

Making the invisible visible: why menopause is a workplace issue we can't ignore

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Making the Invisible Visible: Why Menopause is a Workplace Issue We Can't Ignore

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Abstract:

This commentary confronts the often-ignored issue of menopause in the workplace, a matter affecting a significant number of professional women. It critiques the cultural and institutional oversight of menopause as a symptom of entrenched ageism and gender bias. This silence is a continuation of historical gender discrimination, leading to a work environment that overlooks the needs of women undergoing this transition. We call for a leadership-driven change in dialogue, recognising menopause as a normal life stage and advocating for workplace policies that support women without compromising their professional identity. Menopause should be understood with the same sensitivity as invisible disabilities, necessitating similar accommodations and empathy. Additionally, the commentary examines the medicalisation of menopause.

What is already known on this topic – There is recognition of the challenges faced by women at work, but the specific issue of menopause has been insufficiently addressed within professional settings.

What this commentary adds – This commentary broadens the discourse, highlighting menopause as a significant yet overlooked factor in women's professional lives. It calls for leadership to foster a workplace culture that acknowledges and supports menopausal women, promoting a shift in policy and practice.

How this commentary might affect research, practice, or policy – The perspectives offered could guide research into the wider effects of menopause on workforce participation. Practically, it urges leaders to develop inclusive policies and cultures that support menopausal women, influencing organisational policies and health programmes to retain their expertise and contributions.

Introduction

Menopause, an inevitable biological transition for individuals born with ovaries, affecting cisgender women and some trans, non-binary, intersex, gender fluid and non-conforming individuals. Menopause typically occurs during a pivotal period in their professional lives, yet it remains veiled in a culture of silence within the workplace[1,2]. This silence is far from harmless; it shapes the lived experiences of women going through menopause and influences the broader societal understanding of this life stage. The discourse—or lack thereof—surrounding menopause at work is a reflection of deep-seated attitudes towards ageing[3] and gender, and it plays a critical role in how the contributions and capabilities of women are valued within the labour market[1,2,4].

This silence in the workplace around menopause is not merely an oversight but a manifestation of historical patterns of gender bias and ageism. It is indicative of a wider societal discomfort with the ageing female body and the natural processes associated with it. Thus, menopause is still framed as a taboo topic at work and the implications are profound, affecting not only individual women but also the organisational cultures in which they work[4]. The lack of open dialogue and recognition of menopause as a significant life event perpetuates a lack of support and understanding, leaving many women to manage their symptoms covertly and without the necessary accommodations that could ease their transition[2,4]. In the UK, this is worsened by the lack of access to trained healthcare professionals on menopause who can advise women [5]

Addressing the issue of menopause and work necessitates a deliberate shift in both academic and workplace discourse to encompass experiences that are currently being overlooked in favour of more visible manifestations of this transition.

This includes giving more coverage to menopause experiences that are not solely framed as loss and decline[6,7]; Furthermore, there must be greater attention to less visible aspects of menopause[8]. Menopause, much like many invisible disabilities[9,10], can come with a host of non-visible symptoms — such as cognitive changes, mood fluctuations, and fatigue — that can impact a woman's experience in the workplace[8].

There is a pressing need for a deeper conversation that acknowledges menopause as a normal stage of life that does not diminish a woman's professional identity[2] or capacity to contribute meaningfully to their work while also recognising that the experience of menopause can be compounded by invisible, and often, debilitating symptoms[1]. By examining the discursive representations of menopause in the workplace, alongside a more nuanced understanding of invisible disabilities, we can begin to unravel the complex interplay of factors that influence how both are perceived and managed in professional settings[11]. This is a critical step towards fostering a work environment that is inclusive and supportive of women at all stages of their careers, as well as one that is sensitive to the diverse range of experiences that women may navigate[12]. Creating such an environment requires policies and practices that accommodate not just the physical changes associated with menopause but also the less visible challenges that can accompany it, thereby ensuring that all women are supported in maintaining their professional identity and in making meaningful contributions to their work, regardless of the natural transitions or health challenges they may face[2].

Understanding Menopause

Menopause is a natural biological process that marks the end of menstrual cycles and fertility in women, typically occurring between the ages of 45 and 55. Even though it is defined as an event, this transition is not merely a cessation of menstruation. The period leading up to it can take many years and is often accompanied by a host of symptoms that can significantly affect a woman's life. These range from visible symptoms, such as hot flushes, to less evident ones, like sleep disturbances, mood swings, and cognitive difficulties. These can vary greatly in intensity and duration, potentially impacting a woman's professional life by affecting her performance, concentration, and interactions with colleagues. The experience of menopause is deeply personal, with each woman experiencing it in a unique way, influenced by a combination of genetic, health, and environmental factors[12].

Despite its universality among women, menopause is seldom addressed with the seriousness it demands, especially in the context of work. The prevailing workplace discourse often fails to recognise the challenges posed by menopause, leading to a culture of silence and stigma[2]. This lack of open dialogue and understanding can leave women feeling unsupported and isolated, exacerbating the difficulties they may face. The silence around menopause is not just a personal issue; it reflects broader societal attitudes that undervalue the experiences of ageing women and overlook the need for workplace adjustments that could support their well-being and productivity[13]. This is particularly alarming when we consider that women of menopausal age represent a sizable share of the workforce in many countries[12,14,15]

The consequences of this silence are far-reaching. Women may struggle with their symptoms in isolation, fearing the repercussions of speaking out or seeking support. The stigma attached to menopause can lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, a sense of invisibility, and even impact career progression[16], leading many women to consider exiting the workforce[17]. To foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment, it is essential to break the taboo surrounding menopause. This requires a shift in workplace culture from negativity and taboo to one that acknowledges menopause as a significant life stage that may require accommodations and support, such as flexible work arrangements, access to health information, and an empathetic understanding from management and peers[18].

The Invisibility of Menopause in the Workplace

The invisibility of menopause in workplace conversations is a significant issue that affects countless women as they transition into a natural phase of their lives[19]. This silence is deeply rooted in societal discomfort with ageing, particularly in relation to the female body, and is perpetuated by patriarchal values that prioritise youth and fertility. This is further reinforced by the negativity around the menopause transition as a time of decline and dysfunction, in spite of many women reporting positive experiences at this stage[7]. As a result, menopause is often treated as a non-issue at work or 'women's business'[20] that has no place in professional discussions. The absence of dialogue around menopause leads to a lack of awareness and support in organisational settings, despite its profound impact on nearly half the workforce at some point in their lives. Consequently, women experiencing menopause often feel they must navigate this stage without acknowledgement or assistance from their workplace, exacerbating the challenges they face[21].

The consequences of this invisibility are manifold. Without open discussions or recognition of menopause as a significant life event, workplaces fail to provide the necessary support structures, such as flexible working conditions, resources for symptom management or information on perimenopause and menopause. Women may feel compelled to conceal their symptoms or downplay their experiences for fear of being stigmatised or professionally sidelined[4]. The struggle to keep up with workplace expectations without much support leads women to experience feelings of shame and loss of confidence[2,4]. This lack of dialogue not only affects individual women but also has broader implications for workplace morale, productivity, and the retention of experienced female staff. The silence around menopause can lead to a decrease in job satisfaction and a sense of alienation among women who feel their experiences are neither understood nor valued[22].

Breaking the silence surrounding menopause in the workplace requires a concerted effort to shift the discourse from one of invisibility to visibility and support. This involves recognising the impact of menopause and actively working to destigmatise it by fostering an environment where women can speak openly about their experiences. Employers and colleagues need to be educated about menopause and its effects, creating a culture of empathy and understanding. By bringing menopause into the light, workplaces can begin to develop policies and practices that acknowledge and support the needs of menopausal women, ensuring that they remain valued and integral members of the workforce.

Medicalisation of Menopause

The medicalisation of menopause has become a prevalent approach to this life stage, often framing it as a condition requiring medical intervention[22]. This perspective is deeply entrenched in the healthcare narrative, where menopause is frequently pathologised and presented as a disorder rather than a natural biological process. Such a viewpoint is heavily influenced by the pharmaceutical industry's focus on treatment modalities, particularly hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and other medical interventions aimed at alleviating menopausal symptoms[1]. While these treatments can indeed be essential to many women and are an important option in menopause management, the overarching narrative that positions menopause as an ailment to be "cured" can invalidate the experiences of those who may opt for non-medical approaches or who find that medical treatments are not suitable for their individual needs[22].

This medical-centric view of menopause can have several unintended consequences. It frames menopause in the realms of disease and deficiency rather than a fuller stage of life. Therefore, it risks overshadowing the diverse experiences of women going through menopause, reducing a complex life transition to a series of symptoms to be treated. This can lead to a narrow understanding of menopause that does not account for the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of this stage of life[23]. Moreover, it can create pressure on women to seek medical solutions and potentially expose them to side effects or interventions that may not align with their personal health philosophies or lifestyle choices[24]. The emphasis on medicalisation also often fails to address the need for holistic support systems in the workplace that accommodate the variability of menopausal experiences and promote overall well-being.

To counteract the medicalisation of menopause, there is a growing call for a more nuanced approach that recognises menopause as a natural transition that does not inherently require medical treatment[25]. This perspective advocates for a broader approach that includes lifestyle adjustments, alternative therapies, and workplace accommodations as part of a comprehensive support system for menopausal women. By expanding the conversation beyond medical interventions, it is possible to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment that respects individual choices and acknowledges menopause as a normal, albeit significant, phase in a woman's life. This shift can empower women to make informed decisions about their health and well-being during menopause, with the support of their healthcare providers, employers, and society at large[26].

Stereotypes and Misrepresentations

Workplace perceptions of menopause are often marred by stereotypes that unjustly portray menopausal women as emotionally unstable and professionally unreliable. While mood swings and cognitive challenges are recognised symptoms of menopause[12], the demeaning manner that these issues are framed reinforce an archaic notion that women are beholden to their hormonal fluctuations, which purportedly impair their ability to function with professionalism and logic during menopause. Such discrediting stereotypes perpetuate a work environment rife with discrimination, potentially stalling a woman's career advancement. The continuous promotion of these outdated views can lead to a toxic office environment where the professional capabilities of women are unfairly scrutinised, their achievements are undervalued, and their opportunities for career progression are curtailed based on a natural biological process rather than merit or qualifications. This issue is compounded by findings reported in *The Lancet*[27], which highlight the widespread misinterpretations and obstacles surrounding menopause care. Stigma and a lack of public understanding have led to many women silently enduring menopause or being subjected to an overly clinical approach that treats it as merely a hormonal deficiency. Despite menopause being a natural stage that affects half the population, it remains inadequately recognised and supported within society and healthcare systems.

The impact of these stereotypes on women's professional trajectories is profound and multifaceted. Biased attitudes among colleagues and management can result in women experiencing menopause being unfairly overlooked for promotions, excluded from pivotal projects, or singled out for redundancy. The false belief that a woman going through menopause is less reliable can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the stress of confronting such prejudices indeed affects her work performance. Moreover, the apprehension of facing derogatory comments can lead to heightened anxiety and diminished self-esteem, which can spill over into job performance and satisfaction. The workplace, instead of being a supportive environment, becomes a space of apprehension. This is echoed by research[28], which reveals that a significant number of women do not discuss their menopausal symptoms with their general practitioners, and those who do often face delays in diagnosis. The survey also points out that not all women are offered hormone replacement therapy (HRT), the recommended first-line treatment, and the lack of alternative treatments drives some to seek unverified remedies. The result is a stifling effect on the careers of women, who are pivotal contributors to both paid and unpaid work sectors.

To dismantle these harmful stereotypes, a cultural transformation within the workplace is imperative, starting with enhanced education and awareness. Both employers and employees must be educated about the realities of menopause, dispelling myths and cultivating a workplace that is empathetic and respectful. Training programs, open discussions, and inclusive policies are essential in fostering a supportive atmosphere for menopausal women. By actively dispelling false stereotypes and acknowledging the expertise of experienced women, organisations can improve the work environment for menopausal employees and enhance the overall company culture. Research[29] underscores the need for a holistic approach to menopause care, emphasising the importance of mandatory menopause training for healthcare providers and the creation of a supportive and inclusive workplace culture. Such measures, including flexible working arrangements and temperature-controlled environments, can significantly improve the daily work life for menopausal women. Recognising menopause as a significant life event, society can shift its perspective to see it as an opportunity for women to redefine their futures, thereby enabling them to thrive in mid-life and beyond with the right support and resources.

Reframing Menopause: A Discourse of Empowerment

Amidst the prevailing negative stereotypes, a progressive discourse is taking shape that seeks to empower rather than diminish menopausal women in the workplace[30]. This emerging narrative celebrates menopause as a period of personal growth and professional wisdom when many women find their zest[31]. It acknowledges the depth of experience and the wealth of knowledge that menopausal women contribute to their fields, advocating for a re-evaluation of the roles and recognition given to older women in professional environments. By promoting the value of diversity and inclusion at all stages of a woman's life, this discourse challenges the status quo and encourages organisations to see menopause not as a detriment but as an asset that brings a new dimension of insight and resilience to the workforce[32].

Women's groups and feminist organisations are at the forefront of this shift, actively working to dismantle the negative connotations associated with menopause and replace them with a narrative of strength and capability. They call for workplace policies that are responsive to the needs of menopausal women[1,12], such as offering flexible work arrangements[33], providing access to relevant health information, and fostering a supportive network. These advocates emphasise the importance of a workplace culture that is open and respectful, where menopause is not a taboo subject but one that can be discussed freely and without judgment. Such an environment not only benefits menopausal women but also creates a more inclusive and supportive workplace for all employees, regardless of gender or age.

The reframing of menopause as a discourse of empowerment has the potential to transform workplaces into environments where women feel valued throughout all stages of their lives[6]. It encourages the recognition of menopausal women's contributions and the harnessing of their full potential[34]. By integrating this positive approach, companies can lead by example, showing that they value their employees for their experience and expertise, not just their age or reproductive status. This shift can pave the way for policies that not only accommodate but celebrate the transitions women undergo, ultimately leading to a more equitable and productive workplace for everyone.

The Power of Language in Shaping Discourse

The role of language in shaping menopause experiences at work cannot be overstated. Language not only reflects but also constructs reality[5,35]. It is a powerful tool that can either reinforce the stigma surrounding menopause or help dismantle it. The terminology and phrases commonly used to describe menopause often carry connotations that can influence perceptions. Euphemisms like "the change" can trivialise the experience, suggesting it is a minor shift rather than a significant life event with substantial physical and psychological effects. Such language can discourage open dialogue, leaving women to navigate their symptoms in isolation. Conversely, language that is direct, clear, and free from negative connotations can encourage a more honest and supportive conversation about menopause, fostering an environment where women feel seen and understood.

The choice of language in workplace discourse on menopause is indicative of the level of comfort and respect with which this natural life stage is treated. When the language used is dismissive or joking, it can create an atmosphere where women feel their experiences are not taken seriously[13]. This can lead to a reluctance to seek support or accommodations for fear of being stigmatised or not believed. On the other hand, language that is empathetic and informed can validate women's experiences and signal that their well-being is a priority. It can also educate and raise awareness among all employees, promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect across all protected characteristics given the intersectional nature of menopause-related issues at work. Language that normalises menopause and acknowledges its impact can empower women to speak openly about their needs and experiences, leading to better support and understanding from colleagues and management.

Therefore, it is imperative for organisations to be intentional about the language they use when addressing menopause. This includes formal communications, policies, and everyday workplace interactions. Training and guidelines can help cultivate a language culture that supports and empowers rather than marginalises. By actively choosing words that reflect respect and understanding, employers can contribute to a more positive discourse around menopause. This not only benefits menopausal women but also contributes to a more inclusive and supportive workplace culture overall, where diversity in all its forms is valued and respected.

Media Influence on Menopause Narratives

The media's depiction of menopause significantly shapes societal attitudes, which in turn echo within workplace environments. Employing a computational corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADS) to examine 2993 mainstream UK media articles, researchers found a persistent emphasis on the negative aspects of menopause[6]. Building on Goffman's theory of stigma, the study suggests that while there is an increasing mention of menopause and its relevance to the workplace, the narratives in the media predominantly frame it as a period of dysfunction and decline, often highlighting litigation issues. Such portrayals can reinforce the stigmatisation in professional settings, where menopausal women may be unfairly characterised by these one-dimensional narratives, fostering a workplace culture that is often misinformed and insensitive to the true nature of menopause.

To counteract these skewed representations, the media must heed the findings of the 2023 study and strive for a more balanced portrayal of menopause. The study underscores the necessity for media narratives to reflect the resilience, diversity, and strength of menopausal women, which can contribute to a more accurate and respectful discourse. By integrating stories that encompass both the challenges and the victories of menopause, the media can significantly influence the normalisation of this life stage. The study's methodological approach, CADS, provides a new lens through which writers, producers, and journalists can systematically assess and evolve their portrayal of menopause, moving beyond entrenched stereotypes to stories that resonate with the complex reality of women's experiences. Moreover, the media's potential to drive policy and organisational change is highlighted by the study's focus on the intersection of menopause and work. Investigative journalism and feature stories that advocate for workplace reforms based on the study's insights can raise awareness about the need for inclusive work environments. By spotlighting best practices and praising companies that adopt supportive measures for menopausal women, the media can encourage a broader organisational shift. This proactive role in shaping the narrative not only contributes to a more positive social understanding of menopause but also catalyses workplace transformation. The 2023 study thus not only offers a critique of current media practices but also serves as a call to action for the media to facilitate a more informed, empathetic, and equitable treatment of menopause in the cultural zeitgeist and within the workplace.

Conclusion: Towards a Supportive Workplace Environment

The portrayal of menopause within the workplace reflects a complex web of societal views on ageing, gender, and the valuation of women's contributions to the labour force. The prevailing narratives often render menopausal experiences invisible, overly medicalised, or reduced to stereotypes, fostering a workplace culture where silence and stigma regarding menopause are the norm. This not only marginalises women experiencing menopause but also overlooks the broader implications for workplace diversity and inclusivity. The language surrounding menopause, the stories told in the media, and the existing legal and policy frameworks collectively shape these discourses, underscoring the need for a multifaceted approach to address and reshape these narratives.

Emerging discourses, however, are beginning to challenge these negative representations, advocating for a shift towards a more affirmative and supportive understanding of menopause in the workplace. This shift is critical in fostering an environment where menopause is not a taboo subject but an acknowledged and supported aspect of women's health. Leaders and decision-makers have a pivotal role to play in this transformation by taking positive actions such as: (1) providing health resources and information that can educate managers about the menopause, and help women understand their transition, (2) being mindful of using inclusive language that allows experiences of women to be normalised, (3) foster a psychologically safe environment, where women can discuss their needs openly, (4) and shaping organisational policies and practices that allows women to request reasonable adjustments at work during the critical times of menopause transition.

To cultivate workplace environments that support women at all stages of life, it is imperative for leaders to take a proactive stance. This involves not only policy and practice changes but also a cultural shift within organisations. Leaders should lead by example by promoting

awareness, fostering empathy, and ensuring that the workplace is responsive to the evolving needs of its workforce. By doing so, they not only enhance the well-being and productivity of their employees but also set a precedent for what a supportive and inclusive workplace culture looks like. The journey towards such an environment is continuous and requires commitment, but the benefits of a truly supportive workplace for menopausal women extend far beyond the individuals—it strengthens the entire fabric of the organisation.

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