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About the rights of pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace

Contents

About the rights of pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace	2
Health and safety at work	2
Protection from pregnancy and maternity discrimination	2
Flexible working	3
Breastfeeding on return to work	3
Leave and pay for new mothers	4
Research on pregnancy and maternity discrimination	5
<hr/>	
About the survey	6
About the respondents	7
Survey Findings	8
About being pregnant at work	8
Health and safety	9
Unfavourable treatment	10
<hr/>	
About maternity leave, adoption leave and pay	13
Length of leave	13
Types of maternity pay	14
Reasons for losing out on maternity leave and pay	15
More about being pregnant at work	16
Health and safety issues	16
<hr/>	
About returning - or not returning - to work	26
Returning to the same employer	26
Not returning to the same employer	27
More about returning, or not returning, to work	28
<hr/>	
Conclusions	39
Recommendations	41

About the rights of pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace

Health and safety at work

Pregnant workers and new mothers who have given birth in the last six months or are currently breastfeeding are protected by the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, the Employment Rights Act 1996, the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 and the Equality Act 2010. On being notified about a pregnancy, employers are required to carry out an individual risk assessment and to address any hazards identified, either by making changes to the work environment, offering alternative work, or, if neither of these are possible, suspending the pregnant woman on full pay. Common hazards, as identified by the Health and Safety Executive, include long periods of sitting or standing, heavy lifting, stressful working conditions and exposure to harmful substances.¹

Protection from pregnancy and maternity discrimination

The Equality Act sets out a 'protected period' during which women who are pregnant or have recently given birth are explicitly protected from discrimination. During this 'protected period' a woman is protected against discrimination that arises as a result of:

- her pregnancy
- any illness related to her pregnancy, or absence because of that illness
- being on compulsory maternity leave
- seeking to take, taking or having taken ordinary or additional maternity leave

The 'protected period' currently runs from the start of a woman's pregnancy until: she returns to work from ordinary or additional maternity leave (if she is entitled to either form of leave), or two weeks after the end of her pregnancy, if she is not entitled to maternity leave.

Under Regulation 10 of the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999 if, during an employee's maternity leave a redundancy situation arises and it is not practicable by reason of redundancy for the employer to continue to employ her under her existing

¹ The Health and Safety Executive, Protecting pregnant workers and new mothers, common risks <https://www.hse.gov.uk/mothers/employer/common-risks.htm>

contract, the employee is entitled to be offered a suitable alternative vacancy (where one exists). These regulations have been amended to include adoptive parents and those taking shared parental leave, and in 2024 expanded to include the period of pregnancy. The protected period lasts until 18 months after the child is born or placed for adoption.

The Employment Rights Act includes provision for the government to enhance this protection, making it unlawful to dismiss pregnant women and new mothers except in specific circumstances. A consultation on the details of these protections closed on 15th January 2026.² The new law will be implemented in 2027.

Flexible working

All employees, regardless of pregnancy or maternity, have a right to request flexible working, from their first day in a job. Flexible working includes requesting part-time working, changes to shift patterns and homeworking. Employers must seriously consider such requests and refusals can only be made for legitimate business reasons. Changes introduced by the Employment Rights Act aimed at supporting access to flexible working will come into effect in 2027.

Breastfeeding on return to work

The UK NHS aligns with the World Health Organisation in recommending exclusive breastfeeding for six months, followed by breastmilk as the main drink in the first year and continued feeding of breastmilk alongside solid foods into the child's second year or beyond.³ While breastfeeding mothers in the UK have no legal right to either paid or unpaid breaks, other rights and protections exist under health and safety and sex discrimination law, including protection from risks in the work environment, suitable rest facilities that may

² UK Government, Consultations and documents from Make Work Pay, 10 October 2024 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/make-work-pay>

³ NHS, Your breastfeeding questions answered, 18 April 2023 <https://www.nhs.uk/baby/breastfeeding-and-bottle-feeding/breastfeeding/your-questions-answered/> and How to stop breastfeeding, 16 March 2023 <https://www.nhs.uk/baby/breastfeeding-and-bottle-feeding/breastfeeding/how-to-stop/>

also be appropriate for expressing and protection from sexual harassment.⁴ This is in addition to the right to request flexible working which applies to all employees.

Leave and pay for new mothers

Pregnant employees are entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave and the right to return to their jobs. This is a day one right and separate from any entitlement to pay during this time, which is subject to different conditions and paid for only 39 weeks. Similar conditions apply to adoptive parents.

Pregnant employees and workers who meet qualifying conditions, including having been in their job for 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth and earning at least £125 per week, can be eligible for Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP). SMP is paid at 90% of average earnings for the first six weeks, followed by 33 weeks on the weekly flat rate of £187.18.⁵

Self-employed pregnant women and others who do not qualify for SMP can qualify for Maternity Allowance (MA), if they have worked for at least 26 weeks in the 66 weeks before the expected week of childbirth and have earned over £30 per week on average in at least 13 of those weeks. MA is paid at the weekly flat rate of £187.18, or 90% of average earnings, whichever is lower, for the full 39 weeks.

An adoptive mother who has been employed for at least 26 weeks ending with the matching week and earned at least £125 on average per week in the eight weeks ending with the matching week, can qualify for Statutory Adoption Pay (SAP). SAP mirrors SMP with an initial six weeks on 90% of weekly earnings, followed by the flat rate for 33 weeks.

Since 2015, Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and pay (ShPP) have been available to eligible parents, allowing them to share the mother's maternity leave or transfer it to the father or partner. SPL is not widely used and take-up has been estimated at between 2%-4% of all

⁴ Maternity Action, Continuing to breastfeed when you return to work, April 2025
<https://maternityaction.org.uk/advice/continuing-to-breastfeed-when-you-return-to-work/>

⁵ 2025-26 rates

fathers and second parents, likely attributable to its complexity and the requirement on mothers to 'give away' their leave entitlement.⁶ ShPP is paid at the flat rate only.

Occupational Maternity Pay is paid by some employers who choose to top up the statutory minimum. Schemes vary widely and can be as generous as six months on full pay, or as modest as a few hundred pounds extra for a few weeks. The flat rate of £187.18 per week is currently worth less than half (44%) of the National Living Wage and just over one third (35%) of women's median weekly earnings.⁷

Research on pregnancy and maternity discrimination

According to the 2019 Parental Rights Survey (2023), 30% of women respondents had experienced 'unfair treatment' such as being given unsuitable work (11% of respondents), being so badly treated they felt they had to leave their job (9%) and being subjected to 'unpleasant remarks' from employers and colleagues (9%). In the previous survey (then known as the Maternity and Paternity Rights and Women Returners Survey) published in 2011, this figure was half of this - 15%.⁸

Other research from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (released in 2016 but not replicated since) found that while 77% of mothers had experienced one of a number of defined 'negative or possibly discriminatory experience[s] during pregnancy, maternity leave, and/or on return from maternity leave', two thirds (66%) considered their employer to have 'willingly supported their needs as both a pregnant woman and as a mother of a young baby'. The report noted that qualitative data from follow up interviews indicated that this could be at least partly explained by 'mothers' low expectations of support'.⁹

⁶ Briefing: Shared Parental Leave Evaluation Report 2023 July 2023

<https://maternityaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ShPIEvalParentalSurveyBriefing-July2022-FINAL.pdf>

⁷ Maternity Action, May 2025. Pushed into Poverty, Appendix A <https://maternityaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Pushed-into-Poverty-2025-FINAL.pdf>

⁸ Maternity Action, November 2023. The impact on mothers and families of low maternity payments and the cost of living crisis: a literature review <https://maternityaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/LitReviewFinaltextUpdated.pdf>

⁹ EHRC, 2016. Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination and Disadvantage: Experiences of Mothers https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/mothers_report_-_bis-16-146-pregnancy-and-maternity-related-discrimination-and-disadvantage-experiences-of-mothers_1.pdf

About the survey

2,300 women responded to the survey, which was distributed to UNISON's women members between the 22nd of September and 6th of October, 2025. All respondents were UNISON members, and had a baby or adopted a child at any point since January 2022.

Establishing each individual respondent's employment status and contractual circumstances was not within the scope of this research. Instead, the survey focused on women's experiences of pregnancy in the workplace (where applicable) and of returning to work, or not returning to work, after their maternity leave or adoption leave.

The survey consisted of 29 questions, the majority of which were multiple choice and five of which included space for further elaboration. Not all respondents were asked all 29 questions as some followed up on previous topics. Two questions were open ended, asking if there was anything more the respondent wanted to tell us about being pregnant at work (where applicable) or about returning/not returning to work after maternity or adoption leave. Qualitative responses were thematically analysed, providing further insight into the issues identified.

Comparison of responses across different demographics was carried out where numbers were sufficient to allow this. Questions which only applied to a smaller sub-section of respondents are only reported in full and have not been broken down further, as this would impact on reliability. Sector-specific analysis was only applied to the health sector, education, social care, local government, police and probation services and the community and charity sector as responses from the remaining sectors in the demographic section (energy, environment, transport, water and the private sector) were too few to produce reliable results.

About the respondents

All respondents were UNISON members and had come into motherhood either through birth or adoption at any point since January 2022. A small number of respondents stated that it was their same-sex partner who had given birth to their child during this time and a smaller number were caring for a baby who was not their biological or adopted child.

Nearly 3 in 5 respondents were full time workers (58%) with most of the remaining 2 in 5 (42%) declaring themselves part-time workers. Just under one percent of respondents worked hours that were 'variable each week'.

When asked specifically whether their work contract was a zero-hours contract, only a very small minority (1%) said yes, with a further 2% stating they were 'unsure' about this.

Respondents were categorised into five income brackets, ranging from below £11,000 to £51,000 and above per annum. 2 in 5 of respondents (40%) were in the second to lowest bracket, earning between £11,000 and £27,000. Just over 1 in 4 (27%) was in the middle category of £28,000 to £37,000 per annum, followed by just over 1 in 5 (22%) in the next to highest bracket, at £38,000 - £50,000 a year.

Figure 1: Personal income before tax

Income bracket	Percentage	No. of respondents
< £11,000	4%	93
£11,000 - £27,000	40%	922
£28,000 - £37,000	27%	615
£38,000 - £50,000	22%	502
£51,000 +	7%	172

Respondent occupations were mainly located in the health sector (37%), education (21%), social care (15%), local government (11%), police and probation services (6%) and the community and charity sector (2%).

The cohort was distributed across all regions and nations of the UK. While some over-representation (for example from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) as well as under-representation (for example from Greater London and the South-East) were present in the sample, the geographical distribution was sufficient to enable a UK-wide analysis.

Workplaces with an active union presence may offer more favourable conditions for parents. For example, research shows that fathers at unionised workplaces are more likely to take Shared Parental Leave.¹⁰ It is possible that the universal union membership among survey respondents had some impact on the findings.

Survey Findings

About being pregnant at work

Antenatal appointments

A majority of respondents (71%) were able to attend their antenatal appointments during working hours without losing out on pay. However, 7% said they only got unpaid time off, and another 3% had not been allowed to attend such appointments during working hours. Among the 11% of respondents who chose 'other', about half told us they had not needed the time off, while the other half had been pressured into not attending during working hours, told to use annual leave or make up the time on their return.

"I was allowed to attend appointments, but the guilt and pressure put on me to come back after every appointment or make sure they were as early or late as possible was unreal and a layer of stress that was not needed."

"Yes, I got paid time off work but my manager set up a meeting with me to ask me why there were appointments during working hours. I needed to share the University policy and the UK policy where states that by law you can take this time off because appointments are only at those times."

"I got paid time off work for this but it was made clear to me that it wasn't acceptable to take time off work. I was made to feel guilty about it and asked to work back the hours I had missed."

"I got one hour and anything additional came out of flexi which is unfair as hospital antenatal apts can take a few hours."

¹⁰ BEIS/DBT, June 2023. Shared Parental Leave evaluation

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/649d54be45b6a2000c3d4539/shared-parental-leave-evaluation-report-2023.pdf>

“I think I was entitled to paid time off but I would usually need to make up some of my hours due to pressures of my workload.”

The higher the woman’s income, the more likely she was to have been given paid time off for antenatal appointments. 67% in the lowest income group had benefited from this, gradually increasing up to 92% in the highest.

Access to paid time off for antenatal appointments was higher in education (92%), police and probation (91%), local government (90%) and the community and charity sector (90%) and lower among respondents working in social care (77%) and healthcare (71%).

Health and safety

Three quarters (74%) of respondents stated that their employer had carried out a health and safety (H&S) assessment during their pregnancy, while 2 out of 10 (20%) said no such assessment had taken place. A smaller number (7%) were unsure.

The highest earners were the least likely of all to have had a H&S assessment - a little over half of this group (55%) responded yes to this, compared to the lowest earners, who were the second least likely at 68%. Notably, the most likely group to have had a health and safety assessment was the second to lowest earners - nearly 8 in 10 (78%).

Women in some sectors, notably police and probation (84%), education (77%) and health (76%) were significantly more likely to have had a H&S assessment compared to respondents working in others, notably social care (68%) or local government (65%).

All respondents, regardless of their earlier answer to the health and safety assessment question, were asked whether any adjustments had been made to their working conditions because of health and safety concerns. Almost half (47%) stated that adjustments had been made to their workload and that this had been done in a way that was helpful to them. One quarter (26%) responded that no adjustments had been made, and that they felt none were needed. Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) said that no adjustments had been made, but that they felt this would have been needed. In a small number of cases (4%) adjustments had been made which the respondent felt were not necessary or appropriate and 1 in 20 respondents (5%) were unsure whether any adjustments had been made.

Among respondents who had seen some adjustments, only a very small minority (0.6%) had been suspended on full pay. A further 34% had been given other work and 66% (having opted for the ‘other’ category) described a variety of helpful adjustments ranging from reduced workloads and working from home to equipment like back rests and pilates

balls being supplied. However, a significant number of respondents also described struggling with their working conditions and having to fight for their adjustments.

“Working from home 2 days a week which was not sufficient. I should not have been carrying out clinical work with risky service users when heavily pregnant on my own.”

“I was unable to walk unaided without crutches. I commute from outside of London. My manager reluctantly allowed me to work from home and was pushing me to start maternity leave early. My role did not require me to be office based.”

“I got to work from home, although my manager tried to stop this.”

“I had a slight change to my duties on paper but was rarely followed. Then second time now my Risk Assessment isn’t followed when I’m trying my best to follow it. Told not to be solo in class but my class teacher regularly leaves me solo.”

“I was given a security alarm and able to reject seeing risky patients but I had to request this and push for it.”

“Some of the risk assessment was useful, so I was unable to attend scene if we had a CBRN/HazMat incident on site. However, I was placed in stressful situations that were unnecessary and was not given the right support by my line manager at the time. In retrospect, it should have been agreed that I had to step down from some of my duties when I became impacted by them in my third trimester causing symptoms of stress and pre-eclampsia.”

“Removed from unsafe child eventually (took my partner emailing in after I was assaulted and threatened multiple times) for anything to be done. Outside duties were limited eventually - was still expected to stand outside for 30 minutes in the heatwaves. Staff were concerned and complained on my behalf.”

“My night shifts were changed to late shifts, however I was made to do this via a doctor’s note instead of through a risk assessment. It took me a long time of asking for this to be changed before it was actually done.”

Unfavourable treatment

Survey respondents were asked whether they experienced any unfavourable treatment at work in relation to their pregnancy or any pregnancy-related health issue. 7 in 10 respondents (71%) said no, while just over 1 in 5 (22%) said yes. A small number (7%) were unsure. The latter two groups were asked to select as many as applicable among a

number of pre-defined categories and/or to provide details of any treatment falling outside of these categories.

Lower earners were significantly more likely than higher earners to respond 'yes' or 'unsure' to the question on unfavourable treatment - almost 3 in 10 (30%) on an annual income of less than £11,000 told us that they had experienced such treatment. In the two highest income categories, the number of women telling us about experiencing poor treatment was lower - around 2 in 10.

Women working in the community and charity sector and women working in the health sector were the most likely to state that they experienced unfavourable treatment at work, with around 1 in 4 responding yes to this question (27% and 26% respectively).

Figure 2: Types of unfavourable treatment

Answer Choices	Percentage	No. of respondents
Bullying or harassment	26%	161
Loss of opportunities (such as a promotion or pay rise that you think you would have otherwise been given)	34%	208
Redundancy or dismissal	5%	28
Stopped being offered work	10%	63
Lack of accommodation of pregnancy related health issue/s	38%	233
Other (please specify)	31%	194

A large number of respondents who chose the 'other' category told us about exposure to highly stressful and potentially dangerous working conditions, many of which fitted into the 'lack of accommodation of pregnancy related health issue/s' category.

"Shortstaffing issue caused me to be exposed to and hit by aggressive patients and do pad checks of quadriplegic and bariatric patients."

"Expected to lift heavy items, being assaulted regularly."

"Being put in dangerous situations with children known to be targeting myself."

"Placed into bays which could cause harm to my baby & wouldn't allow me to move (i.e. shingle bays)."

“Made to continue heavy work load and moving and handling even to heavy pregnancy which consultant was not happy with. I had PGP diagnosed which made my job a lot harder also I had a consultant led [high risk] pregnancy.”

“Still being expected to do long drives with children who had been violent with no breaks.”

“Expected me to come into the office but i had hg and was literally sat with a bin at the side of my desk at home.”

“Management were not supportive and made me feel like a burden – ‘If you’re at work you’re expected to work’ – when I asked for less stressful tasks during high risk pregnancy.”

“I was asked multiple times why I was needing to use the bathroom so often, why I needed a dispatcher/radio op due to my sickness, it took a lot of begging & crying for them to accommodate shift changes when I was struggling with sickness.”

“I was left to work alone in a shop and not provided with another member of staff for help. All large shops have minimum two members of paid staff each shift. I was left to work alone, across two floors in a furniture shop.”

‘Constant pressure to keep performing at the same level although I was not well.’

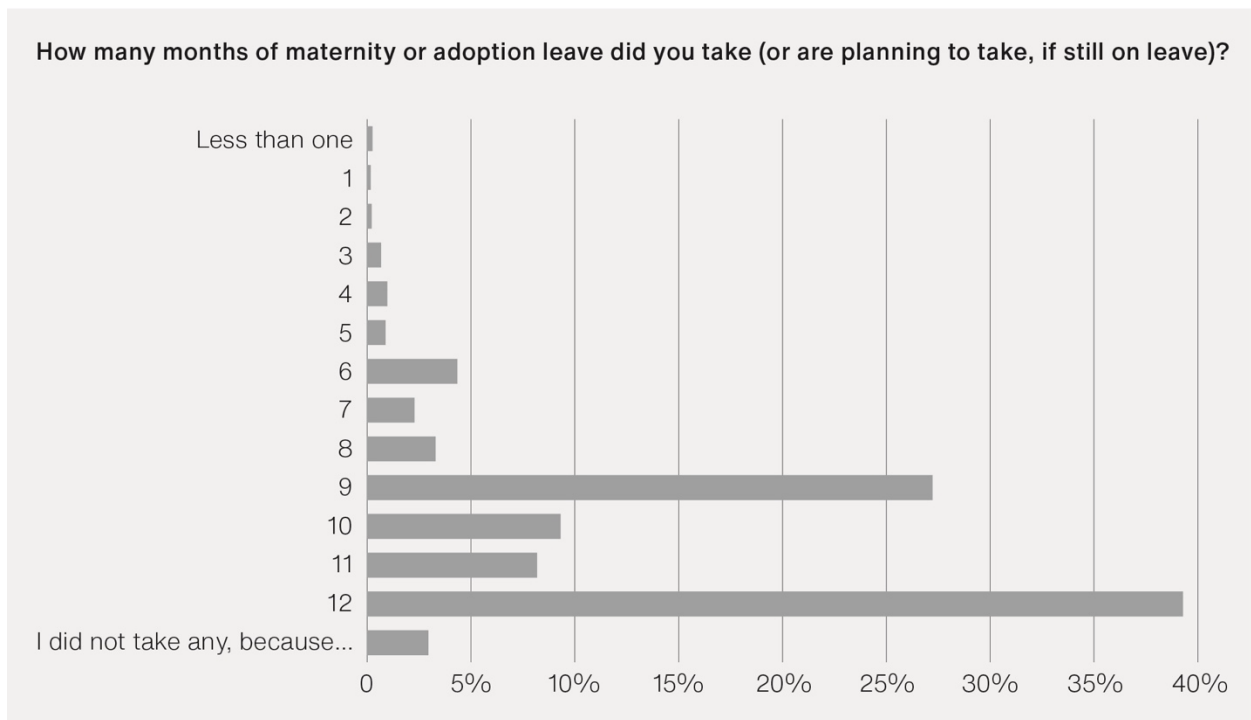
“Lack of assessment on triage of service users for example being referred an ex offender on probation for sexual assault and meeting alone in library.”

“Was told they can’t help me with heavy lifting because nobody else gets help, despite being disabled, pregnant, and bleeding during pregnancy and providing letters from GP and midwife stating I need to avoid heavy lifting.”

About maternity leave, adoption leave and pay

Length of leave

Figure 3: Length of Leave



Length of maternity leave was highly variable but the most common response across all respondents was twelve months or longer, followed by nine months.

The small number (3%) of respondents who stated that they had no maternity or adoption leave at all were asked to provide more detail about this. While a number of respondents appeared to have had some leave and just wanted to provide more detail around this, the most commonly given reason for losing out on maternity leave was a pregnancy loss which had taken place before the 24th week, after which a mother is entitled to maternity leave. Other reasons included job loss, employment status and getting two weeks ‘paternity leave’ instead as the same-sex partner of the birth mother. One woman told us the agency she worked for had ceased to operate and another said she had lost her job during maternity leave. Two respondents who were not the biological or adoptive parents of the baby they were caring for also missed out on maternity leave due to their lack of official status.

“I had to be signed off sick because I didn't qualify due to gestation of loss.”

“My agency went bust and my payments stopped after 7 months.”

“I got dismissed one month into my maternity pay.”

“Selecting this option as i could only take three months because my employer did not renew my sponsorship while i was on neonatal leave. Forcing me to apply to another place and i had to resume after three months.”

“I have had to take 1 year unpaid special leave when baby was 5 months as no kinship carer leave available and too difficult to get childcare and afford to pay for this.”

“I wasn't entitled to foster pay.”

Just over half of all survey respondents felt that their maternity leave was ‘too short’ (52%) while just under half said it was ‘about the right length’ (48%). Less than one percent (0.4%) felt it had been ‘too long.’

Types of maternity pay

A large majority of respondents (86%) had been paid Statutory Maternity Pay compared to just under 1 in 10 (9%) who had received Maternity Allowance. Notably, more than half (56%) had received some type of occupational maternity (OMP) or adoption pay from their employer - an over-representation compared to official estimates of around 13% of mothers nationally.¹¹ Women working in local government (72%), police and probation (68%) and the health sector (58%) were the most likely to have been paid OMP while community and charity sector workers (43%) were least likely.

The number of Shared Parental Pay (ShPP) recipients was 3%. Women in the community and charity sector were the most likely to have been paid ShPP (6%), followed by respondents in the education sector and in local government (both 4%).

Statutory Adoption Pay was paid to 2%. Another 2% had no maternity or parental pay at all.

¹¹ BMG Research, 2023, Parental Rights Survey 2019 (Formerly the Maternity and Paternity Rights Survey series) Survey Report https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/Parental_Rights_Survey%202019.pdf

Reasons for losing out on maternity leave and pay

A significant proportion of women who had no maternity pay told us that they had experienced baby loss before 24 weeks, which had therefore not been classified as a stillbirth.

“My daughter died during pregnancy at 21 weeks.”

“Lost baby before 24 weeks so not classed.”

“I lost the pregnancy at 20 weeks and I was told maternity leave/pay was from 24 weeks.”

“As my pregnancy resulted in a loss before 24 weeks, so I wasn’t entitled to mat pay. I was only entitled to sick pay and if my employer didn’t offer enhanced long term sick pay I wouldn’t have been entitled to anything.”

“I miscarried at 21 weeks, just before the 24 week cut off.”

“I had a stillbirth at 23 weeks so had to use sick pay and keep requesting sick notes from my doctor.”

“I lost my baby a few days before the gestation for her to be classed as a stillbirth.”

Many other women told us that circumstances beyond their control had caused them to lose out on maternity pay, including administrative errors made by their employers.

“I was not allowed to work due to a restriction at work during the “assessment period” and therefore was told that I didn’t qualify for pay from work despite it being my only job since 2022.”

“I changed trusts before knowing I was pregnant so did not qualify for SMP.”

“My job start date was delayed by the employer by several months (reasons not given to me) and so I was in employment for too short a period to qualify for any maternity pay unfortunately.”

“Because there were serious failures in my employers handling of my contract and maternity leave. I had to claim universal credit because by the time they tried to correct their failures it was 6 months after I had given birth and I could not even apply for maternity allowance.”

A small number of respondents also told us about the specific challenges of caring for babies who were not their biological or adopted children.

“Because I had to emergency foster my new born niece and I didn't adopt.”

“Kinship arrangement of grandchild so had to work through having a newborn baby to look after and all appts and meetings regarding baby as no kinship carer leave in place.”

More about being pregnant at work

Women were asked if there was anything more they wanted to tell us about their experience of pregnancy in the workplace, in their own words. The following section outlines the most prominent themes that emerged from the responses.

Health and safety issues

Risk assessment

Women who had been pregnant told us about late, missing or poorly executed risk assessments. In many cases, risk assessments were not followed after being put in place. While some respondents had been able to insist on accommodations and mitigation of risk, others had been exposed to potential harm in their work environment. Examples included having to carry on doing heavy physical work, not being sufficiently protected from a known risk of violence and having to carry on working with infectious patients in healthcare settings.

No accommodations for pregnant women's needs

‘No support from matron. Had to repeatedly ask to have my risk assessment completed and it took weeks before it was done.’

‘The risk assessment never felt like it was necessary to my employer, always on the back burner as not a priority, so it never got done, as something else was always more important.’

‘Never got a copy of my risk assessment despite asking for it. What was agreed was then later changed without my agreement.’

'Risk Assessment wasn't worth the paper it was written on, refused to sign it and nothing was done about it.'

'I didn't get a risk assessment done until a month before i was due to go off on Maternity leave. My manager was very dismissive of any problems I had, I even had a case of spotting whilst in work and got told by a nurse in charge to "see if you can ride it out and monitor it" despite me being high risk and asking if I could go and get checked out. [...]'

"No health and safety assessment was carried out whilst i was pregnant, therefore no assessment of the impact of the work/workload on me especially towards the end of my pregnancy when i was heavily pregnant. my job involves alot of driving, walking and walking up and down stairs, also bending."

"One day I was asked to clean out a full macerator by hand that had been left by other members of staff for 2 days."

"The contact with my supervisor has been really unhelpful throughout pregnancy and maternity leave. I had to tell her she needed to do a workplace risk assessment and even then she had no understanding of the risks and I had to explain everything. We agreed on changes and then she never put them into place and I was forced to do things that were physically inappropriate."

"During my pregnancy, I noticed a lack of ongoing risk assessment and general workplace support for pregnant employees. Although an initial risk assessment was conducted, it wasn't updated as my pregnancy progressed. For example, I was asked by my manager to sort through an inventory of unknown chemicals in a flammables cabinet—chemicals that turned out to include substances dangerous to pregnant women and unborn fetuses. This was a near miss that I reported, but unfortunately, I didn't receive any follow-up or acknowledgement."

"A risk assessment was in place but work didnt adhere to it fully they sent me out to homes where there was violence and one child had chicken pox."

"When I was pregnant with my first baby I was in the same room as a volatile child that could lash out without warning. I feel I was put in danger even though I had a health and safety assessment I was told I could call immediately for help. This wasn't always immediate."

"Short staffing issue caused to only have 2 nurses during shift especially during third trimester and so I had to complete a round of pad checks and personal care of all the bedbound patients, wash patients that just died, get hit by aggressive patients, push

beds during bed moves, exposed to different infectious patients due to clinical flow manager errors in admitting and boarding infectious patients.”

A large number of respondents had been denied adjustments that would have enabled them to carry on working during pregnancy, sometimes necessitating early maternity leave or sick leave, with potential impacts on maternity pay. Examples of adjustments that had been denied included homeworking in desk-based jobs, changes to work patterns to accommodate morning sickness, or even support equipment that would have helped keep pregnant women comfortable during the working day. The expectation to carry on with heavy workloads and overtime throughout pregnancy was also raised by many.

“I didn’t feel like the workload was any lighter. As I work in a fast paced, very small, hot kitchen with no ventilation at all I felt very uncomfortable when working. I was due to give birth in September 2023 so the summer months were very challenging.”

“I requested to work remotely towards the end of the pregnancy as I walked to work and other colleagues were allowed to work remotely. This was declined and I had to continue coming into the office.”

“My job was one where I could work from home and when I had pregnancy related health issues I asked for this to be accommodated for as per the risk assessment but this was not adhered to. Therefore I was under much more stress than I needed to be in an unfavourable work environment which did not help with the issues I was experiencing.”

“No adjustments were made and I ended up moving tables throughout the day so I had a place to sit and work. I felt like I pushed myself because measures weren’t in place. It made me feel like the view was ‘go off early!’ as opposed to putting simple measures in place.”

“I felt very unwell due to morning sickness, I did not feel I could manage 12 hour shifts anymore. I worked alone a lot within my last trimester when there should be 4 members of staff in including myself.”

“During my pregnancy I suffered with severe pelvic girdle pain and was on crutches, I was not allowed to fill out a form for a more comfortable chair or a stool to help me be comfy for 8hrs at my desk, I was told they dont bother doing it for maternity as its only temporary, due to this I had to take maternity leave earlier than planned as they could not accommodate any changes to seating or even offer me a standing desk.”

“Despite telling colleagues and managers that I was struggling with a stressful and overly full workload, I was not given any tangible support and had to take a month off work signed off with stress whilst I was seven months pregnant.”

Mental and physical stress on pregnant women

Respondents told us about the mental and physical stress that resulted from their working conditions and the impacts on their health. A number of women who had suffered complications such as premature birth or even miscarriage told us about the stressful work situations they had been exposed to prior to this.

“Stressful when working within busy department pressure from hierarchy when trying your best led to high blood pressure, staying late and working excess hours to accommodate”

“I had a baby pre-term at 34 weeks, I very much believe the stress of my job could have led to this, and I feel that you cannot be expected to carry out the same job past 28 weeks. Next baby I will be requesting desk duties or very light duties to reduce this risk again.”

“I unfortunately lost my child at almost 6 months, and feel like i had zero support from my company, I was over worked and wanted to reduce my hours but this was not accommodated due to shortages of staff, i also had to attend patients who had covid and felt vulnerable and dismissed when i told my employer of how uncomfortable and nervous I felt doing this whilst pregnant.”

“I had a high risk pregnancy. I miscarried one of the twins at 10 weeks, had Hyperemesis gravidarum (HG), a major bleed at 20 weeks and got signed off work at 7 months pregnant due to risk to baby and stress levels. Work were not accommodating, they viewed HG as morning sickness and I was continuously told by a manager that she also had morning sickness. I was hospitalised multiple times. I was told to come in the office and bring a change of clothes in case I was sick (at this point throwing up 30+ times a day) and told I could use work showers. I felt so pressurised by work at the point I was signed of that I told the doctor I couldn't take time off because of x, y and a deadline. To which the doctor had a very frank conversation with me that I could lose the other baby if we didn't reduce the risk and my stress levels.”

Lack of support and awareness from employers and managers

Lack of knowledge and understanding of rights and obligations

Many women experienced that management had a poor understanding of their obligations towards pregnant staff members. This meant that women often had to self-advocate or contact their union to enforce policies and procedures which should have been a matter of routine. While some managers were credited with being knowledgeable or helpful, it was also pointed out that rights at work should be entrenched in organisational practices and not reliant on the goodwill of individual line managers.

“My management clearly did not know or understand policy and I had to push for assessment and support.”

“I had a very rough pregnancy; my organisation was overall supportive but my direct line manager was not and she had to be told by HR that she was not adhering to policy after I complained.”

“I have been pregnant twice, and what made a difference was having a different line manager, which is not how it should be!”

“I really had to advocate for myself and make sure I knew the policies – more because of ignorance/lack of training for management rather than any malice. Luckily there were robust policies and a dedicated HR to rely on, plus knowledge from a previous (2021 pregnancy) under a different manager who was more willing to proactively address any gaps in her knowledge.”

“I had to tell my employer some of my rights and advocate for myself in terms of the holiday I was rightfully entitled to.”

“I had to prompt my line manager to follow the policy (e.g. complete risk assessments). I felt reasonable adjustments were agreed but not actioned. I had to ask for these to be followed as previously agreed. It was only then that an appointment was made with occupational health.”

“I found it a challenging time, from having to tell work early due to instance of sickness through to risk assessments, I felt I was having to push for support or assessments to be completed and it felt very negative.”

Poor treatment and discrimination

Survey respondents provided a multitude of examples of discriminatory and poor treatment, unfairness and outright bullying from managers and colleagues, during what one new mother described as 'the most vulnerable time of her life'.

"A director did an impression of me trying to walk... I was nine months pregnant and also obese, it wasn't exactly complimentary."

"Unsolicited comments by senior management, for example a joke made that I should do a presentation for the team on 'how to get 18 months free pay in three years' from the health service due to the fact I had two pregnancies in two years. This was said in a 'jokey' manner, but still completely unacceptable and really affected me and how I felt my manager viewed my maternity leaves."

"Was told by a newly promoted supervisor that he hoped I wasn't on his team because he wanted a strong team not somebody who was going to go off on maternity leave."

"Other members of staff who were pregnant got different treatment, i.e. not doing visit past a certain stage where as I am still doing full days of visits 5 days a week."

"Some men in my workplace openly cracked 'jokes' about how women use pregnancy to 'get away with everything'."

"My boss found it difficult to know how to properly talk to someone who's pregnant and kept asking me a very sarcastic voice how I was feeling every time I saw him as he seem to think this is appropriate although though he did it in a sarcastic manner tipping his head to one side as he thought this was funny. It took another female senior member of management who saw this happen to have a word with him and say to him that it was really inappropriate."

"I had a team leader make negative and derogatory comments regarding the amount of antenatal appointments I had to attend due to complications. I was also checked up on and accused of misleading management regarding some appointments."

"Teasing comments when I asked for adjustments such as 'princess' or "precious!"

"My manager was awful to me when I was pregnant, making comments about my fitness to be a mother etc."

"I was told that being pregnant was inconvenient. My manager told the rest of the team 'not to get pregnant.'"

“I went through an organisational restructure which contributed to my high blood pressure. When I was at work other staff would comment on the size of my bump, someone told me I looked like I'd swallowed a beach ball. People would comment on how much or little I was eating. I felt scrutinised constantly, which when I look back shadowed what should have been a really happy time. I felt like I couldn't say anything as if I did I was told I was being hormonal.”

“I had a really awful experience of being pregnant in work, I had medium bad morning sickness and never called in sick. I was not allowed to complete breaks for food and would be asked to work in the middle of my 15 min break. I was made to feel bad for going to appointments, and for calling in sick one time because I had suspected pre-eclampsia. I also asked that stuff would be stored not up on shelves so I wouldn't have to climb to reach things and I felt like stuff was being put out of my reach out of spite. It was a really horrible experience.”

“My experience was terrible because the nurse i worked with bullied me that she takes away the chair I sit on when tired, because of her horrible attitude to me I went on off sick I never came back till after my MAT leave.”

“Pregnancy discrimination is not clearly defined to all managers and should be clarified when they find out they have a pregnant team member. It's not acceptable to give someone a 2/5 because they have only been there half a year when their mid-year review gave them 4/5.”

“It was a horrible time having HG and having to work, but I could not afford to go on SSP. There was no accommodation made. When I returned to work I was told that pregnant people are shirkers and after benefits. [...]”

“I need to return to my job for at least 3 months to prevent paying back the Trust but this is giving me a lot of anxiety as I have been bullied during the most vulnerable time of my life.”

“[...] Overall i feel like my work environment made me have severe anxiety about being pregnant and made me feel like I was a burden to my colleagues. I even was told by my manager that ‘you might want to think about getting a different job when you return as this job can't fit around being a working parent’”

“[...] I can remember leaving work on my last day finishing up for maternity leave crying because the way I was treated.”

Administrative/financial issues

Mistakes made by human resources departments had caused disruption, uncertainty and financial stress to many pregnant women, new mothers and their families. Respondents told us about not getting the information they needed in order to plan ahead, receiving the wrong maternity pay, payments being stopped suddenly and losing out on both annual leave and money that was due to them.

“Local management all great, had suitable support but multiple pay issues. Have not had enough time and energy to rectify them all so have accepted I’ve just lost money I was due.”

“[...] My boss forgot to take me off maternity leave on the agreed date on the system, which messed up my pay, tax, NI for the first two months being back at work full time which I was very disappointed with.”

“I was informed that I qualified occupational maternity pay when I enquired, only to be told 2 days prior to going on maternity leave that I was not entitled.”

“Payroll process was complicated It felt like Payroll had never completed a matb1 process before, which obviously they had.”

“My HR department was very unhelpful in organising maternity leave. They tried to tell me I wasn’t entitled to enhanced maternity leave despite the organisation’s maternity policy saying otherwise. They also told me blatantly incorrect information about shared parental leave which was very stressful and meant me having to get advice from Maternity Action.”

“HR was awful and didn’t log the correct scheme so stopped paying me after three months. I then had to fight for the pay I was entitled to whilst off after I had missed pay checks which interfered with paying rent.”

“The maternity pay has been atrociously handled and incorrect for first 5 months of maternity leave.”

“I was on secondment that was potentially ending prior to mat leave starting, no one was able to tell me what I’d be paid whilst on mat leave due to a banding difference between roles.”

“Poor knowledge of return to work procedures (holidays inaccurately worked out and keeping in touch days were not paid as manager didn’t put through correct paperwork, got this paid eventually 1 year later).”

“Manager terrible at ensuring pay correct on return. I was overpaid for first month, which meant I was paid hardly anything the next month. It didn’t seem a priority to get this right. It felt like now I was back, I should sort this out myself.”

“My old manager didn’t process my maternity leave or any of the paperwork so I got paid full pay which I’m now on a repayment plan to pay this back even though I had no idea this was the case.”

Positive experiences

Women who highlighted positive experiences of being pregnant at work mainly mentioned receiving their legal entitlements. Examples included having health and safety risks assessed and mitigated, being enabled to remain in work, being protected from redundancy, being able to access antenatal care when needed, feeling supported and respected by management and colleagues and having clear organisational guidelines in place.

“My current line manager was very good during my pregnancy, he did frequent risk assessments and made adjustments as needed.”

“I had to request light work during my 6mos of pregnancy with the advice coming from my midwife as I am having PGP. The management gives me the support I needed.”

“I had a very supportive manager who made adjustments so that I could remain operational on the road whilst I felt comfortable - this allowed me to remain operational on the road until 36 weeks gestation which had previously been unheard of in the ambulance service.”

“Adjustments were made for me to remain working ie - working from home, ordered back support for office chair. My managers were all very accommodating and supportive throughout my pregnancy especially in the latter stages.”

“I was pregnant during a restructuring and was greatly benefitted by the legal protections provided by the law in terms of risk of redundancy. I felt well supported.”

“Being supported by the team within the classroom was my main support, other staff members doing the extra lifting or dealing with a child. Kept me safe respected and protected during my pregnancy.”

“I felt very looked after by my supervisor and manager while being pregnant at work. I required additional time off for extra appointments towards the end of my pregnancy and I was able to do this without any issues from my employer.”

“My boss was incredibly appreciative and considerate of my condition. I felt very supported.”

“I would like to acknowledge that I felt very well supported by the management team in my work.”

“I had HG and my line manager and wider team were extremely supportive and helped me through a difficult pregnancy.”

“There were clear policies in place for my manager to follow to allow them to support me and improve their understanding and awareness of any issues that I may be experiencing. My line managers (2 pregnancies with different line managers at the same organisation) had never managed someone who was pregnant before and this was really helpful.”

About returning - or not returning - to work

Just over 3 in 10 of all respondents (32%) were still on maternity leave or adoption leave at the time of responding, while just over 6 in 10 (62%) had finished their leave and returned to the same employer. 1 in 20 (5%) had finished their leave and started working for a different employer. A small number, around 1% were no longer on leave but had not returned to paid employment at the time of completing the survey. Nearly 9 out of 10 (88%) women who were on maternity leave were planning to return to their previous jobs while around one in ten were as yet undecided about this. A small fraction (2%) were not planning to return to their previous jobs.

Women in the lowest income group who were still on leave were somewhat likely to say that they were planning to return to their job - 85%, compared to 93% in the highest income group. The likelihood of returning to work was exponentially higher with each income increase.

Returning to the same employer

7 in 10 (70%) women who had returned to the same employer told us that they still had the same level of responsibility as before, while just over 2 in 10 (21%) had more responsibility than previously and just under 1 in 10 (8%) stated that they now had less responsibility compared to before they went on leave. When asked whether they had requested this change in responsibility, around 6 in 10 (61%) responded that they had while the remainder (39%) stated that they had not.

Women who had returned to the same employer were also asked whether their working hours had changed since their return. Whilst around half (52%) told us that their hours remained the same, around 2 in 5 (44%) were now working fewer hours than before. 1 in 20 (5%) worked more hours now than before they went on leave. For just over half, the change in hours had been their own choice but around 4 in 10 (39%) responded that they had not wanted this change in working hours and almost 1 in 10 (8%) said that they had requested a change in working hours, but that this had not been granted.

A comparison of responses across different income brackets indicated that women in the lowest earning group were considerably more likely to work fewer hours after returning to their jobs (74%) compared to women in the highest income group (16%). Higher earning women were more likely to work the same hours as before (81%) compared to only 19% of the lowest earners. There was a clear relationship between lower earnings

and the likelihood of a reduction in working hours after maternity leave, observable across income groups.

Out of the respondents who had now returned to the same employer, women on the highest incomes (£51,000 and above) were significantly more likely than the other income groups to have seen an increase in responsibilities (28%) compared to the lowest income group (13%).

Not returning to the same employer

Women who had not returned to the same job - or were still on leave but not planning to return to the same job - were asked about the reasons for this. Just under half (47%) of these women had decided to leave their job whilst almost 1 in 10 (9%) responded that they had lost their job. However, this result is impacted by the fact that just under half (44%) opted for the 'other' category, which enabled them to provide further detail in a text box. On analysis, whilst some in this category did give 'other' reasons, such as losing sponsorship from an employer, the majority of these respondents had in fact lost or left their jobs.

Women who had previously told us about losing their job were asked about the circumstances around this. More than 3 in 5 of these respondents (64%) stated that they had been made redundant, while nearly 3 in 10 (29%) had been dismissed.

Women who had previously stated that they left their job were asked to select their main reasons for doing so, as many as applicable:

- Half of this group of respondents (51%) cited a lack of flexibility, including having a flexible working request denied, not being allowed to work part time or from home.
- A little under half (46%) had found another job that fitted better around family life.
- 2 in 5 respondents (40%) had left their job due to experiencing poor treatment, including harassment, discrimination and bullying.
- Just over 2 in 10 (22%) left their job because they could not get the childcare they needed in order to continue working.
- 2 in 10 (21%) had found another job with better pay.
- 1 in 10 (10%) wanted to look after their child, or children, full-time.

“Flexible working request was not favoured at my place of work, and the lack of communication made me lose my trust in the department.”

“Wouldn't allow less than full time working.”

“My work would not accommodate part time working.”

“My employer couldn’t accommodate return to work on a part time basis.”

“I am doing bank work only. My partner also works shift work and I needed more control over what I could work. I also had leave which reduced my hours but was not able to reduce my contracted hours and this would have been too difficult to manage. I also needed more stability with hours and working weekends in my job meant I did not see the kids at all when husband was also working. This has affected the attachment I was still building with my oldest child.”

“They risk my health and baby health and i do not want more to work with people who does not respect the law and does not respect my contract.”

“I left my job due to observed discrimination and bullying related to pregnancy and maternity leave.”

“Whilst still technically working for the same “employer”, I left the department I was working in and I was incredibly upset by how I was treated during pregnancy and maternity leave.”

“I had no choice but to resign and find alternative work due to my previous employer [...] doing everything in their power to stop me from returning.”

“I could not afford to pay childcare on my existing salary so sought a higher paying role.”

In the lowest income group, the most common reason for leaving a job was difficulties accessing the necessary childcare (57%). For higher earners, the most common reason was lack of flexibility, including being denied flexible working, part-time hours or being allowed to work from home (71%).

More about returning, or not returning, to work

All respondents were asked if there was anything more they wanted to tell us, in their own words, regarding returning to work, or not returning to work, after maternity leave or adoption leave. The most prominent themes that emerged are discussed below.

Opportunity loss

Women told us that promotions, training and other opportunities which had been open to them before pregnancy or maternity leave had been retracted and sometimes offered to

others instead. In many cases, survey respondents had lost out on promotion or other opportunities after reducing their hours since having a baby.

Respondents told us that managers and organisations considered part-time working to be incompatible with a higher level of responsibility, creating a disadvantage for women trying to balance work and caring responsibilities on their return from maternity leave.

“When I returned from maternity leave, part of my role had been advertised as a new role and someone had been recruited. I was never made aware of this and I was also studying a degree apprenticeship. When I returned I couldn't complete my apprenticeship as my dissertation was all around the role that was given away.”

“Impacted progression opportunities. Development promised not delivered after telling manager of pregnancy.”

“I was acting up into an Assistant Director position and they recruited someone else to that post without offering me the same opportunity as they recruited a month to go to my due date. Classed it as a “business need” but now that person has been given the role full time and I've returned to less senior responsibilities.”

“I was told three weeks before returning to work that I was going back to a role I had not done for almost three years, and the acting up position I had been in for three years was being continued to be covered by my maternity cover. I was going to have an almost £10,000 pay cut and wasn't given an opportunity to interview for the role I had been acting up in for three years.”

“Advised not to apply for a job opportunity due to being pregnant.”

“Was told that I ruined future plans, they were going to ask me to be temp supv. But as I was pregnant they didn't.”

“I've gone from acting up as an assistant director to being demoted. A year of informal negotiations led to a grievance having to be raised.”

“I have faced maternity discrimination by being given less work and also being told my role is now worth being paid less for.”

“My employer has contacted me while on maternity leave heavily recommending that I change roles, to fewer hours, as it will be more beneficial for me with managing childcare. I have been told that there is restructuring taking place. I do not believe that my previous role will exist. I feel the new role is a step down and not progression. I am

highly anxious about returning to work as I feel I do not know where I stand. Currently, I think I will be looking for other employment elsewhere.”

“I lost my position and was demoted because of my change in hrs. Feels like having a baby put your position in the business at risk. If it wasn't for the law i probably wouldn't be kept at all but has stopped me wanting to progress god forbid i decide to have another baby. Feel penalised.”

“I have had to take myself out of the running for promotion as I could not up my hours.”

“My reduction in hours, a difference of only four hours per week, has been cited as a reason for being rejected for interviews and opportunities for progression. This has created a barrier to my career advancement, despite my strong performance in my current role.”

“It is definitely harder to progress to higher paid jobs with more responsibility as a part time worker. I've found this incredibly frustrating over the last 18months and it is completely limiting to my career progression.”

“My employer at the time of return wasn't flexible and refused my flexible/part time working request unless I demoted myself to a lower paid role.”

“I don't like having less responsibility but that was the only way they would accommodate me reducing my working days.”

“I have felt as though various aspects of my role have been taken away from me, without consultation, due to me returning part time.”

“My colleagues challenged my return to work on reduced hours claiming the role I undertook could only be done full time. This caused anxiety and upset.”

Early return

As stated previously, just over half of all respondents (52%) considered their maternity leave to have been too short. In the majority of cases, the reason for this was the inadequate level of maternity pay, which was not sufficient to support a family. Having to return earlier than wanted was associated with stress and anxiety.

“I couldn't take a full year off due to the maternity package not being enough to sustain myself financially which was a shame.”

“It is not fair to assume women earn less and can afford to take time off.”

“Maternity pay needs to be addressed. I would get full pay for 6 months if I were to be off sick and yet I only get 8 weeks full pay on maternity leave.”

“I had to go back to work before my mat leave ended. I couldn’t afford to stay off. Cause off mat leave paid. I didn't have money to live on.”

“I have no choice but to return to work at 8 months as maternity pay is too low.”

“I can't afford to take longer and I'm angry at a system that forces that.”

“The paid leave is too short. I felt like I had to return to work financially however I didn't feel ready to leave my child. This creates a daily struggle managing all responsibilities in the initial return to work. Occupational maternity pay should continue for longer to allow women to take the full year without suffering no income for the final couple month.”

“Again, it is too soon for what I would like to do but I have no choice really.”

“I returned to work sooner than I would have ideally liked for financial issues. I was very lucky that my flexible working request was accepted this was not the case for others and I do feel at times I have been told and made to feel I was lucky to get the flexible working. It's helped massively but I do feel resentful of the reminder of how lucky and grateful I should be that I got the flexible working approved.”

“Returning to work at an earlier stage is due to financial constraints and the limited maternity pay and high nursery fee costs.”

“You are forced to return to work early because of pay. Forced to pay childcare due to this.”

“I wish the maternity pay was better so I was able to take the 12 months off rather than returning early.”

“Really concerned about my returning since this is my first child and I am not able to spend much time with my baby due to financial issues”

“Anxiety and worry about leaving your baby. Feeling guilty. Having to return to work to get full pay. Reduced pay was not sufficient to support a family.”

“Five months doesn’t feel long enough but it’s impossible to live on statutory pay only.”

“I will likely have to return to work earlier than anticipated due to financial reasons. My employer had given me a breakdown of pay over a 12 month period, however I received less pay than what was advised. I have therefore not budgeted for this under payment.”

A number of women also stated that their employer had pressured them into ending their maternity leave earlier than they wanted or even stopped their maternity pay in order to get them to come back early.

"I am returning to work earlier than planned. I'm going back at the end of October rather than after the Christmas break. I have felt some pressure to get back to work which has felt a bit annoying. I've longed for a child for so long I've missed out on the pregnancy and baby stage, my adoption leave has been short now I think about it."

"I was given one month gave birth on 1 March and was asked back 1 April."

"I wanted to have 9months leave as I had my baby via c-section and needed time to heal and I didn't have any family members to assist. After 2months, my employer forced me to resume at the end of my 3rd month and stopped my maternity allowance as well."

Flexible working issues

Many respondents had seen their flexible working requests rejected or ignored, or were concerned that this would happen on their return. Being denied flexible working or part time working had in many cases led to new mothers having to look for new jobs after maternity leave.

“My employer didn’t respond to my flexible working request within the statutory 2 month window, made no accommodation for my return to work so I had no choice but to resign.”

“Incredibly nervous to return as would like to request flexible working to accommodate childcare and department are not flexible regarding this and may have to find new job.”

“Prior to maternity leave I worked from home 4 days a week. Whilst on maternity leave I was told this was changing to 3 days a week which was fine. Weeks before returning, having already arranged Childcare based on being in the office and from home (I travel a significant distance so Childcare changes dramatically when not in the office) I was told I was now full time in the office. I attempted to change my childcare plans which was not possible. Unfortunately they wouldn’t budge and I had to move department. Thankfully, I found a department with a manager much more understanding but I was on maternity leave with a Child that had health issues and the stress added to this with my managers lack of understanding was awful.”

Women who had returned to work part-time after having a flexible working request approved also found that their workload remained the same despite now working fewer hours and earning less.

“Although I have a reduced working week of 34 hours, my workload and performance expectations remain commensurate with a 37-hour full-time role. This has created an unsustainable and demanding work environment.”

“I have reduced my appointment from five to three days per week, yet I was expected to do the equal amount of work, as well as additional reporting. I felt that I was being pushed out of the role.”

“I am still expected to do my full time job in part time hour.”

“Even though I work part time, I am allocated the same and more work and case load as full time people. It is unsustainable and I am burnt out.”

"I returned to work with compressed hours, which made childcare more feasible but is an absolutely exhausting solution."

"Hours have reduced but workload hasn't and expectations/pressure is the same."

"I have been allowed to reduce my hours but workload remains the same."

Breastfeeding on return to work

The challenges to continuing breastfeeding on return to work were many. Mothers told us that their rights at work in relation to breastfeeding were unclear and that organisational policy was sometimes confusing and contradictory. Women were left in discomfort and pain as they were unable to express breastmilk during working hours. Several respondents had already changed their job or were considering doing so because of a lack of support to continue breastfeeding on their return to work.

"I would leak milk regularly in meetings due to no feasible way to express. My baby breastfed less and I think weaned before he would have if I hadn't returned too soon."

"Nobody seems to know about breastfeeding rights in my workplace."

"Pregnancy at work was brilliant, it is the return to work which is harder. As a breastfeeding mother who returned when the baby was only 20 weeks, I had to express milk at work. I felt as though there was no facility for this and was unsure whether I had to take flexi time or whether it was a right like using the toilet."

"Issues with support for breastfeeding mums in NHS employers needs to be reviewed. It needs to be clarified whether the NHS should deduct pay from staff for the period of time they spend pumping breast milk at work."

"More support around breastfeeding. Work has a policy that allowed time for breastfeeding or expressing yet would not allow me to breastfeed/alter my shifts to do so."

"There was no contact by my line manager, so no questions about what I would need as a breastfeeding mum, for example."

"Making arrangements to return to work when you are exclusively breastfeeding as per NHS guidelines it is extremely difficult and actually borderline impossible."

"Breaks to breastfeed or pump but the service was too busy to actually get out. I would often leak milk into my uniform and experience pain. At other times I was accommodated into a private space to pump."

"[...] On return from my first maternity leave I left that role within 3 months because the required working hours were not adapted for me to be able to breastfeed my daughter to sleep in the evenings, which was the only time I was still breastfeeding her."

"I'm on flexible hours only whilst breast feeding then I have to return to work lates and nights or find another job."

"Returning to work has been extremely challenging. It's too soon. I've had to find another local job as my employer won't support me to work flexibly to continue breastfeeding my son."

Lack of support for return

Survey respondents frequently experienced a lack of support with their return to work. Communication from employers was often considered inadequate during this time, leaving women in a state of uncertainty during what was described as an already emotional time. Many new mothers noted the lack of processes aimed at re-integrating them into the workplace, including meetings with their manager or additional training, even where new systems or practices had been introduced during their maternity leave.

"My working hours were only confirmed after my MAT leave ended and once I was taking paid leave before returning. This was stressful and resulted in me being over paid I chased this multiple times and no one came back to me to confirm my hours."

"My line manager didn't contact me prior to coming back to work, neither did he welcome me back, or arrange any meeting with me, which was quite upsetting."

"On my return, my first day back was unstructured because my manager was off and the colleague who would normally work with me had decided to work off-site. This made the first week back quite difficult and disheartening after 12 months away and returning to full-time work."

"I think there should be more support around returning to work, it is a very emotional time."

"A better return to work plan was needed. I returned to work like a normal day/week no catch up, top up training."

"Very poor communication around the NHS restructure during maternity leave, no return to work conducted when I came back."

"Upon returning to work I was expected to just pick up where I left off, or fend for myself. I received no updates about what had happened whilst on maternity leave, nor did I

receive any guidance on any changes. The return to work was frankly quite a miserable experience and I desperately wanted to still be on maternity leave with my baby.”

“The return to work could have been a lot better and supportive. I felt like I was just left to return to work with no support or catch ups and to just figure it out. It's hard navigating motherhood when returning to work and I feel like the business could have been more supportive. Inputting a flexible working request was also difficult and I felt like my line manager was not helpful.”

“I was not offered any training or a re-onboarding process upon my return, despite being away for nine months during a period of significant business change. This lack of support has hindered my ability to fully reintegrate and adapt to new business processes.”

“I had to really fight to get two days working from home and made to feel that I am asking for too much and that I should be doing more due to this. I was also expected to just pick up where I left off with no easing in process and consideration for the fact I have been out of work for 12 + months and suffered minor post natal depression.”

“I had no handover, or support when I returned and it was really difficult to pick things up having been away for 9 months. My line manager, who had covered some of my role, didn't give it all back. It was not the welcome back I'd expected and was very stressful. I've subsequently had breast cancer and I was treated much more favourable and considerately.”

“I wasn't fully supported by people at work like others were, and going back from maternity leave I haven't felt welcome at all to the point of my now about to leave the trust and work elsewhere.”

“No support given when returning to work, no return to work given, no occ health referral completed, no line manager to greet me on first day back at work. Constant arguments with senior managers over flexible working and discrimination when trying to sort out a flexi plan. was expected to return to duties straight away, no time given to allow to retrain doing the job or go through emails. no support at all from managers.”

“My team and borough I work for were unsupportive. Work was piled onto me immediately. It was very hard and contributed to me wanting to leave.”

“There isn't enough protection for people returning to work - there is no mandated support during an incredibly difficult time.”

“There was no support on return to work even after major changes in the work place.”

The option to have a phased return was raised by a significant number of respondents as a way to enable a gradual return instead of permanently cutting down on working hours.

“I originally asked to return for 2 days a week and stated I would likely want to increase to 3 days once I'd settled back in. I found my return overwhelming as lots had changed and there wasn't much of a handover - I had to find my own way. When I asked to increase my days I was told there was no funding and so I have had to remain on 2 days. Financially this isn't sustainable so I've been looking for another job for 9 months.”

“Coming back after 9 months off maternity was very stressful to be thrown back in, I would have preferred a phase return to work after being off for so long. If you are off that long sick you get offered a phased return and juggling work life and family life at the start of returning is very hard and stressful.”

“I feel a phased return to work is something companies should review. Maternity leave return is a huge step for parents who have been outside of work for a long period. Offering phased returns or better flexible working arrangements helps retain employees and remove/ support the overwhelming mess and emotional factor of returning after leave.”

“I wanted to reduce hours / phased return but financially cannot afford to.”

“Work were unhappy that I wanted to phase return, using up my accrued annual leave, working 3 days a week until the leave expired.”

“I have been on mat leave for 12 months and would have liked to phase back in on a phase return however I was told my council do not do this after maternity leave.”

“Phased return should be an option instead of worrying about money and either being off work or back full time.”

“I would like there to be an option to go back part time for a short period of time. I hope this is able to be considered. I haven't yet asked about this.”

“I think there should be a phased return for maternity. It's a lot returning to work after so long off and if you were off work for 4 weeks or more on sick leave you would get a phased return so why should you not on maternity? Balancing work and a new home life is a lot in the first few weeks of returning.”

Positive experiences of returning to work

Positive experiences of returning to work were mainly around having flexible working arrangements, including phased return after maternity leave, and changes to working hours or arrangements.

“We had a phased return which was absolutely priceless.”

“My employer gave me time to settle back into work and read my emails in my inbox before having any casework. They checked in with me if I was okay. I am able to take my child to school which I am grateful for on two of the 2.5 days I work.”

“As stated before. If it wasn't for the union, I doubt I would have a job to return to or I would've been forced to work full-time and most of my wages go on childcare costs. The union helped me to return to work part-time which meant I was able to spend valuable time with my child whilst still returning to work and earning money still.”

“Flexibility and change in working hours was extremely helpful.”

“Although I have not changed the amount of hours I work as I still work full time at 37 hours per week, I have adjusted my hours to suit family life better. My supervision has been very good with this.”

“When returning my manager was very accommodating for the hours and days I wanted to work.”

“I changed to work compressed hours and my contract to work from home and all been accepted.”

“My workplace have been very accommodating to me since returning including understanding needing time off because my child has been ill.”

Conclusions

This survey, which was completed by more than 2,300 UNISON women members, provides a snapshot of the experiences of pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace in the UK.

While many women who had been pregnant told us about accessing appropriate provisions, such as paid time to attend antenatal appointments and individual risk assessments, common problems included pressure to make up the time for antenatal appointments, absent or late risk assessments and having to work in difficult, stressful and sometimes dangerous conditions. Nearly 1 in 5 women told us that, while they would have benefited from some form of adjustment during pregnancy, no changes had been made to accommodate this.

Unfavourable treatment in relation to pregnancy or a pregnancy-related health condition was also common, with 1 in 5 women having one or more such experiences. This was one of the main reasons women gave for leaving their jobs after maternity leave. 2 in 5 women who had left their jobs gave reasons relating to poor treatment, including harassment, discrimination and bullying.

Information deficits in HR departments were frequently mentioned in response to open questions. Administrative and financial errors in relation to maternity leave and pay had in many cases caused financial and emotional stress and uncertainty. While managers who adhered to the correct procedures attracted praise, there was a sense that many others had an inadequate understanding of their obligations towards pregnant employees and workers.

Over half of respondents felt that maternity leave or adoption leave had been too short. Despite having a comparatively high proportion of OMP recipients compared to the general population, returning to work early was frequently a financial necessity rather than a real choice, as women could not support their families on maternity pay.

Women who had re-entered the workplace often told us about the lack of flexibility leading to loss of opportunities, especially if returning part time. In a number of cases, breastfeeding mothers had left their jobs in order to find something more flexible that would allow them to continue breastfeeding.

While women on higher incomes experienced better treatment during pregnancy in some ways, such as being more likely to have had paid time off work for antenatal appointments and being less likely to have experienced bullying and other poor treatment, the survey also found top earners to be the least likely of all income groups to have had a Health and

Safety Assessment. The likelihood of a woman returning to her job after maternity leave or adoption leave was higher with every income increase. There was a clear relationship between earnings and the likelihood of returning to work after leave, with lower earnings being associated with the likelihood of a reduction in working hours on the woman's return.

Differences were also discernible across sectors, with paid time for antenatal care more accessible to women working in education (92%) compared to healthcare (71%), for example. Respondents in sectors like police and probation (84%), education (77%) and health (76%) were more likely to have had a Health and Safety assessment, compared to their peers in social care (68%) and local government (65%).

Recommendations

- We welcome the strengthened maternity rights and flexible working provisions in the Employment Rights Act 2025, which will provide pregnant women and new mothers with stronger protection against discrimination and enhance the right to make and have a flexible working request seriously considered.
- Employers should have ready access to all the necessary information about their legal obligations towards pregnant employees and workers as well as guidance around good practice in their implementation. This should include supporting new mothers returning to work after maternity leave or adoption leave.
- Maternity Pay should be raised to at least parity with the minimum wage and employers should be encouraged to support their employees at the start of their parenting journey by providing OMP wherever possible.
- To help women's financial security during maternity leave, a written agreement with details of a woman's maternity or adoption pay and length of leave should be shared between HR departments, management and the employee going on leave. Such agreements could also include details on Keeping in Touch (KIT) days, subject to review.
- Flexibility from employers should include considering a phased return as well as part time working and flexitime, supporting staff retention and wellbeing, including for breastfeeding women.
- Employers should ensure clarity on breastfeeding rights and have a workable organisational policy in place.
- Employers, HR departments and managers should be able to access advice on how to maintain a positive and productive working relationship with employees and workers during this time.

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