

Menopause in the Workplace: Building Evidence, Changing Workplaces, Supporting Women

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Abstract

This editorial accompanies and welcomes the release from EMAS of the Global Consensus Statement on Menopause in the Workplace. It highlights key elements of current knowledge in the field and avenues for future research.

Keywords: Menopause, workplace, employees, employers

The welcome release of the Global Consensus Statement on Menopause in the Workplace from EMAS marks a watershed in the study of this field. It provides a clear statement on the current state of scientific knowledge and an actionable roadmap for researchers and practitioners to advance the field into the future.

Menopause has long been a taboo subject in many workplaces, but the silence is now being broken. A significant rise in multidisciplinary research in the last decade, increased focus from governments and employers concerned about ageing workforce profiles, and greater media and celebrity attention underscore the interest and importance of this issue.

Unfortunately, progress in recognising and addressing the needs of women experiencing menopausal symptoms at work has been uneven. Specifically, the greatest advances have been made in European countries such as the UK and for certain types of organisations and workers, typically large private and public sector employers, and professional (white) women.

As captured by the EMAS statement, the current evidence base highlights the *diversity* of women's experience as well as the *two-way* relationship between menopause and work. For

some women, menopausal symptoms have limited perceived impact on their work [1], and menopause can be associated with positive outcomes such as increased energy, or enhanced self-beliefs and greater perceived autonomy [2]. For others, however, the picture is very different. Symptoms such as hot flushes can have perceived negative effects on work performance and prompt feelings of shame or embarrassment [3], while sleep disturbance or fatigue following night sweats, or the unpredictability of menstrual bleeding, may make work more difficult [2].

Burgeoning evidence suggests that the workplace environment has a direct effect on the experience of menopause. Certain physical (e.g., workplace temperature and ventilation), psychosocial (e.g., perceived managerial support and flexibility, formal meetings or high visibility work like giving presentations) and inhospitable organisational cultural factors (e.g., circulating negative gender- and age-based stereotypes of midlife female workers) can shape women's experience by aggravating or ameliorating symptoms [2,3,4]. Employers' incapacity to support them through menopause can mean women take their talents elsewhere.

Crucially, menopause at work is part of a wider tapestry of events and concerns which may include caring responsibilities for children or parents, other health issues, ageing, relationship status and quality of relationship, and financial security. More information is needed about the interplay between these factors and women's experience of menopause in the workplace.

Employers generally have a legal duty of care to protect the health and well-being of their employees. Evidence from UK employment tribunals suggests that menopause may be protected within the context of equalities legislation while other commentators have indicated menopause may be protected through Health and Safety Acts and jurisdiction. Beyond legal compliance, there is also a strong business case for supporting women in midlife and beyond (post-menopause), as they represent a talented, experienced yet often overlooked or

‘untapped’ workplace cohort. Together, these factors provide a pressing argument why organisations should act to better support women managing menopausal symptoms in the workplace [5].

A growing number of private and public organisations including universities, trade unions, TV stations, retailers, transportation companies and the police force have instituted menopause policies or guidelines, education and training for managers, or made other modifications to their workplace environments. Peak bodies, employer and employee associations, trade unions and academic research teams, have also produced valuable guidelines, resources, and frameworks or toolkits [6,7] (see also MIPO Menopause Information Pack for Organizations <https://www.menopauseatwork.org/>).

While recent advances have been very encouraging, there is still much to be done. For example, more information is needed about women’s experiences in a wider range of contexts. Currently, most knowledge has been derived from professional Caucasian women in the Global North and less is known about women in non-urban settings, in precarious work, and in the informal economy, especially outside of Europe/North America. There is a need to better understand and cater to the experience of women in blue-collar occupations, as well as women of different ethnicities or who are gender-diverse. Further consideration of non-cisgender and trans women’s experience would also ensure that practice and guidance is inclusive.

Building the evidence base with more diverse samples and intervention studies represent two ways to generate actionable steps that organisations can take to make their working environments more supportive to a greater range of midlife women. We also need to be clear about what evidence is most likely to aid governmental policy and businesses of all sizes to proactively and productively support menopause. For example, intervention studies [8,9] may

provide valuable evidence in a form that can on-board senior executives and ensure that resources are provided, and change is instigated and championed from the top.

The EMAS statement is key to this future-oriented work. Let us together build evidence, change workplaces and support women through menopause at work.

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