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Over 80% of women face menopause symptoms – so why are workplaces still ignoring it?

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Menopause has long been treated as something private, but the silence surrounding it is increasingly at odds with demographic reality. Women over 50 are the fastest-growing group in the workforce in many countries, and most will experience menopause during their working lives.

Despite this, workplaces, policies and research continue to treat menopause as a personal matter rather than a structural one. The result is a profound mismatch between women's lived experiences and the environments in which they work.

Medically, menopause is a natural stage of life marking the end of menstruation due to the loss of ovarian function. The transitional period that comes before – known as perimenopause – can last from two to eight years. Symptoms vary widely. Some women feel little change, while others face hot flashes, night sweats, insomnia, joint pain, mood swings, irritability, anxiety, cognitive difficulties and fatigue.

More than 80% of women experience symptoms, and for about one third they are severe. These symptoms can last years and significantly affect daily functioning, including work performance, concentration and emotional well-being.

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The 'second glass ceiling'

The scale of the issue is enormous. Globally, 657 million women are aged 45–59, and nearly half of them are in the labour force. In the G7 alone, women of menopausal age represent 11% of all workers. The European Commission has openly acknowledged that “there is no EU-wide data collection on this issue”, and that research remains fragmented.

The facts we do have are troubling. In Europe, the gender employment gap widens with age, and studies suggest that menopausal symptoms contribute to women reducing their hours, changing roles or leaving the workforce entirely.

The workplace impact is well documented. A 2021 study, for instance, found that nearly one million women in the UK had left their jobs because of menopausal symptoms. This often coincides with the peak of women’s careers, when they are poised for senior leadership roles. This has led some researchers to dub their widespread departure the “second glass ceiling”.

Working conditions

Across sectors, women report that their work environments often make symptoms worse. Poor ventilation, high temperatures, synthetic uniforms, lack of access to cold water, rigid schedules, shift work and limited autonomy all intensify discomfort.

The result is a cycle in which symptoms worsen, work becomes harder, stress increases and symptoms intensify further. These factors lead many women to work less, change jobs or take early retirement. This is not a personal failure; it is a structural one.

Yet research also shows that support makes a significant difference. Women cope better when they have understanding managers, supportive colleagues, flexible schedules and access to adjustments such as temperature control or uniform changes.

International institutions are beginning to take notice. The European Menopause and Andropause Society has issued workplace recommendations, while the International Labor Organization also highlights menopause as a global labour issue.

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Some national governments have taken similar steps. The UK Parliament, for instance, has launched multiple inquiries into menopause discrimination, one in 2019 and another in 2021.

In Iceland, the Association on Women’s Menopause was established back in 2013 and features on the national government’s website. Awareness is also growing in the Nordic countries.

In Ireland, the topic features in policy recommendations, while in France it has recently received national media attention.

Meaningful worker protections

While recommendations and media attention are positive, they are not the same as legally enshrined protections for all workers. So what would effective measures actually look like for menopausal workers?

First and foremost, workplaces should include menopause in occupational risk assessments. In practical terms, this means ensuring proper temperature control and ventilation, providing breathable uniforms, and allowing flexible working arrangements. It also means training management staff and creating open, stigma-free working cultures.

These changes are simple and inexpensive, but they require awareness and commitment.

Ultimately, addressing menopause at work is not just a health issue. It is a matter of equality, dignity and justice. Women should not have to choose between their health and their careers. Properly addressing this issue is also a win-win for businesses – any workplace that supports menopausal women will retain experience, leadership and talent.

As populations age and working lives extend, ignoring menopause is no longer an option. The silence must end, and the workplace must evolve to reflect the realities of half the population.



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