

Menopause: gendered experiences of ageing at work

Panel convenors:

Carole Clair (Unisanté), Nicky Le Feuvre (Université de Lausanne), Isabelle Zinn (Université de Lausanne)

Panel chair:

Isabelle Zinn (isabelle.zinn@unil.ch)

Demographic ageing has led to a rapid increase in the proportion of older workers in the Swiss labour market. This trend is fuelled by an increase in the employment rate of people over 50, particularly women.

According to the World Health Organization: “Most women experience menopause between the ages of 45 and 55 years [...]. ‘Perimenopause’ (also known as menopausal transition) refers to the period from when changes in the menstrual cycle are first observed. It can last several years and can affect physical, emotional, mental and social well-being.” (WHO 2023).¹ Contrary to previous periods, a majority of women are in employment throughout their entire menopausal transition. Within this context, women’s experiences of menopause at work have gained increasing media and research attention in recent years.

Research suggests that perimenopausal symptoms may impact:

- 1) Women’s health and their ability to continue working (at the same rate, in the same jobs, in same conditions) throughout the menopausal transition phase.
- 2) Women’s experience of intersectional discrimination, particularly gender stereotypes related to ageing that may reduce their opportunities for recruitment and promotion in the final stages of their working lives.
- 3) The combined impact of employment patterns and career opportunities on women’s ability to remain in employment until full retirement age and their ability to accumulate sufficient occupational pension contributions to ensure financial well-being in later life.

We consider the experience of menopause as an important dimension of ‘gendered ageing’.

The panel will address various aspects of women’s menopause-related experiences in the workplace, including: women’s labour market participation patterns in later life; menopause-related occupational health issues; career opportunities and intersectional discrimination (gender / age / race / sexuality) in later life; organizational attitudes and practices towards the menopause and ageing at work; policies and arrangements aimed at retaining and/or attracting older workers.

The panel will take place in English.

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/menopause>.

Panelists and abstracts:

Belinda Steffan & Wendy Loretto, University of Edinburgh Business School (Scotland, UK)

Menopause and the ideal worker: encouraging individual disclosure through organisational support

This paper investigates how menopause is experienced at work in relation to a range of life domains: work, health, home. Specifically, we ask how women experience menopause at work through the lens of their whole lives, or as the whole menopausal woman, and how this is challenged by or can disrupt the concept of the ideal worker. We draw on 80 semi-structured, life-course interviews of women over 50 working in four organisational settings (social care, manufacturing, finance and self-employed) from Supporting Healthy Ageing at Work, a 3-year interdisciplinary project. Findings are presented through three vignettes from women in different organisational settings, providing unique insight how gendered ageism within organisational culture interacts with ideal worker norms to perpetuate or challenge the persistent silencing of 'being' menopausal at work. Findings reveal the deep-rooted lack of awareness of menopause of this generation of working women, and how menopause can exacerbate or is exacerbated by other issues facing women in mid-later life. While women with high job autonomy and seniority might be in a position to better cope with menopause symptoms at work, we reveal that these factors can also act to perpetuate marginalising menopause through non-disclosure of menopause at work depending on the organisational audience and its reception of the whole menopausal woman at work. We provide a theoretical contribution to current thinking around menopause and work and ideal worker norms, as well as a practical contribution for how organisations can better support this generation and future generations of women at work.

Andrea Rumler & Julia Memmert, Berlin School of Economics and Law (Germany)

Experiencing menopause at work: findings from a nationwide survey in Germany and implications for occupational health management (OHM)

The research project *MenoSupport* explores the experience of menopause in work environments in Germany and aims to derive practical suggestions for OHMs of organizations and companies. Until recently, the topic of women's health received little attention in German workplaces apart from maternity. However, most women suffer from at least one menopausal symptom in the course of their lives, such as hot flashes, sweats, sleep disturbances, concentration problems, anxiety or mood swings.

Few studies, mainly in the English-speaking world, have analysed the needs and expectations of menopausal women for effective workplace health management. Data from UK suggest that many women experience negative effects from menopausal symptoms on their ability to work and do not know how to seek support in their workplaces or remain silent due to the fear of being stigmatized (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2022, *Menopause and the workplace survey results*). In order to advance the topic in the German context, a comprehensive web-based

questionnaire was conducted, which includes quantitative as well as qualitative questions. The objective of the study is to obtain a broad picture with regard to the level of suffering from individual symptoms in German work contexts and the corresponding assistance required. Besides physical effects of menopause, the study also sheds light on psychological factors, such as workplace stigma and emotional wellbeing. The results of the survey are evaluated using statistical data analysis and qualitative content analysis.

Carole Clair (unisanté), **Nicky Le Feuvre & Isabelle Zinn**, University of Lausanne (Switzerland)

The individualisation of health issues at work: an exploratory study of the experience of menopause at work in Switzerland

It is widely recognized that pathologies that are specific to women or affect them predominantly (e.g., endometriosis or lipoedema) have sparked limited clinical interest and attracted less research funding and drug development than those associated with men. A recent comment published in *Nature* (Avnoon 2022) highlighted that only 4% of the medical journals specialized in gynaecology and obstetrics were dedicated to women's health outside of their reproductive years. In comparison to pregnancy and lactation, menopause is an aspect of women's health that remains largely invisible in the occupational context.

An older workforce means that more women than ever before will be in employment throughout their entire menopausal transition, yet this 'taboo topic' remains under-researched. Menopause is related to women's health and well-being, as well as to their employment patterns, career opportunities and exposure to discrimination in the final stages of their working lives. By exploring different interrelated aspects of gendered ageing at work through the focus on menopause as an institutionally embedded experience, we will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the impact of perimenopausal symptoms on women's experiences at work and uncover their coping strategies.

This paper will allow us to present the research design of a project we are starting in 2023. Our methodology is based on the contributions of the sociology of life course, work and gender. In order to contribute to a better understanding of women's menopause experiences at work, we will carry out mixed-methods organisational case studies in healthcare institutions in Switzerland, including: (1) ethnographic observations and interviews with medical staff and patients attending dedicated 'menopause clinics'; (2) an on-line survey of approx. 1000 female professionals aged 45+ working in a wide range of occupations in healthcare institutions located in three cantons; (3) 100 biographical (+ life-grid) interviews with women aged 45+ working in the same institutions; (4) 20 expert interviews with HR, line managers, and staff representatives in these institutions.