

Maternity Protection Campaign

Support maternity protection and work-family policies: despite some progress, globally more than 800 million women workers, or 41 per cent, still don't have adequate maternity protection, and take-up rates among men of parental leave are low. Could we not design maternity protection and work-family policies that are more inclusive, and supportive of gender equality?⁴

– Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General, 2015



MP Coalition meeting with ILO Director-General, Juan Somavia, 1999.

Following the 1993 theme of the Mother-Friendly Workplace Initiative, WABA along with other international NGOs, particularly IBFAN, campaigned at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) for better maternity protection (MP) from 1998 to 2000. Global standards for MP were at risk of deterioration at the hands of a few industrialised governments and the NGOs could not allow this. Industry backed by the milk-manufacturing industrialised countries proposed to make breastfeeding breaks optional, risking all hope of breastfeeding becoming a maternity entitlement. Dr Ted Greiner recalls how this campaign was so significant in halting major backsliding in international standards for breastfeeding and working women.

As part of the process leading up to the Innocenti Meeting, Sida sent me to the ILO to explore their orientation toward maternity protection in 1990, and I presented quite a depressing paper reporting that three of their departments were all opposed to strengthening the existing convention – each for different reasons (See <http://global-breastfeeding.org/pdf/Brasilia.pdf>). A few years later, I put together a website on the issue of women and work. This was incorporated into the WABA website and presented arguments that could be used to counter each of the ILO concerns. Perhaps the achievement of WABA and the MP coalition that is most etched in historical stone is the way it managed to lobby delegates to the ILO meeting in Geneva in 2000, which established the text for the new Maternity Protection Convention 183 and Recommendation 191. Rather than weakening the existing convention (which would have ensured more widespread ratification), WABA managed to get delegates to vote for its strengthening. This helped establish stronger normative goals for which the breastfeeding community could advocate.

*– Ted Greiner, former WABA SC member and
Research Task Force Coordinator*

4. “The future of work must also deal with the future of women at work” Statement by Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, 8 March 2015.