



# City of Sanctuary **Maternity** Stream



Around the world, more people than ever in history are being forced to flee conflict and persecution to find safety and sanctuary elsewhere.

Women seeking sanctuary are much more likely to die from pregnancy or childbirth related causes or to face complications with their pregnancy than other women in the UK.

## **The needs of pregnant women seeking sanctuary**

Asylum seekers and refugees living in the UK often have complex needs. They may have physical and mental health issues as a result of their experiences in their home country or on their journey to safety. Some people may have spent long periods in refugee camps or on their journey to the UK. Poor health may be worsened by going through the UK asylum system. Difficulties such as poverty, poor housing, social isolation and feeling a lack of control over the situation are likely to exacerbate existing poor health, particularly post traumatic stress disorder and depression.

Pregnant women seeking sanctuary will face these issues too and are at a disproportionately increased risk of low birth weight, preterm birth and the death of mother / baby.

## Factors affecting access to maternity care

Timely access to good quality maternity care is essential to improve pregnancy outcomes. However, migrant women are more likely to access care later in their pregnancy and attendance can be patchy.

Factors that may affect access to maternity care:

- **Lack of understanding of services available and how to access them**
- **Different cultural beliefs about the importance of health care**
- **Fear of going out or attending a hospital**
- **Racism and discrimination**
- **Poverty**
- **Domestic abuse**
- **Poor administration between different health and social care services**
- **Difficulty registering for services and misinformation about entitlements to healthcare**
- **Language and cultural barriers**
- **Fear of being charged**

Many women experience poor care including:

- **Lack of suitable interpreters**
- **Health care workers who do not understand their needs**
- **Lack of consideration of cultural issues**
- **Stereotyping and unsympathetic care as well as prejudice and discrimination**
- **Workers who have misunderstood entitlements to healthcare**

## The Maternity Stream

The Maternity Stream has grown from an amazing network of women seeking sanctuary, health professionals, voluntary sector services, and researchers, in Yorkshire and Humberside working to raise awareness of some of the issues that pregnant women seeking sanctuary face and how services can meet their particular needs. Our vision is to extend and develop their incredible work and engage others to build a culture of welcome within maternity services.



### **Mariam's Story**

When Mariam became pregnant, she was referred by her GP to the Haamla Service, a specialist midwife service for asylum seekers. They understood her needs, experiences and different cultural perspective and she had a great experience, giving birth to a healthy baby boy. She became involved with her local Maternity Stream group and gained the confidence to talk about her positive birth experience and was able to support other pregnant women seeking sanctuary. She also received her refugee status. When she became pregnant again, she was referred to a non-specialist midwife because she was no longer an asylum seeker. She felt uncomfortable with the midwife who she felt didn't fully understand her background. She asked to be referred to the specialist service again and had another very positive birth experience, giving birth at home! The Haamla Service in Leeds was awarded as a Maternity Service of Sanctuary In 2015.

### **Clementine's Story**

Clementine fled her home country because of political persecution. She arrived in the UK alone and did not speak any English. She didn't register with a GP until she became ill and then found out she was four months pregnant. During her pregnancy, she saw her GP twice but was never referred to a midwife. She did not think anything of this, because that was the norm in her culture. When she went into labour, her friend took her to hospital and then went to work. Clementine was never offered an interpreter and was left alone for long periods of time, attached to a monitor. There was a friendly woman who brought her hot chocolate every so often. When her friend visited the next day, she interpreted for her and Clementine was then given some pain relief. On day three, when her friend returned, she was able to ask for an epidural. When she was finally fully dilated, the delivery room suddenly got very busy and the midwives indicated through sign language that her baby was lying sideways. She was asked to sign a piece of paper, giving permission for a Caesarian section but this was not explained to her. A midwife pressed down very hard on Clementine's abdomen, causing the baby to move position which was also not explained to her. A healthy baby girl was born. Clementine stayed in the hospital for another four days when the baby was examined several times. She was never offered an interpreter or explanation for the normal obstetric procedures which she had found so frightening and the repeated but unexplained examinations of her baby left her fearful for her daughter. After she went home, she was only visited once by a health visitor. She had no idea how to breastfeed or care for a newborn baby. Her experiences are still traumatic for her and she is terrified of having another baby.



### What is a Maternity Service of Sanctuary Award?

The City of Sanctuary network recognises and celebrates maternity service providers for their commitment to the values and vision of welcome and inclusivity. Local groups can award any service who can provide evidence that they have followed our core principles of learn, embed and share:

- **Learn:** learning what it means to be seeking sanctuary; in general and particularly in the context of maternity care
- **Embed:** taking positive action to embed concepts of welcome, safety and inclusion within the organisation
- **Share:** sharing your vision, achievements, what you have learned and good practice, with other services

### How can you get involved?

Please visit the website  
[maternity.cityofsanctuary.org/](https://maternity.cityofsanctuary.org/)  
or email [info@cityofsanctuary.org](mailto:info@cityofsanctuary.org)

For the Maternity Stream in Yorkshire & Humberside,  
please contact [info@maternity.cityofsanctuary.org](mailto:info@maternity.cityofsanctuary.org)



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