader cultural devaluation of certain kinds of bodies.

Fat bodies are particularly targeted. Research has shown that fat people experience high levels of discrimination and harassment on social media, that their content is more likely to be flagged as obscene, that their visibility on platforms is systematically suppressed. This is not because fat nudity is actually more obscene than thin nudity; it is because fat bodies are culturally devalued, treated as bodies that should be hidden, whose visibility is treated as a provocation.

Dark skin is also disproportionately targeted. Content from Black creators is more likely to be removed, more likely to be flagged as problematic. Research has shown that the same image

posted by a white person and a Black person will be treated differently by content moderation systems, with the Black person's image more likely to be removed. This reflects the ways that Blackness itself is treated as threatening, as obscene, as requiring control and suppression.

Non-normative beauty—aging, disability, bodies that do not conform to conventional beauty standards—is systematically suppressed. The result is that digital spaces reproduce and amplify the erasure and devaluation of these bodies in physical space. The diversity of human embodiment is not represented; instead, what is visible is a narrow slice of conventionally attractive, predominantly white, predominantly thin, predominantly young bodies.

THE MOVEMENT EXPANDS: CENTERING MARGINALIZED BODIES

The #FreeTheNipple movement, to be truly liberatory, must expand beyond a simple focus on gender equality in nipple regulation. It must center the experiences of those whose bodies are most heavily policed, whose visibility is most suppressed, whose struggle for bodily autonomy is most urgent.

This means centering Black women, who face both sexualized racism and sexualized misogyny. It means centering fat women, whose bodies are treated as inherently transgressive. It means centering trans people and non-binary people, whose bodily autonomy has been particularly denied. It means centering disabled people, whose bodies are often rendered invisible or treated as objects of pity rather than as subjects of their own experience.

A movement for bodily freedom must attend to these differences. It must ask: who is being policed most heavily? Whose freedom is being most denied? What would genuine equality look like when we account for these intersecting systems of oppression?

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Topfreedom movements exist outside the Global North, though they are often less visible in English-language media and international discourse. The struggle for bodily autonomy, for the right to move through public space in one's own body without legal or social punishment, is a global phenomenon. But the forms that struggle takes vary significantly across cultures and geopolitical contexts.

TOPFREEDOM MOVEMENTS BEYOND THE GLOBAL NORTH

In many countries of the Global South, struggles over female toplessness are intertwined with struggles against colonialism, against the imposition of Western norms, against the legacies of colonial governance. In some cases, colonial powers used regimes of modesty as a tool of control, imposing Western standards of dress and bodily covering on colonized peoples. The struggle for topfreedom becomes, in this context, a struggle against the imposition of colonial values.

In other contexts, particularly in countries with significant populations that practice non-Western traditions of dress and bodily adornment, topfreedom has different meanings and different political implications. Indigenous peoples in various parts of the world have practiced bare-chestedness as part of traditional clothing and cultural practices. The regulation of these practices by nation-states represents a form of cultural control and erasure.

The global topfreedom movement must attend to these contexts and must not simply impose a Western framework onto struggles that have their own histories, their own meanings,

their own particularities. What topfreedom means in New York is not the same as what it means in Lagos, in Jakarta, in Nairobi, in São Paulo.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM VS. UNIVERSAL RIGHTS: NAVIGATING DIFFERENCE

One challenge in building a global movement for bodily autonomy is navigating the tension between cultural relativism and claims about universal human rights. Some argue that each culture has its own standards of dress, modesty, and bodily presentation, and that outsiders should not impose their standards on others. From this perspective, it would be inappropriate for Western feminists to promote topfreedom in contexts where different norms prevail.

But this argument can become a tool for defending oppression. Governments and cultural conservatives use cultural relativism as an argument against protecting bodily autonomy, particularly for women. They argue that it is part of local culture, local tradition, local values that women should be covered, that women's bodies should be hidden, that women should not be visible in public space.

The resolution is to distinguish between culture and coercion. People in different cultures may have different norms and values about dress, embodiment, and public display. That is genuine cultural difference. But when state power or social violence is used to enforce particular dress codes, when women are punished for not covering themselves, when legal systems criminalize female toplessness, that is not culture—that is coercion.

A global topfreedom movement can be built on the principle of bodily autonomy: the right of each person to make decisions about their own body, their own dress, their own public presentation, without legal punishment or social violence. This principle is compatible with cultural diversity; people in different cultures may make different choices about how to dress

and how to present their bodies. But those choices must be genuine choices, made freely, without coercion.

INDIGENOUS PRACTICES AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF EMBODIMENT

In many parts of the world, indigenous peoples and cultures have practices of partial or complete bare-chestedness as part of traditional clothing and cultural identity. These practices are often regulated, criminalized, or suppressed by nation-states. Colonial governments, in particular, imposed Western standards of dress on colonized peoples, treating bare-chestedness as uncivilized and requiring the adoption of Western clothing as a mark of civilization.

The struggle to preserve indigenous practices of embodiment is, in part, a struggle against colonialism and cultural erasure. It is a struggle for the right of indigenous peoples to practice their cultures, to maintain their traditions, to define their own standards of dress and embodiment.

This struggle intersects with contemporary topfreedom activism in important ways. The principle that people have the right to move through public space in their bodies, to practice their own cultural standards of dress and embodiment without legal punishment, applies to indigenous people as well as to those fighting for gender equality. A truly global and truly liberatory movement for bodily freedom must make space for indigenous self-determination and for the preservation of indigenous cultural practices.

THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF RESISTANCE

Every movement, if it achieves even modest success, faces the risk of being absorbed into the structures it opposes. The #FreeTheNipple movement is no exception. What began as radical activism has, in many contexts, become a style, a brand, a commodity that can be bought and sold like anything else.

This is not to say that all commercialization of activism is wrong or that activists who seek to make a living from their work are compromised. But the absorption of radical movements into commodity capitalism represents a real problem, one that requires honest acknowledgment and ongoing negotiation.

MERCHANDISE, BRANDING, AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF #FREETHENIPPLE

Like many successful social movements, #FreeTheNipple has generated its own merchandise economy. There are t-shirts with #FreeTheNipple printed on them. There are stickers, buttons, hats, and other items bearing the movement's slogan and symbols. These items are produced by various parties—some by movement activists themselves, others by third parties seeking to profit from the movement's visibility.

The merchandising of activism is not inherently problematic. When activists produce and sell merchandise, they are generating resources to fund their work. A t-shirt that announces one's support for #FreeTheNipple can be a political statement, a way of identifying with the movement, a form of public commitment.

But there is a risk in this commodification: that the movement's radical content becomes reduced to aesthetic and symbolic form. Wearing a #FreeTheNipple t-shirt becomes a way to signal political consciousness without necessarily committing to the harder work of political transformation. The movement becomes fashionable, and fashion is always complicit with the very structures it appears to oppose.

WHEN ACTIVISM BECOMES CONTENT: THE TENSION BETWEEN VISIBILITY AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE

The #FreeTheNipple movement exists, necessarily, on social media. This creates a built-in tension: the movement must be visible on platforms that profit from that visibility while simultaneously suppressing content related to the movement. The movement needs Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter to reach audiences, but these platforms are the primary site of the censorship the movement opposes.

This generates what we might call the "content trap": the more successful a movement is at generating engaging content, the more that content becomes subject to algorithmic suppression and platform control. The movement's success in creating compelling images, in generating viral moments, in creating content that people want to share, is exactly what makes the movement visible to platforms and draws algorithmic attention and suppression.

There is also a danger that activism becomes reduced to content creation. Political engagement becomes liking, sharing, commenting on Instagram posts rather than engaging in direct action, organizing, building institutions, challenging power. The transformation from activism to content is seductive because it feels productive—one is creating, sharing, reaching audiences—while being less costly and less risky than traditional forms of political organizing.

THE ONLYFANS PARADOX: USING SUBSCRIPTION PLATFORMS TO BYPASS CENSORSHIP

In response to platform censorship, many creators have moved to OnlyFans, a subscription-based platform where creators can share content for a monthly fee, with much more permissive content policies. OnlyFans allows creators to monetize nudity, sexual content, and other content that mainstream platforms prohibit.

For some creators and activists, OnlyFans represents a genuine liberation. It allows them to share their work, to reach audiences, to make a living, without submitting to the censorship regimes of mainstream social media platforms. It creates space for creators to control their own representation and to profit from their own labor.

But the OnlyFans model also reproduces problems. First, it is a subscription model, which means that access is restricted to those who can afford to pay. While mainstream social media is at least nominally free and allows for more democratic access, OnlyFans creates a tiered system in which the most transgressive, most censored content is available only to paying subscribers.

Second, OnlyFans is designed to facilitate sex work and the commodification of intimacy. While this can be liberatory for sex workers who choose to use the platform, it also creates pressure for all creators who use the platform to frame their work in sexual or intimate terms in order to attract subscribers and generate income. The platform incentivizes the sexualization of content and the commodification of intimate labor.

The Vienna Tourist Board's "Vienna Strips on OnlyFans" campaign, while creative and successful, also exemplifies this paradox. Rather than fighting for the right to share artistic content on mainstream platforms, the campaign essentially concedes that mainstream platforms will continue to censor artistic nudity and seeks refuge on a platform designed for sex work. The strategic victory of finding an alternative platform is real, but it is also a retreat from the demand that mainstream platforms treat artistic expression with respect.

TOWARD A MORE RADICAL MOVEMENT

The ongoing challenge for #FreeTheNipple is to resist the pull toward commercialization and content capture while maintaining its ability to reach audiences and build power. This requires several things:

First, the movement must maintain its focus on structural change, not just visibility. The goal is not to make #FreeTheNipple a fashionable cause, but to actually change laws, change platform policies, change social norms, and change the material conditions of people's lives.

Second, the movement must diversify its organizing beyond social media. While social media is a tool, it is not a substitute for the hard work of building organizations, developing leadership, creating institutions that can sustain the movement beyond any particular viral moment.

Third, the movement must attend to the material dimensions of activism. Who is profiting from the movement? Who is exploited in the production of movement content? How can activists ensure that the work they do generates resources for the communities most affected by the issues the movement addresses?

PART VI

THE FUTURE

Beyond the Nipple

PLATFORM ACCOUNTABILITY

The regulation of female bodies on social media platforms has become a form of power that is largely beyond public accountability. Technology companies have established themselves as private authorities over what billions of people can see and say. They have deployed the language of "community standards" and "policy enforcement" to obscure what is really happening: the systematic suppression of women's speech, feminist activism, and artistic expression, all in service of maintaining their business model and their political position within existing power structures.

What would meaningful platform accountability look like? What would reform require? How can society ensure that technology platforms respect bodily autonomy, protect artistic freedom, and enforce their policies in ways that are transparent, consistent, and subject to democratic scrutiny?

WHAT MEANINGFUL POLICY REFORM LOOKS LIKE

Meaningful reform of platform moderation policies would require several key changes:

First, transparency. Platforms must publish their content policies in clear language. They must explain what content is prohibited and why. They must make public the data that shows how their policies are being enforced, who is being censored, and whether enforcement is consistent or discriminatory. Currently, much of what happens in platform moderation is opaque and invisible. Transparency would be a first step toward accountability.

Second, appeals processes. When content is removed, users must have access to meaningful appeals. A human being, or ideally a team of humans, must review the algorithmic

decision, understand the context, and make a determination about whether the content actually violates the policies. Currently, much platform moderation is automated and appeals processes are inadequate. Meaningful appeals processes would allow for genuine human judgment and would make possible a more nuanced understanding of contested content.

Third, human review for contested categories. Content that involves nudity, bodies, representations of the human form should not be moderated purely by algorithms. These are contexts where context and artistic intent matter. Human reviewers, trained in understanding art history and artistic expression, should be involved in making moderation decisions for such content.

Fourth, representation in moderation decisions. The people making moderation decisions should reflect the diversity of the platform's users. Currently, content moderation teams are often composed predominantly of young people from privileged backgrounds, often from specific geographic regions. The biases of these teams are coded into moderation policies and algorithmic systems. Diversifying the people involved in making moderation decisions would help ensure that policies reflect diverse values and perspectives.

THE "ARTISTIC CONTEXT" EXCEPTION: NECESSARY BUT INSUFFICIENT

Many platforms have moved toward recognizing "artistic context" as a reason to allow content that might otherwise be prohibited. This represents some progress. It acknowledges that artistic expression deserves special protection, that context matters, that not all nudity is the same.

But this exception is fundamentally insufficient. First, it creates a hierarchy in which art is protected but ordinary human expression is not. A photograph that is recognized as art may be allowed, while an identical photograph that is simply a personal image is prohibited. This is

backwards. The right to bodily autonomy and the right to represent one's own body should not depend on whether the representation achieves the status of "art."

Second, the artistic context exception requires that creators prove their work is art, jumping through hoops to justify their expression. The burden is on the speaker to prove that their speech deserves protection. This reverses the usual principle in free expression law: that speech should be allowed unless there is a compelling government interest in prohibiting it, not that speech should be prohibited unless the speaker can prove it deserves protection.

What platforms should do is recognize that all representations of the human body deserve protection, regardless of whether they are categorized as art. Bodily autonomy is not a special pleading by artists; it is a fundamental right. Everyone should have the right to represent their body without proving that their representation is artistically or culturally significant.

REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS: SECTION 230, THE EU DIGITAL SERVICES ACT, AND PLATFORM GOVERNANCE

Reform must also happen at the level of law and regulation. Governments have tools available to constrain platform power and ensure accountability.

Section 230 Reform: In the United States, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act has been interpreted to shield platforms from liability for content posted by users and to give platforms broad discretion in moderating content. Reform of Section 230 could require platforms to be more transparent about their moderation practices, to allow for appeals, or to maintain consistency between their stated policies and their actual enforcement. However, Section 230 reform must be carefully designed to protect legitimate speech and free expression while constraining the most egregious abuses.

The EU Digital Services Act: The European Union has taken a different approach, enacting the Digital Services Act, which requires platforms to disclose their moderation practices, to maintain appeals processes, and to be accountable to users for how they moderate

content. This represents a more interventionist approach, with government actively regulating platform practices. The success and limitations of this approach will be instructive for other jurisdictions considering similar regulations.

Platform Governance Reform: More radically, some argue that platforms should be subject to democratic governance, that their moderation decisions should be made by users or by boards that represent diverse stakeholder interests, rather than by corporate management. This would represent a fundamental restructuring of how platforms operate, but it might be necessary to ensure that platforms operate in service to democratic values rather than to corporate profit.

THE NIPPLE AS NUCLEUS

Li na Esco said it plainly: "The nipple is the nucleus where it all begins." This simple statement contains profound truth. The nipple is not the destination; it is the starting point. To fight for the nipple is to fight for something much larger than the nipple itself.

From the vantage point of 2026, it is clear that the struggles of #FreeTheNipple have always been about more than the nipple. They have been about bodily autonomy, about gender equality, about freedom from surveillance and control, about the right to exist in one's body without legal punishment or social violence. These struggles extend far beyond toplessness to encompass reproductive freedom, trans liberation, sexual autonomy, and a radical reimagining of the relationship between bodies and power.

FROM NIPPLE EQUALITY TO FULL BODILY AUTONOMY

The demand to treat female and male nipples equally is not just about the nipple. It is a demand for a principle: that bodies should not be regulated differently based on gender, that the state should not have the power to criminalize certain bodies for displaying themselves in ways that other bodies are allowed to display themselves.

From this principle flows a much broader demand: that all people should have autonomy over their own bodies, that the state should not criminalize or punish people for what they do with their own bodies, that bodily autonomy is a fundamental human right.

This principle has radical implications. It calls into question laws that criminalize abortion, that regulate sex work, that police gender expression, that regulate drug use, that restrict

people's ability to modify their own bodies. It calls into question the very idea that the state has the right to regulate bodies at all, except to prevent harm to others.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN #FREETHENIPPLE AND OTHER STRUGGLES FOR FREEDOM

#FreeTheNipple is connected to #MeToo, the movement exposing sexual harassment and assault. Both movements are about the right of women to control their bodies and to not be subject to unwanted touching or display. #FreeTheNipple says you cannot criminalize my body for displaying itself; #MeToo says you cannot touch my body without consent. These are two sides of the same demand: that women's bodies are our own.

#FreeTheNipple is connected to abortion rights and reproductive freedom. Both are about the right to make decisions about one's own body, to not have the state dictate what happens to one's reproductive system. The regulation of female toplessness and the regulation of abortion are both forms of state control over female bodies, both ways that patriarchal power operates through the regulation of embodiment.

#FreeTheNipple is connected to trans rights and the struggle for gender-affirming care. The regulation of trans people's bodies, the denial of access to gender-affirming healthcare, the criminalization of trans existence, are all forms of state control over embodiment. The demand for bodily autonomy encompasses the right of trans people to transition, to access medical care, to live in their bodies without legal punishment.

#FreeTheNipple is connected to sex worker rights and the decriminalization of sex work. Sex workers, many of them women and trans people, have long fought for the right to control their own labor, to have autonomy over their bodies and their sexual expression. The demand for decriminalization is not just about allowing a particular economic activity; it is about recognizing sex workers' right to bodily autonomy.

All of these movements share a common ground: the demand that bodies are not property, that bodily autonomy is a fundamental right, and that the state should not have unlimited power to regulate and control embodiment.

THE NIPPLE AS ENTRY POINT TO BROADER LIBERATION

Lina Esco's genius in choosing the nipple as the focus of #FreeTheNipple was precisely that it provided an entry point to this broader conversation. The nipple is specific enough to make the argument concrete and clear—male and female nipples are identical, yet one is regulated and one is not. But the nipple is also emblematic enough to point toward a much larger set of questions about bodily autonomy, gender justice, and freedom from state control.

By focusing on the nipple, activists have been able to make visible the arbitrary nature of gender-based regulation of bodies. By making this arbitrariness visible, they have opened the possibility of imagining something different—a world in which bodies are not regulated differently based on gender, a world in which people have autonomy over their own embodiment, a world in which the state does not criminalize bodies simply for existing.

The nipple, in other words, is not the goal. The goal is freedom. The goal is a world in which all people—regardless of gender, race, class, ability status, or any other dimension of identity—have the right to move through the world in their own bodies, to represent themselves as they choose, to make decisions about their embodiment without legal punishment or social violence. The nipple is simply the most obvious place to start the fight for that freedom.

A NEW BODY POLITICS

Imagine a different future requires more than demanding that existing systems change. It requires imagining something genuinely new: a way of relating to bodies, to embodiment, to gender, and to the public sphere that is fundamentally different from what patriarchal capitalism has given us.

What would a truly liberated body politics look like? What would it mean to actually achieve the goals that #FreeTheNipple points toward? How would society need to change, not just in law and policy, but in culture and consciousness?

REIMAGINING THE BODY BEYOND THE GENDER BINARY

A new body politics must begin with the recognition that gender is not binary, that not all bodies fit neatly into male/female categories, and that the regulatory systems built on binary categories will necessarily fail and harm those who do not fit.

This means developing language and frameworks that can account for the full diversity of human embodiment and gender expression. It means recognizing trans people, non-binary people, and others whose gender does not fit binary categories not as exceptions or edge cases, but as central to how we understand bodies and gender.

It means that the demand for bodily autonomy cannot be framed as a demand for "female" rights or a demand for "men and women" to be treated equally. It must be a demand for all people to have autonomy over their own embodiment, regardless of gender or how their bodies are perceived.

A new body politics recognizes that bodies are diverse, that the regulatory frameworks built on binary understandings of gender are inadequate, and that genuine freedom requires moving beyond binary categories altogether.

CONSENT, AGENCY, AND THE RIGHT TO SELF-REPRESENTATION

A new body politics is built on the principle of consent. Bodies are not property. Bodily autonomy is a fundamental right. No one should have the right to touch, display, represent, or make decisions about another person's body without that person's consent.

This principle has radical implications. It means that people have the right to make decisions about their own bodies, including decisions about reproduction, about medical treatment, about how they present themselves publicly, about what happens to their bodies. It means that the state does not have unlimited authority to regulate bodies in the name of public health or morality.

It also means that people have the right to represent themselves, to tell the stories about their own bodies, to control the narratives that circulate about their embodiment. It means rejecting the regime in which women are objects of the gaze, in which their bodies are displayed for consumption, in which they are denied control over how their bodies are represented.

A politics of consent and agency means that people should be able to share images of their own bodies, to represent their own embodiment, to participate in the construction of meaning about their own flesh, without fear of legal punishment or social violence.

BUILDING DIGITAL SPACES THAT CENTER MARGINALIZED BODIES

Currently, digital spaces reproduce the hierarchies and erasures of physical space. Marginalized bodies—Black bodies, fat bodies, disabled bodies, queer bodies, trans bodies—are systematically rendered invisible or are hyper-visible in ways that are subject to intense scrutiny and suppression.

A new body politics requires building digital spaces that are different, spaces that center rather than marginalize, spaces in which the full diversity of human embodiment is not just tolerated but celebrated and centered.

This means more than just making content moderation policies more permissive. It means actively designing spaces that promote visibility of marginalized creators, that amplify marginalized voices, that treat marginalized bodies as worthy of representation and celebration rather than as problems to be managed or erased.

It means recognizing that the platforms we have now—Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter—were designed with particular values and by particular people, and those values and people are reflected in how the platforms operate. Building genuinely different digital spaces would require starting from different premises, centering different values, and designing for different purposes.

THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

A new body politics recognizes that the personal is political, that how we relate to our own bodies and the bodies of others is always political, that individual acts of embodiment always have broader political resonance.

When a woman refuses to shave her body, when she allows her body hair to grow, she is making a political statement about her right to her own body. When a fat person refuses to diet, when they insist on taking up space and being visible, they are making a political statement about body autonomy and the right to exist as they are. When a trans person

transitions, when they live in their body as their true gender, they are making a political statement about the right to self-determination.

A new body politics recognizes these individual acts as political. It recognizes that the transformation of individual consciousness and individual practice is part of the broader project of social transformation. It recognizes that how we relate to our own bodies and the bodies of others is part of how we build a liberated world.

THE MANIFESTO

This is the manifesto of #FreeTheNipple, written at a moment when the movement is more than a decade old, when it has achieved significant victories but faces ongoing struggle, when the time has come to articulate clearly what the movement demands and what it envisions for the future.

A DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES FOR BODY EQUALITY

We declare that bodily autonomy is a fundamental human right. All people have the right to make decisions about their own bodies, to determine how they present themselves, to exist in public space without legal punishment or social violence. This right is not conditional on performing biological functions, on conforming to conventional beauty standards, or on meeting anyone else's expectations about what bodies should look like or how they should be covered.

We declare that gender-based discrimination in the regulation of bodies is a violation of fundamental rights. Identical body parts should not be regulated differently based on the gender of the person they are attached to. Identical acts should not be criminalized based on the gender of the person performing them. Any legal regime that treats bodies differently based on gender violates principles of equal protection and bodily autonomy.

We declare that freedom of expression includes the right to represent the human body in art, activism, and personal documentation. The censorship of artistic nudity, of activist representation of bodies, of personal photographs is a violation of freedom of expression. Technology platforms and governments should not have the power to suppress

representations of bodies simply because those representations include nudity or challenge conventional norms about how bodies should be covered.

We declare that artistic freedom is a form of freedom that demands special protection. Artists have the right to create representations of the body, to challenge aesthetic norms, to present embodied realities that dominant culture renders invisible or shameful. This right should be protected even when the representation is controversial, especially when the representation challenges patriarchal norms about gender, sexuality, and embodiment.

We declare that the regulation of women's and marginalized people's bodies is a form of oppression that must be resisted. The systematic regulation, surveillance, and control of women's bodies is central to patriarchal power. The disproportionate regulation of Black bodies, trans bodies, fat bodies, and other marginalized embodiments is central to racism, transphobia, and other systems of oppression. Bodily autonomy for women and marginalized people is necessary for liberation.

We declare that breastfeeding is not obscene and should be visible in public space. The lactating body, engaged in the work of nourishing the young, is not obscene. Breastfeeding should be recognized as a natural biological function that deserves visibility and respect. The hiding and shame-management of breastfeeding represents a form of violence against mothers and against the work of reproduction.

We declare that technology platforms should not have unlimited power to regulate what bodies can be seen and represented. Platforms have become the primary public spheres in which billions of people communicate. When these platforms censor representations of bodies, they are suppressing speech and controlling culture. Platforms should be subject to transparency requirements, appeals processes, and democratic accountability.

We declare that the regulation of bodies is inextricably linked to the regulation of sexuality, reproduction, and gender expression. The fight for bodily autonomy encompasses the fight for reproductive freedom, the fight for sexual autonomy, the fight for the right to

gender-affirming care, and the fight for freedom from sexual violence and coercion. These struggles are connected; victories in any of these domains strengthen the broader struggle for bodily liberation.

ACTIONABLE DEMANDS

We demand that technology platforms reform their content moderation policies to protect artistic expression and bodily autonomy. Specifically, we demand:

- That platforms cease hiding and suppressing hashtags and content related to #FreeTheNipple and bodily autonomy activism.
- That platforms implement meaningful appeals processes for content removals that involve nudity or bodily representation.
- That platforms employ human reviewers, trained in art history and artistic expression, to evaluate content involving nudity and embodiment.
- That platforms establish explicit protections for artistic nudity and representations of the human body.
- That platforms publish transparency reports showing how their policies are being enforced and whether enforcement is discriminatory based on race, gender, or other factors.

We demand that governments decriminalize toplessness and strike down all gender-based clothing regulations. Specifically, we demand:

- That all laws criminalizing toplessness on the basis of gender be repealed or struck down as unconstitutional.
- That governments enact explicit protections for the right to bodily autonomy and the right to present oneself in public without fear of legal punishment for one's embodiment.
- That governments implement enforcement mechanisms to ensure that police and other officials comply with topfreedom rights and do not continue to arrest people for lawful

bodily presentation.

We demand institutional transformation around reproductive justice, gender expression, and sexual autonomy. Specifically, we demand:

- That reproductive healthcare be accessible, affordable, and provided free of judgement or coercion.
- That people have the right to make decisions about reproduction, including abortion, without government interference.
- That gender-affirming healthcare be accessible and covered by insurance.
- That sex work be decriminalized, allowing people to engage in sexual labor safely and with legal protection.
- That consent-based sexuality be protected and that laws criminalizing victimless consensual sexual activity be repealed.

We demand that education systems teach comprehensive, affirming, consent-based sexuality and body education. Specifically, we demand:

- That young people learn about bodily autonomy, consent, and healthy sexuality.
- That education about gender expression, trans identities, and non-binary embodiment be included in curricula.
- That education challenge narrow beauty standards and promote acceptance of diverse bodies.

THE VISION: A WORLD BEYOND SHAME

Ultimately, the vision of #FreeTheNipple is a world in which bodies are no longer sites of shame and regulation. It is a world in which people can exist in their own bodies without fear,

without hiding, without apologizing. It is a world in which embodiment is recognized as a fundamental aspect of human existence deserving of dignity and respect.

It is a world in which women are not divided into categories of respectable and shameful based on how they cover their bodies. It is a world in which breastfeeding is ordinary and visible. It is a world in which trans people can transition without legal barriers or medical gatekeeping. It is a world in which fat bodies and disabled bodies and aging bodies and all the diversity of human embodiment is seen, respected, and celebrated.

It is a world in which bodies are not property, in which they are not owned by men or by states, in which they are not available for consumption and use by others. It is a world in which bodies are simply bodies, existing for themselves, for their own pleasure and survival and connection, not for production or reproduction or the satisfaction of others' desires.

This is the world that #FreeTheNipple points toward. This is the liberation that we are fighting for. And this fight continues.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: COMPLETE TIMELINE OF #FREETHENIPPLE (2012–2026)

2012

Lina Esco begins production of *Free the Nipple* documentary in New York. Multiple arrests of female participants during topless demonstrations.

2013

Film completed; begins festival circuit at independent film festivals.

2014

Facebook removes promotional materials for the film. #FreeTheNipple hashtag goes viral. Celebrity support amplifies movement. Movement expands internationally.

2015

Iceland: Teenage activist Adda Smaradottir faces harassment; MP Björt Ólafsdóttir posts topless in solidarity. Taipei: Five women organize topless protest; Facebook censors images. Courtney Demone's #DoIHaveBoobsNow project documents algorithmic bias in moderation.

2016

Brighton Free the Nipple marches begin. Bernie Sanders rally topless protests; Anni Ma and Tiernan Hebron arrested; file federal lawsuit against LAPD.

2018

Facebook censors Venus of Willendorf and apologizes after global outcry.

2019

#WeTheNipple protest outside Facebook HQ with Spencer Tunick (125 nude protestors). Free the Nipple Fort Collins federal court victory: toplessness rights extended to Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Kansas, Oklahoma.

2020

#IWantToSeeNyome campaign highlights disproportionate censorship of Black and fat bodies.
Instagram pledges policy review.

2021

Vienna Tourist Board launches "Vienna Strips on OnlyFans" campaign; wins Golden Lion at Cannes. Instagram censors and then restores Madres Paralelas poster after public pressure.

2024–2025

Continued platform censorship and algorithmic suppression. Growing scholarly attention to algorithmic bias and platform governance.

2026

Don't Delete Art × Free the Nipple collaboration (March–April) brings major scholarly and artistic voices to platform censorship issues. Berlin Free the Nipple bike ride at Brandenburg Gate (July) demonstrates continued international organizing and movement persistence.

APPENDIX B: LEGAL PRECEDENTS AND CASE SUMMARIES

New York Toplessness Case (1990)

A woman arrested for going topless in New York challenged the state statute criminalizing female toplessness. The court ruled that the statute violated equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision established the legal principle that gender-based dress codes are subject to heightened scrutiny and must serve an important governmental interest. This was the first major state court decision legalizing female toplessness on constitutional grounds.

New York Toplessness Settlement (2005)

Fifteen years after the 1990 decision, a woman arrested for toplessness in New York sued the city for violating her constitutional rights. The city settled for \$29,000, acknowledging that police had violated the established legal right to go topless.

Free the Nipple Fort Collins v. City of Fort Collins (2019)

Federal court ruled that ordinances criminalizing female but not male toplessness violate the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection guarantee. The ruling applied to six states: Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Kansas, and Oklahoma. This was the largest geographic expansion of toplessness rights since the 1990 New York decision.

L'Origine du Monde Case (2011–2019)

French teacher Frédéric Durand-Baïssas sued Facebook after his account was suspended for posting an image of Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde*. A Paris court ruled that Facebook had wrongfully suppressed the account and must allow sharing of the famous artwork. Facebook complied but continued to prohibit most photographic nudity.

Amy Greenfield Case (2010)

YouTube removed two experimental films by artist Amy Greenfield. After intervention from the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation

(EFF), YouTube restored the films, setting a precedent for artistic protection of nudity on digital platforms.

APPENDIX C: PLATFORM NUDITY POLICIES — A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This appendix would contain detailed comparative analysis of nudity policies across Meta (Facebook/Instagram), X/Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, and other major platforms, including the specific language used in policies, how policies are enforced, the appeals processes available to users, and documented examples of bias in enforcement. Due to space constraints, we note that such analysis would require substantial technical research and is beyond the scope of this version.

APPENDIX D: ARTIST STATEMENTS AND ACTIVIST PROFILES

This appendix would include statements from artists, activists, and scholars who have been involved in #FreeTheNipple-related work, including Lina Esco, Courtney Demone, Nyome Nicholas-Williams, Carolina Pasti, Soraya Chemaly, Safiya U. Noble, Lee Rowland, and others. It would also include profiles of key activist organizations and collectives dedicated to platform accountability and bodily autonomy. Due to space constraints, we note that substantial original research would be required to compile these statements and profiles.

APPENDIX E: RESOURCES FOR ACTIVISTS — ORGANIZATIONS, LEGAL AID, AND DIGITAL SAFETY GUIDES

Organizations

National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) — Dedicated to fighting censorship and protecting artistic freedom. Provides legal support and advocacy.

Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) — Defends digital privacy, free speech, and innovation rights.

Free the Nipple — The original movement organization, continuing advocacy for toplessness rights globally.

Don't Delete Art — International collective fighting platform censorship of art and artistic expression.

Center for Reproductive Rights — Provides legal advocacy for reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy.

Digital Safety Resources

Digital activists should be aware of strategies for protecting their privacy and security online, including use of VPNs, encrypted messaging applications, and secure document storage. The resources listed above provide detailed guides on digital security for activists.

APPENDIX F: FREE THE NIPPLE FILM — PRODUCTION NOTES, DISTRIBUTION CHALLENGES, AND CULTURAL IMPACT

Free the Nipple (2012–2014) directed by Lina Esco is a documentary that explores the legal status of female toplessness in New York and follows activists engaging in topless protests and demonstrations. The film faced significant distribution challenges due to its content. Many theaters were reluctant to promote or show the film. Festival programmers were uncertain about whether the film was appropriate for festival programming.

The film's most significant impact came not through traditional theatrical distribution, but through its viral circulation on social media and the resulting #FreeTheNipple hashtag campaign. The film itself became almost secondary to the movement that it inspired, which quickly outgrew the specific film to become a broader global movement for bodily autonomy. The film's legacy is to have provided a clear, focused articulation of the basic injustice being addressed: that male and female bodies are regulated differently by law, that this differential regulation violates principles of equal protection, and that the regulation is ultimately arbitrary and unjustifiable. By making this injustice visible, the film created the conditions for a movement that would persist and evolve for over a decade.

COLOPHON

This book was produced using research compiled from historical records, legal documents, media archives, activist documentation, and original reporting. It represents an effort to document the #FreeTheNipple movement from its origins in 2012 through 2026, and to situate that movement within broader struggles for bodily autonomy, gender equality, and freedom from surveillance and control. The typographic design uses fonts from Google Fonts: Cinzel (display), EB Garamond (body text), Poppins (sans-serif accents), and Lora (serif accents). The color palette reflects the design traditions of Landry Industries Press: navy (#0F1F3D) and gold (#C19A3E).

Landry Industries Press

Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada

2026