

Creating a Mother-Friendly Workplace

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The importance of enabling women to continue breastfeeding once they have returned to the workplace has been strengthened with the new Convention on Maternity Protection from the International Labour Organisation. This new convention broadens the scope of maternity coverage found in previous ILO instruments, extends maternity leave and secures paid breastfeeding breaks for mothers who are employed. The ILO, a specialized United Nations agency, promotes social justice and internationally recognised human and labour rights. Although it is the responsibility of member states to incorporate the Convention's provisions into law, these standards have strong moral authority around the world.

Information for employers, about supporting breastfeeding employees, is available in the Department of Labour's document '*Breastfeeding in the Workplace: An Employer's Guide to Making it Work*' (2005). It can be downloaded from the website www.ers.dol.govt.nz. Employers need to know that it is advantageous to support women who choose to continue breastfeeding. 'The Human Rights Act (section 74) provides that preferential treatment based on pregnancy and childbirth is permitted. Health and Safety regulations also do not prevent employers from allowing a baby to be breastfed in the workplace, provided this can be done under healthy and safe conditions'. Maintaining the breastfeeding relationship may require accommodations to the workload or the hours worked, provision for regular contact for breastfeeding and / or additional rest periods to support lactation. In some situations, this may include time and privacy for breast milk expression.

Employers need to know the importance of developing policies and provisions that are available to all employees in their organisation rather than just a select few.

In New Zealand, recent legislation on Paid Parental Leave came into effect in July 2002. These changes support eligible families to have access to paid parental leave for fourteen weeks. This leave can encourage the family/whanau to maintain breastfeeding by supporting either the mother to remain at home or the father's care of the infant; in turn, he can support the mother to combine breastfeeding and work. However, not all New Zealand families have access to paid maternity or parental leave. Currently there is a threshold for part-time workers who must have worked ten hours per week over the preceding six months in order to qualify. The Department of Labour is reviewing Parental leave provisions including examining those for contract workers and the self employed. Families who do not receive maternity leave or parental leave may be eligible for Parental Tax Credits, Family/whanau Assistance or other relevant benefits, available through Work & Income New Zealand (WINZ).

"For breastfeeding mothers who return to work, workplace support is vital to the successful continuation of breastfeeding"

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1. Ensure that workers are aware of New Zealand's existing maternity and parental leave entitlements under law and whether there are additional company policies including the company's policy for breastfeeding in the workplace.
2. Ensure that women on maternity leave are aware that their position is kept for them for their return, or where this is not possible that the woman has been advised in writing and that she can have preference for a similar position for six months after her leave ends.
3. Support affordable infant and child care at or near the workplace, and provide transportation for mothers to join their babies.
4. Offer flexible work hours to breastfeeding women, such as later starts, part-time schedules and job sharing.
5. Provide daily breaks for breastfeeding or expressing milk. 'ILO recommends at least 90 minutes of paid breastfeeding breaks per working day.'
6. Provide comfortable, private facilities for breastfeeding and expressing breast milk and storage for expressed breast milk.
7. Keep the work environment clean and safe from hazardous wastes and chemicals. '...Existing health and safety management systems (hazard identification and controls under the Health and Safety in Employment Act) should already have identified any actual or potential hazards for employees and other people in the workplace. Another risk assessment may need to be done bearing in mind the particular needs of a breastfeeding woman and her baby (including a risk assessment of any facilities or storage space provided).

The law requires employers:

to protect the health and safety of all workers and any other people (e.g. a baby and the baby's care-giver) who are at work, or in the vicinity of work (s5 Health and Safety in Employment Act) and to 'take all practicable steps' to prevent health and safety risks to employees and others at work or in the vicinity of work' .

8. Encourage co-workers and management to have a positive, accepting attitude toward breastfeeding colleagues.
9. Inform women workers and unions about maternity-leave policy and other rights.
10. Encourage a network of supportive women in worker's groups who can help women to combine breastfeeding and work.