

Witten evidence from Manchester Metropolitan University [MEW0061]

This submission is made by Professor Carol Atkinson, Professor of HRM, Decent Work and Productivity (Research Centre), Manchester Metropolitan University Business School¹. Carol has led research into women's experiences of menopause in the workplace and is making this submission to share findings from this research and thus inform the inquiry.

Nature and extent of discrimination

Women experience both direct and indirect discrimination in the workplace as a result of menopause. In our research, we have worked with women who have been overtly bullied as a result of their experiencing symptoms (Atkinson et al., 2021). This has manifested in many ways, from ignoring Occupational Health Service recommendations on workplace adjustments to humiliating 'banter' when they experience, for example, hot flushes. Many workplaces are still not safe spaces in which to raise menopause for discussion and seek support for associated symptoms. We then see many women leave work. Indirectly, women are discriminated against via organisational policy – an example of this is the police service where job related fitness tests that are required for continued employment or promotion take no account of challenges created by menopause symptoms. Many women are reluctant to disclose their menopausal status which prevents access to support mechanisms. Impacts for wider society include the exclusion of women from the workplace with social and economic disbenefits for themselves, together with negative economic implications for organisations and at national level.

Economic impact

While there are challenges to establishing a precise value to this (Brewis et al., 2017), a growing body of evidence suggests that a lack of workplace support decreases performance for many women and leads to early exit from the labour market for some. Both clearly have negative economic impacts.

Workplace support

Workplaces can use policy, toolkits, guidance etc as appropriate to both train line managers and give them the necessary tools to offer support and to create an open culture where women feel safe to disclose their status and request support. Culture change is essential to this for many organisations: support will not be effective in the absence of a diverse and inclusive culture in which it is safe for women in menopause transition to disclose their status. Awareness raising is a central aspect to creating supportive workplaces.

A number of organisations e.g. the police service, Environment Agency, Aviva have introduced policies, toolkits or similar. These range from support with physical symptoms e.g. access to toilets, cold water, rest spaces, to support for psychological symptoms, e.g. counselling and similar support services for anxiety, depression and low self esteem. Changes to uniforms, menopause champions, self support networks and 'passports' that document agreed adjustments are other valued support mechanisms.

Legislation

Numbers of Employment Tribunal cases that are making findings of discrimination in relation to women in menopause are small, but growing rapidly (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/aug/07/menopause-centre-increasing-number-uk-employment-tribunals>). Legislation is thus in force, but does not allow for combination of protected characteristics i.e. cases have to be

brought on the basis of gender or age, and in some cases disability. Allowing for combination of protected characteristics would better support women in gaining redress through the Employment Tribunal system.

References

- ATKINSON, C., CARMICHAEL, F. & DUBERLEY, J. 2021. The Menopause Taboo: examining women's embodied experiences of menopause in the UK police service. *Work, Employment and Society*, 35, 657–676.
- BREWIS, J., BECK, V., DAVIES, A. & MATTHESON, J. 2017. The effects of menopause transition on women's economic participation in the UK. *In: GOVERNMENT_SOCIAL_RESEARCH (ed.) Research report*. London: Department for Education.

ⁱ <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/business-school/about-us/our-staff/profile/index.php?id=1058>

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