

WOMEN AND THE WORKPLACE:

Menopause -

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1. DEFINITIONS:

Menopause: 'one point in a continuum of life stages for women and marks the end of their reproductive years'^[1].

Typically occurs between 45 to 55-years for women and menstruating people worldwide.

Perimenopause: 'the period from when these signs are first observed and ends one year after the final menstrual period'^[2].

This is when the hormone balance starts to change, for some this is in their early twenties and for some it is as late as their forties.

Post-menopause: 'refers to the stage after the menopause, when someone has not had a period for at least 12 consecutive months'^[3].

It is crucial to note here the gap in research about the menopause, its symptoms and the causal effects. It is often hard to attribute possible symptoms directly to perimenopause, or the menopause, as they can be many and varied, and possibly linked to other factors.



2. WHAT IS THE MAJOR ISSUE? WHAT ARE THE CAUSES?

Physical and psychological menopausal symptoms affect and combine to affect people's experience of work in a variety of ways:

- CPID research (2023) indicates that 67%
 of those with experience of menopausal
 symptoms (aged 40-60 in employment) have
 'a mostly negative impact on them at work',
 only 28% report no impact^[4].
- 'Feeling less able to concentrate and an increased amount of stress' are by the most common reported negative impacts (79% and 68% respectively)^[5].
- Brain fog and fatigue can prevent women from being able to perform at their usual level. A testimonial, from a woman who left work due to her symptoms and took an early pension, said 'If I had been in the workplace still I am not sure I would have coped as the pressure of work and working in accountancy the level of detail needed would have made it impossible'^[6].
- Forbes also reported that those experiencing Vasomotor Symptoms (VMS), for example hot flushes and night sweats, are estimated to lose 60% more 'work productivity loss days' than women without symptoms^[7].

 The ages of 45-55 often brings other challenges for women – For example, they may be supporting children as they move into adulthood or caring for aging family members.

There is no one experience of the menopause, and thus it is evidently hard to make any generalisations about how it affects work. This can make it hard for employers to make adjustments, but it highlights the need for employers to consult their employees and take a careful and measured approach to providing support.

Menopause symptoms and work stress and environment can often work symbiotically, exacerbating the other:

- Feeling like you can no longer perform your job to the same standard comes with emotional and financial stresses and can lead to lower self esteem. CPID report showed that employees who feel unsupported by their employer, manager or colleagues are significantly more likely to report having felt 'an increased amount of pressure' and an 'increased amount of stress'^[8].
- This is highlighted in a testimonial from an employee in the aviation industry: 'my

- company did not support menopause at work and viewed my symptoms as behavioural change; rather than supporting me, they made me feel even more isolated, which led to imposter syndrome, and I walked away from my career for my own health and well-being'^[9].
- Having little control over your environment, unlike at home, can directly worsen symptoms. For example, inability to control ventilation and temperature makes hot flushes more difficult to deal with, or where employees have to wear restrictive, or synthetic workwear. 26% of key worker women say they are uncomfortable in their workwear^[10].

Many absence and performance review policies fail to acknowledge the menopause, and some menopausal employees faced disciplinary action:



- One issue found by the extensive Inquiry held by Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee was that performance reviews or disciplinary action were triggered when menopausal employees took a number of short-term absence policies^[11].
- An alarming 1 in 10 people have seen the impact their symptoms (absence, lateness, distraction drop in performance) lead to disciplinary action^[12].
- One CPID survey respondent detailed her experience – 'in a former job, I was suffering sleep disturbance and dissociation episodes that I brought to the attention of management, who did nothing in way of offering support and tried to dismiss me under gross misconduct'^[13]. Thankfully her case was resolved at Tribunal, however this brings to light the lack of sympathy held by some employers for those suffering from menopausal symptoms.
- This is due to a lack of acknowledgement of menopause and its specific characteristics: a life stage that has symptoms detrimental to life quality but can't and shouldn't be classed as an illness or a disability (apart from in the severest of cases).
- As noted earlier, increased stress around work and potentially facing disciplinary action or dismissal, will most likely exacerbate symptoms of stress.

A culture of silence and toxicity about menopause is still prevalent in the workplace:

- The survey conducted by Parliament Women and Equality committee found that less than a third of respondents who were experiencing menopause told anyone at work^[14].
- The main reasons cited for this were privacy, followed by concern over people's reactions.
 25% of respondents to the survey said there were 'worried about the reaction' if they sought any workplace adjustments^[15].
- The silence from menopausal women is also indicative of fears and expectations of gendered ageism in the workplace^[16].
- Many feel that the menopause is treated as a joke amongst colleagues at work.
 One Fawcett survey respondent noted that 'there is a stigma around the menopause in workplaces, it's a joke with most men and I don't think workplaces realised how horrible it can be'^[17].
- Another respondent said that 'I experienced being at bullied at work and people not believing that my illness was real... I was anxious, didn't want to go to work... It resulted that I walked out of my workplace and never returned'[18].
- In general, across society, there seems to be a lack of knowledge and understanding about the menopause, perimenopause, their diverse

- symptoms and their impact of everyday life. Many myths, or reductions (e.g. it is just hot flushes) still persist.
- Gendered ageism and sexist stereotyping heavily shape how menopausal employees are treated. The issues in the workplace are reflective of the issues in society as a whole.

Workplace support, although improving, is extremely limited:

- 8/10 women say their employer hasn't shared information, trained staff, or put in place a menopause absence policy^[19].
- In an online survey put out by TUC, with over 5,000 respondents, found that just 18.8% said their workplace provided information about menopause at work, and just 10.2% said their workplace had menopause guidelines or policies^[20].
- It is important to note that employees feel most unsupported by their employer and manager. Support is felt most from colleagues^[21].
- However, it is encouraging to see that there has been some level of improvement revealed by the differences in the CIPD's 2019 and 2023 surveys across all three areas employer, manager and colleagues. For example, in 2019 only 24% of respondents said they felt supported by their manager, by 2023 this number rose to 34%.

The effects of the menopause and a lack of support can lead to women to struggle at work, leading them to take less hours, take leave or leave work altogether:

- 14% of women working through menopause report reducing their hours, and a further 14% report going part-time^[22].
- Just over half of CPID (2023)'s survey respondents 'were able to think of a time when they were unable to go into work due to their menopause symptoms'^[23].
- Those with serious menopausal symptoms take an average of 32 weeks of leave from work^[24].
- Fawcett found that one in ten women who worked during the menopause have left a job due to their symptoms^[25]. Moreover, one in six women aged 40-60 report that they have considered leaving work due to a lack of support in relation to their menopause symptoms^[26].
- The troubling situation is summarised by Baroness Kishwer Falkner, chair of the EHRC, who said 'As Britain's equality watchdog, we are concerned both by how many women report being forced out of a role due to their menopause related symptoms and how many don't feel safe enough to request the workplace adjustments'^[27].

For those who stay in work, their potential promotional opportunities can be reduced if they struggle to perform at their optimum at work:

- 27% of women say menopause has had a negative effect on their career progression^[28].
- For example, one CPID survey respondent noted that 'Due to forgetfulness and not being as sharp with my recall as usual, I am often considered less able to present to important stakeholders, which is a huge shift for me as I was considered one of the most valued team members'^[29].
- By the age of 45-55, women and menopausal employees will have accumulated a range of skills, knowledge and experience, and as highlighted by Helen Tomlinson, the government Menopause Champion, perimenopause/ menopause need not to be a time for women to step back, step down or step out of their career. Post- menopause is a time to thrive and grow, giving women the best 10,15 or 25 years of their career'^[30].
- Many women also lose confidence and motivation. 61% of women who have worked through the menopause said they had lost motivation due to their symptoms and 52% said they lost confidence. Those with more severe symptoms, were more likely to lose motivation^[31]. These losses can further impact a menopausal individual's experience at work.

There have been a number of successful rising employment tribunal cases, but many menopausal women still do not get the justice they deserve for mistreatment or from an absence of reasonable adjustment:

- The Employment Lawyers Association (ELA)
 argued that claims based on menopause
 were not being brought as claimants are
 unwilling to embark on stressful litigation, or
 unable to access or fund legal advice^[32].
- There are a large number of cases, which were settled before Tribunal, many due to 'uncertainty from claimants about the prospects of success and limited funds'^[33].

 We can hope this will improve with the stricter guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) – see below.

It is hard to quantitively measure the full extent of the costs that menopause has on work for those experiencing the symptoms. However, it is abundantly clear that it has serious implications for menopausal people's working lives and it is crucial that it is addressed.

As recommended by the CPID it would be extremely beneficial for the policymakers to 'Develop a methodology to quantify the cost of menopause on the individual and the UK economy'^[34].

3. THE CASE FOR CHANGE FOR EMPLOYERS AND GOVERNMENT:

Given that menopausal women are the fast-growing demographic in the workplace^[35] and nearly 8 out of 10 menopausal women are in work^[36], it is crucial that employers address gaps in, or their absence of a support system. Government should help lead and guide improvements in menopause support.

Losing older employees due to menopause means that employers lose out from the benefits from having a multi-generational workplace:

- A report produced by the World Economic

Forum, the Organisation for Economic
Co-operation and Development and the
American Association of Retired Persons
(2020), demonstrated that multi-generational
workforces are more productive on both the
societal level and company level^[37].

- Having older workers boosts productivity,
 as they help facilitate 'intergenerational learning and collaborating', by sharing
 skills, knowledge, and wisdom accumulated through experience.
- In addition, they provide stability and

continuity in companies as they are far less likely than younger counterparts to move to other companies^[38].

- Evidence presented to the House of Commons Committee 'Women and the workplace' Inquiry highlighted that woman 50-64 'are highly skilled and experienced, typically at the peak of their careers, and are role models for younger workers'^[39].
- Oxford Economics' Statistics indicates that to replace a woman that makes over £25,000 a year, it will cost the employer over £30,500 to replace her. This is in inclusive of direct recruitment costs, and indirect costs of losing her knowledge and experience.

Looking at Gower College, Swansea as a case study demonstrates how investing in and supporting women's health is beneficial from a business perspective:

- The average age of Gower College's staff is
 47, of which 60% are female. 200 women aged
 between 45 and 55.
- The college trained their managers to support staff and provided advice and guidance, including menopause appointments with health consultants.
- The results have been significant with a
 70% reduction in absence for female staff accessing support over a 12-month period,
 and hugely positive feedback from the staff^[40].

It is also in employers' interest to avoid any legal cases:

- New guidance issued by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) means that employers can be sued for 'disability discrimination' for failing to make 'reasonable adjustments' for menopausal employees^[41].
- Failing to make workplace adjustments for staff can result in hundreds of thousands of pounds of loss in defending a claim and losing talent^[42], whilst the cost of fulfilling the obligations does not need to be great.
- Jenny Arrowsmith, employment partner at the law firm Irwin Mitchell, said 'by taking proactive measures to address menopause in the workplace, companies can not only reduce the risk of potential disputes but also improve the overall well-being and productivity of their employees'^[43].
- See more below about the rights of menopausal women below.

The government should work to support employers, providing guidance to facilitate positive economic change on a societal level:

 It is estimated that 14 million working days are lost each year due to menopause and perimenopause^[44].

More broadly, the government should invest in research about the menopause and women's health.

4. WHAT DOES THE LAW AND GOVERNMENT SAY?

Menopause is covered by the Equality Act 2010 and under Health and Safety legislation:

- The Equality Act 2010 protects workers from discrimination, harassment and victimisation on the basis of the protected characteristics, including disability, age and sex. Menopause is not an explicit characteristic, but.......
 - Menopause can be categorised as a disability if the 'symptoms have a long term and substantial impact on a woman's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'.
 - Women experiencing menopause symptoms may also be protected direct and indirect discrimination, as well as harassment and victimisation, on grounds of age and sex^[45].

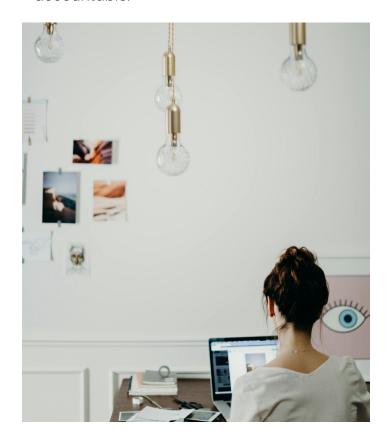
Employers are under a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and to not discriminate against the worker.

- Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.
 This states that it is the duty of every employer to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees, when reasonably practicable^[46].
- Management of Health and Safety at Work
 Regulations 1999 requires employers to risk
 assess factors to ensure the health and safety
 of their employees. This includes identifying

groups of employees that may be particularly at risk, or responding to notifications about an employee's condition, issue and/or symptoms^[47].

There is a rising trend in the number of employment tribunal cases that cite menopause as a contributing factor.

- HM Courts and Tribunal Service^[48]: 2017- 5
 cases, 2019 7 cases, 2020 16 cases, 2021 23 cases, 2022 18 cases, and in the first half
 of 2023 there were 14 cases alone.
- We can suspect with the new guidance the ECHR; employers will be held more accountable.



It is encouraging to see that the DWP have appointed a Menopause Employment Champion, and the appointee, Helen Tomlinson, has made many positive strides to create a structured plan of action:

- On World Menopause Day, 18th October, she launched the Four Point Plan 'to improve support for people affected by menopause in the workplace'. The four elements of the plan are:
 - 'Sharing of employer best practice (within sectors) on a portal that is accessible to all employers whether large or small, free of charge'.
 - 2.'A national sector-specific allyship programme which ensures no one is isolated and everyone has someone available to talk to'.
 - 3.'Menopause- friendly employers who will support, share and advocate across their sector retaining and attracting talent to the sector'.
 - 4.'A communications plan to improve the working lives of women in their sector, achieved by amplification through strategic partnerships'.
- The government simultaneously launched

the Help To Grow website^[49], which provides useful information and guidance for creating a menopause- friendly workplace, and also provides guidance to individuals. It has sought to involve all sectors.

 She has responded to many of the recommendations of the Women and Equalities Parliamentary report.

Tomlinson has also encouraged businesses to sign Wellbeing of Women's 'Menopause Workplace Pledge':

- It is encouraging to see that more than 2,600 employers have signed the pledge^[50].
- Signing the pledge commits employers to:
 - 'Recognising that the menopause can be an issue in the workplace and women need support'.
 - 2.'Talking openly, positively and respectfully about the menopause'.
 - 3.'Actively supporting and informing your employees affected by the menopause'.

These are positive steps and government should continue investing in supporting employers give menopausal individuals the support they deserve.

5. HOW CAN EMPLOYERS HELP?

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting menopausal employees due to the diversity of symptoms, and the diverse types of workplaces. Employers should assess and audit their own workspaces, policies and culture to assess the changes needed. They should collect responses from colleagues on what would be most useful adjustments and listen to research to shape their aims:

- For example, CPID survey respondents who felt supported at work cited these reasons as why: having a healthy workplace culture (38%), working with female colleagues of a similar age/ experiencing menopause symptoms (26%), awareness- raising (16%), having understanding colleagues (15%) and management support (13%)^[51].

Committing to 'Menopause Workplace Pledge' provides employers with useful, broad aims that they should focus their change around. Employers should also cross-reference and review with their existing policies on diversity and inclusion, flexible working, absence management and sickness reporting policies.

5.1) Flexible Working:

Creating a strong culture around flexible working helps menopausal employees better manage their symptoms. The CPID survey found that planned flexible working was mentioned as the most helpful type of specific measure^[52]. The following can be put in place, as far as possible:

- Allow working from home.
- Flexible shift patterns, such as varying start and finish times – helps menstruating who may suffer from poor night's sleep start later, and allows them to travel off-peak, avoiding busy, hot transport situations.
- Offer flexi-leave, where employees can work longer hours on some days and use accumulated hours to have shorter days, or a day off when needed.
- Re-allocate tasks to another colleague or to another time that may increase stress, for example, front-facing tasks.
- Normalise flexible working, for example,
 by using the tagline 'happy to talk flexible working' in recruitment and promotion opportunities^[53].

5.2) Review and alter policies:

There is no clear consensus whether it is necessary to have a separate menopause policy or integrate menopause into existing policies. Employers should, in whatever way, strongly consider the following:

- Make sure health and sickness absence

policies are fair - menopause-related absences should be recorded separately from other types of absence, to prevent triggering any performance reviews.

- Be clear about the roles and responsibilities
 of the parties involved: the menopausal
 individual, management and other members
 of staff.
- Be clear about the points of contact for support within the organisation and the support that is available. Create routines for confidential meetings.
- Workplaces can consider introducing 'inclusion passports', which are short documents where employees and managers record agreed adjustments^[54].

5.3) Physical aspects of work:

Be mindful of the physical workspaces, and people's different needs. Various adjustments can be made, for example:

- Put measures in place to be able to adjust room temperature, ideally localised to employees to accommodate everyone's need, e.g. by providing desk or handheld fans or heaters.
- Provide rest areas or quiet rooms.
- Provide blinds, or curtains to block out bright sunlight, and appropriate lightening.

- Relaxing uniform policies or allowing them to wear cooler and adjustable clothing.
 - For example, TESCO adjusted their instore uniform to have more breathable fabric^[55].
- If hot-desking is in place, provide extensive plans with information, e.g. which desks are in the sun, which ones are closest to the bathroom etc.

5.4) Creating an open, inclusive and supportive workplace culture:

Open up conversations about the menopause, breaking down any taboo and shame. Menopausal employees should feel confidence to talk about their symptoms and be confident to ask for adjustments:

Ensure line managers and senior staff are well trained and aware of how they can support employees through the menopausal period:

- This should include how symptoms vary across different menopausal groups – women, trans and non-binary staff,
- They should develop strong listening skills and sensitivity to be able to have difficult conversations to address issues.
- HR should be well-versed with the organisation's policy and procedures and be able to provide support to line-managers approaching menopause issues.

 Senior leadership should hold employees accountable for any derogatory or discriminatory comments or actions made.

Awareness and education should be generated across the workplace:

- This should be for both menopausal employees, and for all employees.
- Organisations can support 'awareness days and months', e.g. for International Day of Action for Women's Health (28th May), or Menopause Awareness Month (October), or World Menopause Day (18th October).

- Implement Menopause Champions, to advocate for menopausal employees.
- Use staff intranet, and noticeboards to share resources.

Moreover, informal support groups should be held for employees to discuss concerns and challenges, and ways to manage symptoms:

- There should be cross collaboration with other informal groups in the employee network, e.g., with LGBTQ+ or menstruation groups.
- Hold coffee & chat meetings.

6. HOW CAN MENOPAUSE POLICIES AND ADJUSTMENTS BE AS INCLUSIVE AS POSSIBLE?

Any existing research suggests that there are disparities in the experience of menopause and experience at work. Disparities include:

- Those with a disability or a long-term health condition are significantly more likely (71%) to say their symptoms have had a mostly negative effect on them at work than those without (64%)^[56]. This leads to more disabled women leaving their jobs 22% disabled women had left a job due to menopause compared to 9% of non-disabled women^[57].
- Those also from the LGBT+ community were significantly more likely to say their manager wouldn't be supportive^[58].

- Those identifying as LGBT+ are more likely to have faced disciplinary action due to their symptoms impacting their work (16% v 8% who don't identify as LGBT+). The same as for those with a disability (16% with, v 7% without). This suggests existing prejudices heavily influence perceptions of an individual's experience of menopause and their right to be supported.
- Persisting racial biases and stereotyping
 exist in organisations and influence how
 employees' health experiences are perceived
 and how supported employees feel in
 general^[59] this is evident in survey results
 that showed that those from an ethnic

minority background were more likely to not tell their manager about menopause being the cause of them not coming into work because they were embarrassed about disclosing this information (42% v 31%)^[60].

- Moreover, employees from ethnic minority groups are more likely to experience misdiagnosis, late diagnosis, and underdiagnosis from healthcare providers^[61], thus it makes it more difficult to access any support that be provided.
- Those with pre-existing mental health conditions may be debilitated by the mood changes and increased stress the hormonal changes menopause entails.
- Financial insecurity, precarious employment, and in-work poverty can influence the choices employees make regarding menstrual symptoms. Freelance or zero-hours contract employees may be more hesitant to speak out in fear of losing their income.

However, research has often failed to include or adequately represent LGBT+ people, younger women and ethnic minority women:

 Prof. Joanna Brewis, the head of department of People and Organisations at Open University Business School, told the Parliamentary Inquiry that 'We know nothing about how women of different racial or ethnic origins might experience the conjunction between menopause and work. We know nothing about trans women. We know nothing about women who identify as anything other than heterosexual. We know nothing about women in the gig economy. Really, the majority of the research that focuses on the workplace is about professional white, middle-class, able-bodied women'^[62].

- This should not be limited to looking at the relationship between menopause and work, but in medical and social science research about menopause.
 - For example, there were in the UK government's Women's Health Strategy:
 Asian women, women under 25, and over 60 were all underrepresented^[63].
 - The British Menopause Society have also written on the need for a bridging of the gap in research between ethnic minority women and white women^[64].

It is crucial that research, which is mainly survey-based, ensures that it includes minority voices in order to inform how best more inclusive employer support can be truly implemented.

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