

Offshore Expressing

Returning to work after having a baby is a challenging time for most parents. Even more so when the workplace is offshore, and you don't get the opportunity to spend the evening with your child.

Many fathers across the offshore industry will know this wrench well, but a growing number of women are also returning to offshore roles after becoming a parent. One of the key differences in a mother's return to work in comparison to a father's is the possibility that the mother may be breastfeeding the child.

We spoke to mum of two and Decommissioning Team Lead, Caroline Lawford about her experience of going offshore whilst still breastfeeding.

Tell us about your experience of returning to the offshore environment after becoming a mum.

My job is full time onshore in the office but as part of my role I travel offshore to lead campaigns, do surveys or management engagement sessions. My trips can vary from anything between 3 days to 3 weeks away from home.

I decided to go offshore after the birth of my first child when I was still breastfeeding in the mornings and evening. I wanted to pump milk at those times to maintain my supply, prevent mastitis (which is horrible by the way – no one wants that!) and relieve discomfort.

My personal experience of pumping milk offshore has been really positive, I've always been provided with the privacy and facilities to pump and there has never been any question about the importance of making this support available.

That's great to hear! For those of us who haven't had to express, can you explain the set up or type of facilities do you need to pump?

Any woman that has tried to pump breastmilk knows that you need to be relaxed and comfortable for it to be successful. Often you are sharing a cabin and most expressing (unless you have one of these new super-expensive silent pumps) is really noisy – there's no hiding what you're doing! For some women, myself included, pumping behind the closed curtain of your bedspace when someone else that you've just met is there is really awkward.

Often pumps require mains power, not found in the bathroom, which is usually shared anyway – pumping takes a while and you don't want to be incurring the wrath of your fellow bathroom users by hogging the facilities for too long!

Ideally, women that need to pump should be provided with their own cabin with immediate access to bathroom facilities. That way pumping can be done in private, the milk disposed of and pump cleaned without needing to carry it along corridors.

But offshore platforms are busy and usually bedspace doesn't allow for an individual cabin, in this case an alternative facility should be provided, in the past for me this has been a side room in the onboard medic/hospital facilities or a quarantine cabin which needs to be reserved in case of need but is often unused and available for short periods each day. With some simple engagement and communication, a private and comfortable space with a sink offshore to pump milk can easily be provided.

What can companies do to support breastfeeding mums offshore?

Breastfeeding provides numerous health benefits to both the mother and child throughout their lives (Ref 1) and is often clearly supported by companies in their onshore offices with specific breastfeeding or pumping rooms and fridges for storage. These facilities are usually outlined in maternity policies.

The difference with the offshore working environment is that provisions for pumping breast milk are often not defined, creating uncertainty and occasionally embarrassment for a woman. Couple this with the emotions of leaving your child for the first time, it can make for a really tough return to the offshore world.

Suggestions for companies include:

- Treat the offshore environment the same as you would your onshore office and outline clearly in maternity policies and procedures provisions for pumping offshore.*
- Consider whether women that need to express should be given priority for single cabin occupancy where possible.*
- Proactively talk to the offshore teams to identify other facilities and rooms that could be used for pumping and document and communicate this in a way that potential users are aware of it. Omitting these facilities is most likely unintentional given the lack of representation of new mothers offshore.*

What's the ultimate support that a company could provide?

When I express offshore, I 'pump and dump', meaning I dispose of the breastmilk and don't store it. This is fine for me, my trips offshore are relatively short, but it always feels a little wasteful to just be dumping the milk.

If you were on a full-time rotation in the North Sea, the ultimate would be to be able to freeze your breastmilk and transport it home for it to be used the next time you're away.

The maritime industry has set precedents, with breastfeeding mums on month-long rotations on ships being able to use galley or medical freezers to freeze breastmilk and then pack and ship the milk home still frozen. Seasisters have a nice blog about this (Ref 2).

Do you have anything else you want to add?

Let's share good practice!

If we don't talk about breastfeeding and pumping offshore, and share what we've learned, mums have to reinvent the wheel each time and that takes a lot of energy, it's just an additional, avoidable stress.

Searching the internet for expressing or pumping milk offshore brings up nothing from the UKCS. There could be companies out there doing amazing things to support new mothers in the offshore environment and we just don't know about it!

Creating awareness in offshore teams on breastfeeding and pumping requirements will also go a long way to addressing the discomfort some women endure when working offshore and needing to pump. With the number of women in offshore roles relatively low, retention of them in the offshore workforce after childbirth is so important to help develop a diverse leadership team and create role models for future generations. Defining in procedures and smoothing breastfeeding hurdles helps make women not only feel welcome in the offshore world but contributes to them feeling like they belong. A key tenant of inclusion that every company should strive for if they are to develop and maintain a diverse offshore workforce.

Ref 1: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/breastfeeding-and-bottle-feeding/breastfeeding/benefits/>

Ref 2: <https://www.seasisters.org/news/pumping-breast-milk-offshore>