

Submission from 4Women [MEW0085]

Introduction

4Women is Channel 4's grass roots in-house gender equality staff network that was set up 5 years ago. Its mission is to empower Channel 4 women to achieve success, whatever success looks like for them.

4Women were the driving force behind the launch of Channel 4's menopause policy, which was launched back in 2019 and updated and published publicly in 2020 (available at: <https://www.channel4.com/corporate/menopause-policy>). At the time, this was the UK media industry's first dedicated menopause policy for employees. Since then, 4Women have supported a number of organisations with specific advice as they develop their own policies, including those in the financial, media and government sectors. We also continue to take part in interviews and panels that aim to address the taboo that surrounds the menopause in business by ensuring that the right support is available and the conversation continues.

Our response to the terms of reference is set out below (please be aware that we have responded to those questions that we feel most able to answer):

What is the nature and the extent of discrimination faced by women experiencing the menopause?

We felt compelled to act after discovering a number of our colleagues were suffering in silence from debilitating symptoms that was making it hard to carry out their jobs successfully. We held several focus groups with women around the business who felt completely unsupported and too ashamed to mention the word 'menopause' whilst at work. As is widely known, 59% of women in the workplace experiencing symptoms say they have a negative on their work and for a quarter of women those symptoms are debilitating.

Research suggests that, for 30% of women, the recent global pandemic has made the physiological and mental symptoms of menopause worse (Source: Survey by The Menopause Hub, April 2020). According to recent figures, there were five employment tribunals referencing the claimant's menopause in 2018 and in the first 6 months of 2021, there have been 10 cases citing menopause.

It seems clear to us there is a significant issue here that needs addressing. Unlike other forms of discrimination that are legislated against, the menopause is a taboo that isn't discussed. It's seen as something to be ashamed of and the lack of support means that anyone experiencing severe symptoms has no choice but to get on with the job. We believe that is slowly changing but urgent and faster action is needed to protect a valuable section of the workforce.

What is the economic impact of menopause discrimination?

Women aged 50 – 60 are today the fastest growing economically-active group in Britain, yet without any support for menopause symptoms, recent research found we could be losing 14 million workdays a year.

Losing women at this stage of their career is a huge blow for any organisation given the skills and knowledge that they have acquired. The cost of hiring, investing and training people to replace a woman at this stage of her career is likely to have a real economic impact. It's also important from a gender pay gap perspective, without the women at the top, figures for gender pay gap are likely to skew higher.

Following the launch of Channel 4's policy, we surveyed our members and found that 78% of Channel 4 staff feel better about Channel 4 as place to work. Such feedback shows the value of having a policy and the importance of ensuring employees feel included.

How can business factor in the needs of employees going through the menopause?

Business needs to understand what the menopause means, what symptoms it can cause and ensure it provides the appropriate support to alleviate or help deal with those symptoms. We held focus groups and spoke to the women directly to find out what they needed, and we would recommend any business does that same.

We felt very strongly, when we launched our policy, that it should be a policy and not guidelines – we wanted employees to know that there was a real commitment from the business to provide support in terms of the physical environment, medical help and emotional support. As part of that support, it's also vital that line managers have the necessary training so that they can have a constructive conversation and ensure an employee is being supported in the right way.

Having the conversations and hearing the word 'menopause' in the workplace will slowly ensure that the taboo that surrounds it disappears. There is no reason why the menopause should be treated any differently to any other women's health issue.

How can practices addressing workplace discrimination relating to the menopause be implemented?

As with other protected characteristics, the menopause should be covered under sex discrimination law. Implementing legislation is a powerful protection and one that shows the Government is committed to supporting those suffering such symptoms. All companies should be required to provide the appropriate support – whether that's a policy or guidelines. The key is ensuring that employees have access to meaningful support with the appropriate medical provisions.

Educating people is also key, together with legislation, information about the menopause needs to be freely available. People need to be aware of what it means, and the effect severe symptoms can have on people going through it.

How should people who experience the menopause but do not identify as women be supported in relation to the menopause and the workplace?

We felt it was very important to ensure that our policy wasn't just limited to women and was for anyone suffering from menopausal symptoms. We expressly state this at the beginning of the policy so that people who do not identify as women feel fully included in any support provided.

As we said above, speaking to employees and consulting with them is key in understanding what support is needed.

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