

Numerous accounts have been shared about this campaign to save and strengthen the ILO MP Convention, recounted by those who were part of the advocacy team. While it would be too much to list everyone's story, it is noteworthy that members of the team made such an important contribution to change the lives of working women and their chances to breastfeed by ensuring that the highest possible global standard is set at the UN level!



*Breastfeeding is beset by hurdles as women pursue work. WABA's realignment of the Women and Work Task Force focus was on the Maternity Protection Campaign, timed for the drafting of the ILO Maternity Protection Convention 183 in 1999. I was a witness to this historical process with UNICEF, WABA and IBFAN forming a coalition to lobby the tripartite groups: employers, trade union and government on labour and employment. What totally moved me was the statement by the woman delegate from Ghana responding in desperation and exasperation to the male delegates – who were defining what a woman is, what work is, what a child is – as they crafted the provisions. She asked: "What if we women of today, declared to the world that we don't want to have babies anymore? Who will take over the job of sustaining humanity?" There was a deafening silence. Later, it moved the drafting activity faster amidst debate with the aggressive exporting milk-manufacturing countries who voted as one bloc. Breastfeeding provision almost lost if not for the work of lobbyists like Dr Marina Rea from Brazil and I from the Philippines, who were part of the WABA-IBFAN coalition lobby group. The two of us eyed the Arab delegation seated together and pushed for the 'one vote for all' strategy. When the Committee Head in the room asked for a final vote for 'breastfeeding at work', Marina pushed the hand of the delegate from Jordan and the other eight countries raised up their hands and voted in unison – as I whispered to them, "The Quran recommends two years breastfeeding. Muhammad was wet-nursed too." Breastfeeding won the YES vote at the 2000 ILO Conference! WHAT A VICTORY!*

*Another behind-the-scene incident in the making of ILO Maternity Protection 183 involved the delegate from Thailand. I was trying to explain how working women can manage breastfeeding empowerment at the workplace. He claimed that it was impossible for women who work outside the home. I showed him a graphic illustration on how to express breastmilk by hand, involving a bag from the Ivory Coast. It was from Dr Koulibali, a government delegate who was a pro-breastfeeding advocate. The Thai delegate covered his face in shame.*

*– Ines Fernandez, former WABA Women and Work Task Force co-coordinator*