


maternity action
annual
report



2009-10



2009-10 was the first year of full time operation for Maternity Action.

We developed our information resources to become a primary source of online guidance about maternity and parental rights at work, in the benefits system and in the NHS. Our influencing work has created change in legislation and policy and we have built valuable coalitions to improve the lives of pregnant women, new mothers and their families.

Maternity rights in the recession

Some unscrupulous employers have used the recession as an excuse to get rid of employees who are pregnant or new mothers. It is against the law to select someone for redundancy because she is pregnant or on maternity leave and we have been actively campaigning to ensure the law is followed.

We called a meeting with other advice and campaigning groups to discuss the issue and set up the Alliance Against Pregnancy Discrimination in the Workplace. We raised the problem of pregnancy discrimination with Ministers, gained media coverage and built awareness through community networks.

The pregnancy discrimination provisions of the Equality Bill reduced women's rights. We successfully campaigned to get the legislation changed and preserve effective protection against pregnancy discrimination at work.

Our information sheets on redundancy during pregnancy and maternity leave answer the specific questions faced by women. More than 6000 people have used these in the past year.

Breastfeeding on return to work

Enabling women to continue breastfeeding on return to work makes it possible for more women to breastfeed longer and helps normalize breastfeeding. Return to work remains a major reason why women cease breastfeeding.

We produced an information sheet about women's rights to continue breastfeeding on return to work. This has been widely used by infant feeding coordinators, midwives and breastfeeding women.

The law in this area remains weak and we have advocated for stronger protections. Disappointingly, we did not persuade the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills to strengthen these protections when it legislated for the right to transfer up to six months maternity leave to fathers and partners. We are continuing to work with our partners in the Breastfeeding Manifesto Coalition to promote change.



Supporting asylum seekers

Asylum seeker and refugee women have extremely poor maternal health outcomes. Conditions in their home countries may not be conducive to good health however the health of asylum seekers declines after arrival in the UK. This indicates that experiences in the UK are a major contributor to ill-health.

We have raised awareness amongst health professionals about the maternity experiences of asylum seeking women. We made presentations to the Royal College of Midwives annual conference, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Consumer Forum, Middlesex University midwifery students, and others.

We are particularly concerned about the situation of women whose asylum claim has been refused. Many are left without the right to work or any form of financial support until six weeks before their due date. We have begun working in partnership with the Asylum Support Appeals Project, the Royal College of Midwives and Asylum Aid to obtain support for pregnant women earlier in their pregnancy.

Charging for maternity care

Many vulnerable migrant women are asked to pay for NHS maternity care. This can leave women on very low incomes or living in destitution with bills in excess of £3000. Many women are not prepared to incur a bill they cannot pay and do not attend for maternity care. Others are wrongly refused care or deterred from seeking care.

We have campaigned on this issue as part of the Entitlement Working Group which is a network of voluntary organizations and professional groups seeking to protect access to healthcare for vulnerable groups.

We developed a short information sheet on entitlement to free NHS maternity care for women from abroad. This outlines women's rights in accessible language.

Migrant women and Maternity Allowance

We discovered that many migrant women and community workers were unaware of their entitlement to Maternity Allowance. This payment is not classed as 'public funds' so is available to women who have 'no recourse to public funds' as a condition of their visa.

We found that the information on Government websites and advice lines was incomplete and, in some cases, incorrect. We produced a briefing paper on the issue and successfully campaigned for improvements in the information provided by the Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions.

Raising awareness about pregnancy discrimination

"It's extraordinarily difficult to pursue an action for pregnancy discrimination," reckons Ros Bragg, director of Maternity Action. "Whilst the law is clear, it's often very difficult to prove. Plus, women who are in the late stages of pregnancy, or at home looking after a baby, or who have just returned to work, simply don't have the time or energy."

The Observer, 14 June 2009



Web-based information

All our information sheets are available free of charge on our website. We give permission to community workers, health professionals, advisors, union representatives and others to copy and distribute the resources.

We have extensive material on employment rights which address the specific questions which women and their partners encounter in the workplace. These guide parents through maternity and paternity leave and pay, flexible working requests, redundancy, breastfeeding on return to work, and a variety of other issues.

Entitlement to benefits and other forms of support vary according to immigration status. Our information sheets for women from abroad cover EU nationals, asylum seekers, refugees, refused asylum seekers, women with 'no recourse to public funds', indefinite leave to remain, and undocumented migrants.

Usage of our website has increased dramatically during 2009-10. By January 2010, we were logging more than 8 000 sessions each month. We are recommended by DirectGov, the Health and Safety Executive, Trade Union Congress, Citizens Advice Bureau 'Adviser Net', and many others.

Financial summary

The financial year 2009-10 was the first year of independent financial operation. We received income of £49 617 and incurred expenditure of £41 596.

We gratefully acknowledge support from City Parochial Foundation, Equality and Human Rights Commission, Eleanor Rathbone Foundation and UNISON.

Board and staff

Thanks to our hardworking staff: Rosalind Bragg, Director, Katie Wood, Legal Officer, Katie Warwick, Policy Support Officer, and to Rachael Owens, Naoise McGeer and Eve Blair.

Maternity Action board of trustees: Moyra Rushby, Chairperson, James Rowe, Treasurer, Alison Macfarlane, Maurina Baron

