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Written evidence from Nottingham Women's Centre [MEW0036]

Introduction

Nottingham Women's Centre (NWC) is a charity and community building that was established in 1971. We support around 200 women a week by providing financial and employment support, counselling, training and social activities in a women-only building in Nottingham.

Problems relating to the menopause and the workplace were identified by our service users during a feedback focus group. This led us to developing a research project on this topic where over a hundred women participated through our confidential surveys, focus group and email interviews in January and February 2020. The pandemic and lockdown measures led to an extension of our research to include a second 'call-out' for stories about the menopause and the pandemic in September 2020. Our evidence is based on this research and all quotes and statistics used in this submission have been gathered from our research participants with permission.

Summary

The first half of our submission includes evidence about the nature and extent of discrimination, along with the economic impact of that discrimination. The second half is about how businesses can factor in the needs of employees going through the menopause.

Our research found that:

- Many women feel unsupported at work and consider leaving their jobs or reducing their hours due to an unsupportive working environment.
- Medical professionals can be unsupportive even though they are the first point of contact for women experiencing menopausal symptoms.
- Many women lack basic knowledge about the menopause and would welcome opportunities to learn about the menopause in order to self-manage symptoms more effectively.
- There are serious issues with the current designs of PPE for menopausal women as they cause overheating and therefore make work difficult and uncomfortable. New designs of PPE must take account of menopausal symptoms.
- Employers should create and implement a menopause policy, which could include;
 - Line managers to be trained in menopause awareness.
 - Employers should support the creation of peer-led support groups for women who are experiencing the menopause.
 - Continue flexible working practises in order to support employees experiencing the menopause.
 - Employers should offer extra mental health support for menopausal employees
 - Supply blue screen filters for women experiencing migraines and headaches as part of the menopause.

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

Women feel unsupported at work and consider leaving their jobs

“When talking about menopausal symptoms at work, I get laughed at and made fun of by male colleagues, and not taken seriously” - quote from interview

Our research found that most women feel unsupported in the workplace during the menopause, which can force them to consider reducing their hours or leaving their jobs. A *“toxic combination of ageism and sexism”* leaves women considering leaving their jobs at the prime of their careers. Our survey of 82 women found:

- Only 9.3% of women who completed our survey felt supported in the workplace while going through the menopause.
- 57% of women reported that hostile workplace environments impacted their wellbeing and ability to work.
- This led to 55.1% of the women surveyed considering reducing their hours or leaving their jobs.

This ‘brain drain’ impacts employers as they lose experienced employees, as well as hindering women’s ability to participate in the economy.

Women reported a fear of redundancy and being seen as incompetent, as well as a lack of self-confidence during the menopause;

“I was not able to discuss I was going through the menopause because I might seem incompetent”.

“My boss has been largely supportive but recommended I contact HR. It's taken me 6 months to do so for fear that this would be seen negatively when it comes to redundancies in the future”.

Only 8.3% of women reported that their workplace has a menopause policy, but the majority of women reported that their employers are either interested (28%) or might be interested (49.2%) in developing a menopause policy in the near future. This indicates there’s an opportunity to support workplaces to develop policies and practices that will enable menopausal women to stay in work.

Medical professionals can be unsupportive

Many women reported issues with their GP; they either found that their GP was not sympathetic or understanding, or that they did not spot their menopausal symptoms. GPs do not receive mandatory training in menopause, which is surprising as women are sign-posted to their GPs to get support.

“I left work due to my menopause symptoms not being recognised or treated by GP”

“My biggest issue was telling my male GP that I thought I was going through the menopause to be told I was too young ... I was 42 at the time but I knew my mum had gone through it at the same time and her symptoms were hard to ignore ... but I went away and suffered for another year”

Many women lack basic knowledge about the menopause

During interviews, many women said they lacked basic knowledge about the menopause, which meant they struggled to identify their own symptoms and reach out for support.

“I didn’t know or understand a number of my symptoms, or their relationship to menopause versus a stressful working environment. My organisation has a policy ‘to make reasonable adjustments’ but I was so at sea I had no idea what an adjustment might look like. Only last week the doctor informed me that decision making is often difficult. This resonated but I’d never heard anyone say this. There’s so much focus on hot flushes but this symptom barely touched me.”

Many women asked for more opportunities to learn about menopause and asked for marketing campaigns that raise awareness of menopause symptoms so they can self-diagnose and access appropriate support more quickly.

Issues with PPE

There’s a serious issue with the current designs of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) . Most women reported that current designs of PPE have made working difficult and uncomfortable due to overheating.

“I have to wear full PPE during the therapy sessions I offer. Hot flushes and PPE are a nightmare. My goggles steam up, my apron sticks to me, my face burns under my mask and my gloves fill with sweat and then they squeak!!”

“The PPE is very warm and restrictive so I often feel uncomfortable.”

“Masks are an issue with hot flushes. Really uncomfortable.”

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

Create and implement Menopause Policies

“My employer does have an understanding of the menopause but there’s no firm structure to help those going through it. This does not help or guide my manager hence he is making his own decisions.”

A standalone menopause policy provides clarity for managers and employees, for example by setting out key responsibilities and signposting to sources of support. It also serves to break the silence around the menopause and therefore tackle the social stigma surrounding the menopause. Furthermore, the development of a policy provides an opportunity to engage with employees on the issue and can show the workforce that menopause is regarded as a serious work-related health issue.

Adjustments that should be included in a menopause policy

CIPD advises against a ‘one size fits all’ approach as every woman will have different symptoms for different lengths of time. The majority of women want a ‘suite’ of reasonable adjustments to help manage menopausal symptoms at work.

83 women reported (via our focus group and survey) wanting the following adjustments and changes while experiencing the menopause:

- 65% of women want the option of home working
- 62.5% of women want the option of a workstation fan or ability to open windows
- 61.3% of women want a quiet space to rest
- 61.3% of women want the option of temporary adjustments to shift patterns/working hours
- 60% of women want to be able to access to counselling services
- 56.3% of women want the option of flexible and additional breaks
- 46.3% of women want extra time to complete tasks or alternative tasks
- 41.3% want easy access to cold drinking water and washroom facilities

- 25% of women want employers to create uniforms that are made from natural fibres, avoiding nylon

For examples of best practice, see the [Nottingham Women's Centre menopause policy](#).

Give training to line managers

"We can get fans and we have a support group, however if your immediate line manager is not very understanding and puts you down all the progress is wasted"

We strongly recommend that all employers urgently prioritise training for managers on menopause. 81.3% of women we surveyed felt their line managers need to receive specialist training on the menopause. Appropriately trained managers will enable women to carry on working through the menopause and feel able to speak to their managers about the reasonable adjustments that workplaces are legally obliged to provide.

There are multiple specialist organisations and online resources that support managers to effectively manage people with menopausal symptoms.

Support the creation of peer-led groups and women's networks

Our research showed that 62.5% of women want opportunities to network with colleagues experiencing similar issues and be involved in menopause support groups.

For example, 'Menopause Cafes' are a type of peer support group that women can set up and attend. They are organised through a not-for-profit organisation and offer an *"accessible, respectful and confidential space to discuss menopause alongside refreshing drinks and cake!"*

Women reported wanting;

1. A safe and understanding space for women to share ideas and experiences.
2. More educational materials and resources.
3. The ability to attend sessions focussed on the re-building of confidence.
4. Opportunities to network with other women within their organisation.

Continued flexible working

Women have mostly reported back positively about home working. Employers could continue offering flexible working, including home working, plus an increased number of social activities to tackle the potential isolation of working from home.

Extra mental health support for employees

Our research has shown that menopausal women have been feeling particularly high levels of anxiety and distress during the pandemic and higher levels of mental health issues in the broader population have been reported by mental health charities across the UK.

Employers can help tackle this by increasing their extra mental health provision and actively encouraging employees to partake in the services provided. Smaller organisations can also signpost employees to free or affordable mental health support, such as Nottingham Women's Centre's peer support group and counselling service.

Improve PPE

As PPE develops, new designs must take into account women's experiences of the menopause and employers must seek to provide PPE that's appropriate for women experiencing menopausal symptoms.

Prioritise re-opening toilets

As flagged in our research, menopausal women are being forced to wait longer to access toilets, which can be inconvenient and cause distress. Employers and businesses must prioritise re-opening any toilets that were closed during lockdown and look to increase the number of toilets available to women.

Supply blue screen filters

A number of women reported migraines and headaches as a menopausal symptom. Employers could provide blue screen filters to employees to help reduce the risk of migraines caused by screens.

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