

The Menopause Taboo at Work

Examining Women's Embodied Experiences of Menopause in the UK Police Service

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The Problem

Menopause transition is different for every woman, but usually occurs in their late 40s or early 50s, bringing four to eight years of various symptoms. It's increasingly an experience that plays out in the workplace, as the ageing workforce means more women are working for longer, and hence during transition.

While there is a growing awareness of the issues it can cause, with some employers adopting best practice, the menopause remains a taboo subject shrouded in stigma. At best, women are unsupported. At worst, they are harassed and humiliated.

To date, much of the work around menopause in the workplace has focused on the biomedical event – the 'living decay' of age. Yet women's embodied experiences are more complex and nuanced – a bio-psychocultural process that is as much about a woman's personality, immediate environment and wider organisational context, as it is about her physical being.

This is particularly relevant in the police service, a hyper-masculine workplace where a macho culture of self-reliance dominates, bodies must conform to a male ideal and aggressive behaviours are routinely accepted by men and women. Put mildly, it is a context that can be challenging for women to navigate.

Work on the embodied experiences of pregnancy, periods and breastfeeding in the workplace show how women must strive to minimise the visibility of their body's demands – that biological functions are shameful. What is less understood is

how age and gender intersect in these embodied experiences of the menopause transition. What symptoms do women experience, and how do their personal characteristics and professional context shape those experiences? What attitudes do these women encounter at work? How likely are they to speak to their colleagues or managers about their symptoms?

What we discovered

Drawing from an online survey across three large metropolitan police forces, researchers from Manchester Metropolitan and University of Birmingham investigated the embodied experiences of around 1500 women, mainly aged 40 plus. They found that many experienced 'bothersome' symptoms – from well-recognised physical issues like hot flushes or irregular periods, to psycho-social outcomes, including anxiety, low mood or lack of concentration.

The context of their day-to-day working lives makes a major difference in how women experience these symptoms. Those working on shifts, spending long hours at crime scenes or wearing uniform suffered most from the physical symptoms. Meanwhile, the highly educated women – those more like to have autonomy in managing their working routines – experienced these issues less. While some women saw it as natural life stage or even a benefit to be embraced, many were unprepared for menopause and felt negatively about the changes their body was experiencing.

Examples of gendered ageism were rife – many had even been ridiculed in the name of ‘banter’ or made the butt of jokes as they managed their symptoms. In an environment where the idealised image of a police officer is a young, strong male, the women facing menopause transition felt disadvantaged, struggling in a working environment which wasn’t supportive enough.

Unsurprisingly, most chose not to disclose any issues to their line manager, particularly if they were younger or male. Some were concerned about the negative connotations of menopause, and most worried that managers and colleagues might consider them less competent. A few women would even prefer to keep these issues in the shadows, presuming that greater awareness would set back progress for older women.

In general, the women surveyed still enjoyed their job, despite the challenges that the menopause transition presented – but felt that their confidence and general wellbeing had declined as a result.

Recommendations

- There are straightforward physical measures that would support women in menopause transition such as access to water and toilets, proper ventilation and temperature control, and the opportunity to work from home. Within the police service, extra uniforms – supplied discreetly – would also help.
- Workplace culture has a profound impact. People need to be aware that it is okay to talk openly about menopause and that it’s not a punchline for office banter.
- A diverse range of organisations should set clear policies and provide better information in this area – making support accessible, offering guidance for colleagues and ensuring managers know what to do.
- The police force has changed in recent times – it’s not always about chasing criminals. For officers working on areas like cybercrime or safeguarding children, is a one-size-fits-all fitness test appropriate?
- Flexible working in the police service is often geared toward parents, but the menopause demands a different type of flexibility – the chance to start later after a difficult night or time out in the day to change clothes.
- In one force, 40% of the respondents felt they would have to leave if they didn’t get enough support. As such, these measures aren’t just a moral imperative, but an operational need.

Further information

Carol Atkinson is Professor of Human Resource Management at Manchester Metropolitan Business School, where she is based in the Decent Work and Productivity research centre. Her research focuses on employment and careers for diverse groups, including women and older workers, and for sectors such as adult social care and small and medium-sized enterprises.

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