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The problem of addressing menopause in the workplace without rigorous evidence

A 2022 landmark report contained one of the most cited figures in the menopause debate: “one in ten women have left work due to menopausal symptoms”. Shani Orgad, Gillian Paull and Catherine Rottenberg review the report and write that there are problems with the “one in ten” figure. They argue that rigorous research is urgently needed on the impact of menopause on women in the workplace.

In the past few years, there has been a surge of media coverage of menopause: from high-profile women, such as Davina McCall and Michelle Obama, speaking publicly about their experiences, through best-selling books, to the portrayals of menopause in popular television shows, such as Channel 4’s *The Change*.

A significant part of the public conversation has focused on the workplace; in particular, how **menopause affects women** in the workforce and how workplace and Government policies can better support those experiencing menopause. In the UK, this debate has been animated by government and the **IMF** encouraging older people to become “**active agers**” and remain in paid work for as long as possible to prevent their dependence on the state.

One highly-cited reference in these discussions is ***Menopause and the Workplace***, a landmark report published on 2 May 2022 by the Fawcett Society, one of the UK’s leading charities campaigning for gender equality and women’s rights. It draws on an opt-in survey of 4,014 UK women aged 45-55 who self-identified as experiencing or having previously experienced perimenopause or menopause, based on a list of symptoms presented in the survey’s filter question.

The report’s findings suggest that 14 per cent of women experiencing menopausal symptoms reduce their hours at work, 14 per cent go part-time, and eight per cent do not apply for promotion. However, the figure **most cited** from the report has been that “one in ten women have left work due

to menopausal symptoms". This figure has become a "sticky" statistic: it has been cited repeatedly in the press and used to inform policy discussion, including the new guidance on menopause in the workplace issued by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in February 2024.

Women in the workplace

There are two major problems with the way in which the "one in ten" finding from the Fawcett Society report has been presented and used. First, the survey was conducted only among women aged 45-55 who self-describe as having previously experienced or were experiencing certain menopausal symptoms.

This tells us the proportion of women who experience menopausal symptoms and leave work because of that. But to know the percentage of *all* women aged 45-55 who have left their job due to menopausal symptoms requires information on the proportion of women who experience menopausal symptoms. It is often reported that approximately 20 per cent of women go through menopause with minimal or unnoticeable symptoms, although the source for this number could not be identified.

The other problem is a lack of clarity on what the one-in-ten figure refers to. In the *Menopause and the Workplace* report, there is reference both to one in ten women leaving a "job" (and thus potentially finding another job rather than ceasing paid employment) and one in ten women leaving "work", that is, leaving the workforce altogether. This confusion has been exacerbated by media coverage of the report and policy discussions, in which the one-in-ten figure was reported as meaning leaving the workforce.

Interrogating the "one-in-ten" figure

Therefore, to assess the actual impact of menopause on women in the workplace, discussions about women, employment, and menopause, we need to make two distinctions clear.

The first distinction is between women leaving paid work altogether and women moving between jobs. The second one is between the impact of menopause on workforce participation for all women and for a self-selecting subgroup of women who report having symptoms. There is no impact on those not experiencing symptoms. Therefore, the size of the impact will always be smaller when measured as a proportion of all women than when measured as a proportion of those experiencing symptoms.

Given the considerable interest in the impact of menopause on women in the workforce and the way the "one-in-ten" figure has come to shape the discussion, we turned to analyse data from the

Labour Force Survey (**LFS**), the most comprehensive database on labour force participation in the UK.

Our investigation

We compared key work outcomes for women aged 50 to 59 with five other gender age groups: women and men aged 25 to 39 and 40 to 49; and men aged 50 to 59. We examined key drivers of work outcomes for women aged 50-59 with particular focus on self-reported long-term health problems limiting work and/or daily activities, under which, we can only assume, menopausal symptoms are subsumed.

Our analysis of LFS data suggests that it is highly unlikely that as many as one in ten women leave the workforce due to menopause, or that menopause is the predominant driver for women aged 50 to 59 leaving the workforce, particularly given that the rises in the proportion who are inactive due to long-term health problem for this age bracket are similar for both men and women.

More specifically, the increase in this proportion for women between ages 45 and 56 (the range used in the *Menopause and the Workplace* report) equates to seven per cent of female workers at age 45 not working at age 56 because of long term sickness or disability. Not only is this seven per cent less than one in ten, but, crucially, it covers all types of long-term health problems and not just the menopause.

In addition, according to our analysis, it is very unlikely that even three per cent of women retire early as a result of menopause, as found by the *Menopause and the Workplace* report. According to LFS data, the proportion of women between the ages of 50 and 59 who have retired early is four per cent, while the proportion for men is three per cent. This suggests that the menopause might only explain early retirement for one per cent of all women.

Need for rigorous evidence

Beyond simply highlighting these concerns, our analysis underscores the urgent need for rigorous research on the impact of menopause on women in the workplace and the precise numbers of women and others who are either changing jobs or leaving the workplace altogether due to menopausal symptoms.

To begin with, reports on women, menopause, and the workplace should cross-check their data using national surveys in order to verify the representativeness of their findings. Future surveys would also benefit from considering men in the same age group as comparison, in order to better inform claims about the likelihood of menopause acting as a predominant driver for women's employment outcomes.

Moreover, to create, compile and analyse accurate data about women, menopause and the workplace, national databases, such as the Office of National Statistics, Labour Force Survey and the UK Household Longitudinal Study, need to include specific questions on menopause in their surveys. Currently, many of these databases do not provide any specific data on perimenopause, menopause and post-menopause.

Finally, it is absolutely critical that policymaking in this area is evidence-based and that this evidence is rigorous and representative of the diverse experiences of women and other people who experience menopause **across lines** of age, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, location, occupation and other identity markers and/or sociodemographic dimensions.

Final words

Public debate on menopause in the workplace has been instrumental in raising awareness of women's needs and government and employers' responsibility to support them. However, focusing on women leaving the workforce is only one important aspect of this debate, and this narrow focus risks overlooking other major factors that affect women's employment, such as caring responsibilities and ill-health that can be unrelated to menopause. Public discussions and **policies designed** to support women in the workplace must be based on precise, comprehensive and representative data that account for the impact of menopause in the broader context of women's employment and life trajectories.

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