

Submission towards review of Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012.

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Are there any other matters you want to comment on in relation to the Workplace Gender Equality Act and improving and promoting gender equality in the workplace in Australia?

The legislation should include... greater reference to the impact of significant life stages of a woman's life, more specifically Menopause and how it can affect them in the workplace.

In 2021, the significant phase of Menopause continues to be a silent, taboo life stage that the majority of Australian businesses, communities and individuals choose to ignore. With the numbers of women experiencing Menopause likely to exceed 1 billion globally by 2025 (1) the time to normalise this very natural life phase is needed now more than ever.

Menopause impacts ALL women at some point in their life between the years of 44 to 55. It can last anywhere from four to six years, but even as long as ten years. This phase of life impacts all women differently. No two menopausal experiences will be the same. It can be an extremely isolating time with many women reluctant to talk about it amongst friends and family let alone their workplace. The impact of Menopausal symptoms and reluctance to talk pose a real risk to the livelihoods of women, men, communities and businesses. Recent research conducted by Circle In and Victorian Women's Trust (2) highlighted 83% of women feel that menopause symptoms negatively impact their work. More than half confirmed they wanted to leave or take a break from the workforce and 60% confirmed there was a real lack of support from their workplace. These gaps in support at work are taking a huge toll on women's mental wellbeing which impacts their ability to carry out the job that they want to continue and thrive in.

These same experiences are mirrored amongst women across multiple countries but none more prevalent than that of the UK and US who are paving the way in supporting their female employees during Menopause. Research in the UK has suggested that "menopausal women are the fastest growing workforce demographic". (3)

Data collated by the UK Government into **Menopause transition: effects on women's economic participation** highlighted key negative impacts of symptoms on economic participation such as lower productivity, reduced job satisfaction and problems with time management. This work also highlighted a "few studies about women being unable to look for a job, reducing their working hours, identifying negative effects on their careers, or leaving or losing jobs due to transition". (4) The flow on effect of this phase of life is far reaching and can be dire with evidence out of the UK suggesting that nine in ten women experience mental health problems as a result of Perimenopause symptoms.

Further to this and from our own consultations with clients, women are silent on the impact of menopause symptoms, many feeling uncomfortable raising awareness to what they are experiencing or need in the way of support. The ultimate price of this is a change in culture, morale and a decline in psychological safety due to fear of being singled out or discriminated against. This translates into the loss of experienced

employees, strong female representation and an all round decline in the culture of the business/workplace. A study by the Center for Creative Leadership and Watermark found having more women in the workplace improved job satisfaction for both women and men, highlighting that employees whose companies had a higher percentage of women in their ranks rated their organisations more favourably on: Job satisfaction, organisational dedication, burnout and employee engagement (5).

It is substantially clear that it is within a business' interest to break the taboo around Menopause and offer supportive measures for female employees. The Women, Work and the Menopause Project conducted by the Australian Menopause Society has also confirmed that "among administrative and executive staff, women aged 40–49 years reported greater intention to quit their jobs than their older colleagues (50–59 years and 60+ years old)". Further to this, women felt pressure to create, maintain and discard certain aspects of themselves due to negative organisational and managerial messages about older women. This had a significant impact on how engaged, and how included, women felt at work. (6)

What do we propose for workplaces and Governments?

Evidence from the UK report confirms that "appropriate employer interventions are necessary such as changing organisational cultures; compulsory equality and diversity training; providing specialist advice; tailored absence policies; flexible working patterns for mid-life women; and fairly low cost environmental changes". From a Government perspective "it is likely that the most effective government intervention would be working with employers to provide transition-related advice". (7) Menopause is not just a "women's issue", everyone needs to know about it and that is the only way we can start to shift normalising attitudes towards it and women going through it.

Our own work has identified that a behaviour change approach is required at the individual, team and wider workplace level. We advocate taking a holistic approach with complimentary initiatives to support the entire workplace ecosystem. In the 2020 Wellbeing Lab report, it was highlighted that "workers reported higher levels of engagement when they had access to three or more forms of wellbeing support" (8). We recommend supporting women and workplaces around Menopause with this same thinking, which includes training workshops; one to one, group and executive coaching; online self paced programs; learning, support resources and utilisation of a support network.

Similarly, women share our sentiments about what they want from their workplace. First and foremost, "women do not want workplaces to manage their menopause. What they want is an enabling environment that supports them through the menopausal transition." (9) This is made up of practical strategies, education and training support, managerial support and workplace systems that collectively would foster positive attitudes to this pivotal life stage for women.

In Summary

Menopause is a completely normal life stage transition that ALL women will encounter, each having her own unique experience. Women will and can manage work over the Menopause transition, but should not do so at a cost to their personal health and wellbeing and careers. Women are growing curious and are starting to speak out and have indicated they would like more support from their employers.

If employers support women through this transition, they stand to retain experienced, talented staff, saving on recruitment costs and training. This of course contributes greatly to the business bottom line, but more

than that it's the right thing to do. Like many taboo topics before it, workplace initiatives are desperately needed to support women at this time in their lives. By shifting mindsets, employers can continue to shine a light on menopausal women as an important asset and leadership group that will bring distinctive and valuable experience and expertise to their age-diverse organisations.

References:

- (1) [Meet 8 Female Founders Disrupting The \\$600 Billion Menopause Market \(forbes.com\)](#)
- (2) <https://circlein.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circle-In-Driving-the-change-Menopause-and-the-workplace.pdf>
- (3) [Menopause and work: why it's so important \(menopauseintheworkplace.co.uk\)](#)
- (4) [menopause_report.docx \(live.com\)](#)
- (5) [5 reasons it pays to have women in the workplace | Michael Page](#)
- (6) [Women, Work and the Menopause Project - Australasian Menopause Society](#)
- (7) [menopause_report.docx \(live.com\)](#)
- (8) [Wellbeing Lab Aust Aug 2020 Workplace Survey Report | Michelle McQuaid](#)
- (9) [How to make work menopause-friendly: don't think of it as a problem to be managed \(theconversation.com\)](#)