

Working Women and the Menopause:

A study of the impact of the menopause on careers of a sample of women working in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Ireland – IADT, TU Dublin, ATU.

Note: Throughout this report the word women is used, this is not meant to exclude anyone. Whatever your gender identity is, menopausal symptoms might be part of your lived reality and experience.

Introduction

This was a pilot study with three institutions involved – Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dún Laoghaire (IADT), Technological University Dublin (TUD) and Atlantic Technical University (ATU). Initially the partnership was with the Institute of Technology, Sligo. However as of April 2022 IT Sligo became part of ATU, therefore all of ATU were involved. IADT was the lead partner. The project was designed to critically explore the lived experiences of a sample of women working in higher education in Ireland and the impact of the menopause on careers. This project by its nature then looks at gendered ageism – this is the intersection of age and gender bias.

Recruitment

IADT advertised for a half time researcher for the project, and the researcher started in August 2022.

Aims

The aims of the project include:

- 1) Breaking taboos - Until quite recently menopause was a taboo topic in wider society. But we have begun talking about it. This taboo needs to be addressed in the workplace. The hormonal body, not just at the time of menopause, is a biological reality for at least half the population.
- 2) Addressing a knowledge gap - There is a lack of research on women in the HEI sector in Ireland and the impact of the menopause on careers. Reports on Gender Equality in higher education have failed to address or even feature menopause.
- 3) Contribute to policy - It is hoped the research findings can contribute to government and employer policy, on how best to support women experiencing menopause transition for example culture, training, flexible working arrangement and workplace accommodations.
- 4) Lead to further research – Expansion of study across all higher education institutions.

Methodology

The fieldwork on the project was qualitative research with focus groups in the three partner institutions IADT, TUD and ATU. Focus groups were chosen as this can be a more naturalistic and are more likely to generate more realistic accounts of what people think (Bell and Bryman, 2018) and feel. The focus groups were initially conceived as in person fieldwork, this was revised from feedback from participants in location one who preferred the more flexible arrangement of online focus groups.

Sampling

A purposive sampling method was used as the participants need to meet certain criteria in order for them to participate. Women going through perimenopause or menopause took part. Those taking part were self-selected through the publicising of the project internally within the organisations. This publicising was done through the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) managers in two institutions and through Human Resources and Staff engagement in the third institution. Some participants were recruited through existing staff mailing lists and others through a general call out. Due to unavailability of participants, or no shows, some one-to-one participation was necessitated. A total of seventeen women took part, generating 224 minutes of data. 94.12% of participants were white Irish and 5.88% were from an ethnic minority background.

Questions

The primary question in the study was around the careers of the participants and how they are affected by menopause. With further questions around: awareness of symptoms before experiencing menopause or perimenopause, speaking about menopause in work, if or how this has affected them at work. Referencing the organizational culture - How safe do they feel raising the issue of menopause with their managers? How do symptoms make them feel in the workplace? Would they apply for new positions /promotion while going through the menopause / or have they applied for any new roles while experiencing menopausal symptoms? Are there any menopausal supports in place in their institutions?

Analysis

The data was analysed inductively using Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis. The themes that are generated were then linked with the current literature which formed part of the study.

Themes

There were ten themes generated: symptoms, awareness of symptoms, taboo, male/ female, academic delivery – impact, confidence – impact, career progression – impact, multiple roles, age(ing) and attitudes to supports.

1) Symptoms

These are some of the symptoms that people reported experiencing, but it's not an exhaustive list. There are twenty symptoms here that participants were experiencing. Every woman has a different experience, and some of the symptoms were so specific they might identify that person; therefore, these have been excluded. Symptoms are - anxiety, lack of confidence, insomnia / sleep difficulties, exhaustion, low energy levels, mood changes, brain fog, poor concentration, emotional, irritable, word finding difficulty, forgetfulness, irregular periods, heavy periods, joint aches and pains, feeling overwhelmed, weight gain, night sweats, headaches and hot flushes. So here we can see how varied and numerous the symptoms are. A lot of these symptoms would be very challenging in the workplace. The literature references the domino effect – one symptom can lead to another, and another and so on. For example, lack of sleep, low energy levels to poor concentration to word finding difficulty.

2) Awareness of Symptoms

Hot flushes are the symptom that is generally known about, but there are plenty of women that do not experience these. As we have seen, the other physical and psychological symptoms are numerous, and this list is not complete. Those who experience hot flushes at least have a clear idea that they are experiencing menopause. But if you're not aware of the

other symptoms then it might be less obvious. The quotes gathered from participants show many women did not recognise their symptoms of menopause or perimenopause.

"I never thought the symptoms were what I was having because I only heard about hot flushes."

"Wasn't aware at all. I thought menopause was hot flushes."

"I did not know I was going through it until a friend of mine said to me you should go to the doctor and you should get a test."

"You know just got on with it and but looking back now, I probably should have got more help."

"I don't think I really knew very much about the menopause."

"The reality was I actually wasn't aware."

"I was aware of just, you know, some of them"

"I should have known about these symptoms. I should have gone. Oh, this could be this could be the menopause."

"Am I just slowly dying? Is this what it is to get old where you just can't function anymore."

"Wasn't aware at all. I thought menopause was hot flushes."

"I didn't know what the symptoms were, I'm sure there's plenty more like me..."

"I thought that it was the menopause in that there was no lead into it, ..., you know, your period stopped and then that's when you had symptoms."

"I don't even know what perimenopause is, I'd never heard of it."

"I wouldn't have known some of the symptoms if I hadn't started talking, you know, to peers."

"No, neither was my doctor."

"Nothing hadn't a clue."

"I never dreamt that I was in menopause."

"And probably not very aware."

"I wasn't didn't know that they were related, to what, to the menopause, if you like."

"I didn't have a massive amount of awareness of really what to expect beforehand"

"That I worried I was going an early dementia or something at the time, you know?"

The above findings correlate with The Menopause Hub Survey 2020 "What women want in menopause" which showed that 80% of women say that they are or were unprepared for menopause. 66% say that they knew nothing or very little about menopause beforehand. 79% of women rate the level of information & support for menopause in Ireland as poor/ very poor. (The Menopause Hub, 2020).

The research literature speaks about awareness for employers, social and healthcare professionals but surely this should start with giving women the knowledge themselves. Research by Jack et al (2016) agreed that wider awareness of menopause transition and its effects would be positive for working mid-life women, so those around them could understand what they are experiencing and support them better as a result.

Some of the women in the current IADT study mentioned that they have now made it their goal to educate others about menopause.

"I have made it my mission to tell everybody I ever meet."

"So yeah, I tell everybody"

"Yeah, we definitely talked about it."

"All the time."

3) Taboo

Questions around speaking about the menopause were asked in order to get some sort of a feel for how taboo this topic still is in the workplace.

The majority of women in the present study said they would be comfortable speaking to their friends and family about the topic outside work but when it came to work this was different. Though it was fairly divided – from extremely taboo still, to openly talking about menopause in the workplace.

Still taboo

“...never discussed at work, never mentioned, Never ever no.”

“I realized ah, this is it is kind of whispered still about.”

“...I wouldn't be comfortable bringing up the menopause.”

“I wouldn't talk to my manager. No.”

“I don't ever see myself going to *male manager* saying like I don't feel like work today because the menopause, I just don't see myself doing that.”

“There's no space for things that affect women in the workplace. So, it's not just the menopause, it's everything.”

Breaking the taboo

“there is thankfully open conversation in the office.”

“we actually have started the conversation around menopause.”

“Didn't make a big thing about it, you know, I'm just switching on my fan or whatever and just. And make sure that they're aware of it.”

“the more it's spoken about it, the better it will be for everyone coming behind us.”

“I think we're definitely get better at that.”

“...and when you see it used in an e-mail and it's out there then then it's just a word no big deal.”

4) Male / Female

Looking into the differences that some people have with speaking about the menopause at work it appeared that in a lot of cases – not all, it can be different when there are male managers or majority male colleagues in the department. This leads to it being more difficult to speak about menopause in the workplace. It was generally felt easier to speak to female managers, but not in all cases.

“I don't think I would be as comfortable speaking to a male manager.”

“if your bosses are male, it's maybe a little bit more awkward you know”

“So, but would I have conversations with the men? - probably not. Not the men, actually.”

“never mentioned to anybody in work, my manager is a male.”

“We haven't even started talking about it to me it's very disappointing of female leadership.”

Some of the participants insisted they would speak to a male manager.

“If I had to go and speak to him, man, if I you know, if I worked alongside him, I would. Now I because it's more a spoken about. But like six months ago I wouldn't have, you know.”

“So, my personal opinion is we need to talk to the men. We need to include them because otherwise, you know there's no point.”

“If they were male, yea might actually.”

5) Academic Delivery – impact

Speaking to some of the academics in this study who get up and lecture in front of classes, or anyone who has a public facing role. These women spoke about performing / acting. Not an easy thing to do even when you are at your best but when going through menopause this make things challenging.

“I've gone in... trembling to a meeting or to a class and it's physical trembling because of anxiety.”

“it is tough going. It's, you know, performing in front of a gang of students when you're feeling less than your best, you know”

“I have six hours of teaching. That's six hours in front of the students.”

“the word just won't come and people are looking at you like waiting.”

This is a new area of research. Further research would need to be done to verify women's experiences in these types of public-facing roles. This was a pilot study and these are a small number of women. Further studies are needed to verify these.

6) Confidence – impact

Women's confidence is affected by menopause.

“yeah, really hits you, for a confident person really would hit you ... I'm not going to be putting myself forward for this.”

“...not able to articulate what I'm trying to say at all. And for me that's impacted my confidence hugely.”

“I just want to go and hide in a corner because it's just awful.”

“It does really affect your confidence. You're second guessing yourself all the time.”

“I questioned myself on every decision that I took, everything that I was doing, I just and as I said, I was sitting crying. Just, just feeling totally overwhelmed.”

“I was doubting myself and what I was doing in work and whether I was covering everything. You know, I'd be. I'd be worried about whether I have all the things that I need to do and that was constantly playing on my mind over and over again thinking about things.”

“I totally lost confidence in myself.”

“You know you lack a bit of confidence.”

Understandably, from the quotes, a lot of women leave or contemplate leaving the workplace during menopause. A survey in 2021 shows that 40% of menopausal women consider giving up work and 12% give up work. (The Menopause Hub and IBEC, 2021)

The UK study into effects of menopause transition on women's economic participation states that.

“What we also cannot quantify using the available evidence is the cost of lower self-esteem and reduced social support as a result of older women leaving work due to bothersome symptoms; or the lost economic benefits of older women not returning to work or leaving work earlier than they would have done otherwise.” (Brewis et al, 2017, p113)

7) Career Progression – impact

Would people apply for new positions or promotions? Has menopause affected their career? Is menopause a barrier to progression?

Atkinson (2021) and Grandey (2020) argue that the menopause comes at a time when many women are at the peak of their careers frequently when they are seeking promotion.

However, many women are less likely to seek promotion due to symptoms of the menopause (Menopause in the Workplace: Impact on Women in Financial Services, 2021).

The following are a sample of quotes from participants in the current study:

“I have a pulled back a bit on the career because of it.”

“I'm just struggling to get through day-to-day you know, so why would I go for that?”

“I think I'll just be completely burned out if I try and do anything else.”

“I don't have the confidence that I ought to go for interviews. I had a chance to go for an interview last summer. I just I just blocked. I couldn't do it.”

“And like at my age, I know I have a lot of experience and I have a lot to give But I just. I just don't feel I'm in the right frame of mind for any of that.”

“It's that it's taking a chance on whether you're going be lucky enough to have a good day or a bad day when you have to go and actually do the interview.”

“I did. But I was a nervous wreck, though, and I'm not normally like that.”

Women have invested a lot of time and energy into their careers and they might just be on the verge of moving up the ladder, when they start experiencing menopause symptoms. And still there is a lack of awareness of the symptoms – so women don't always realise that it's the menopause.

8) Multiple roles

It's not always easy to tell that it is menopause. Women at this stage of life are often trying to juggle many tasks, there's a lot going on in women's lives. There could be children, teenagers and older parents to care for.

A recent Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission campaign – Care About Equality pointed out the burden of care in society is on women, one of the campaign contributors said;

“the word 'care' is synonymous with women. You don't get through life without having care responsibilities...” (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Care About Equality, 2023, Linda Kelly [contributor])

Some participants reported that it is sometimes more difficult to actually put your finger on it and say “this is because of the menopause” or for women to even have that time to themselves to figure out that what's going on is the menopause. Respondents in the current study reported:

“But it's not easy for you you're squeezed between parents and teenagers and work. It comes at a difficult time of your life, I think.”

“And we're so busy we don't even know. We don't have time to stop and think. Is this the menopause? We're just too busy, you know that's, grabbing it and trying to get through life as such.”

“And so maybe it's not just the menopause, but maybe there are so many other layers that add complexity.”

“You feel half mad because you're trying to figure out what's causing what or you know what I mean.”

9) Age(ing)

Menopause is linked to age. While some women can experience menopause very young, the average age of menopausal women is 51. Age is a sensitive subject for some women. Women may not want to admit they're menopausal as it puts them in a certain age bracket. And for those women in employment there are work and career implications.

While menopause is not a protected characteristic age is a protected characteristic under the 9 grounds of discrimination? Both menopause and age are inextricably intertwined thus making menopause, gender and age an intersectional issue.

The current study found a small number of women spoke about their looks / appearance and the fact they like to look their best. As one woman put it;

“If you're looking well you're kicking ass.”

Some of the literature has found that going through menopause might affect people's appearance in different ways. And if they don't look their best they don't feel their best. This can also affect confidence. This raises the issue about how much women's confidence is linked to their appearance.

According to Mafra (2014) women's attractiveness is an important factor in their lives, affecting how they feel about themselves. Several studies found a positive relationship between attractiveness and self-esteem in women.

10) Attitudes to Supports

Questions were asked around workplace supports – what's already in place?

Would they like to see supports? What was desirable what are they skeptical about?

Most respondents agreed that working from home is helpful as a support. One positive thing that came out of the pandemic. A few women hoped that something would change soon. But others were skeptical about the whole talk around menopause and how this might lead to more gendered ageism in the workplace, making life more difficult for them.

“I know I have some friends and colleagues who are worried about the focus on menopause now, and how other people might perceive us as being a bit useless now that we're older or, you know, the whole brain fog not being able to think of things, that we aren't capable of doing our jobs.”

This is also a theme reflected in the literature. Some women feel that their menopausal status opens them up to being stereotyped and prefer to consider age and gender as irrelevant at work. (Griffiths, et al, 2013). Menopausal women are often presented as figures of fun or mocked (Kale, 2021). Women are therefore reluctant to discuss menopausal issues with their line manager for fear of being undermined or silenced (Shabi, 2021). There is indication in the literature that women choose not to disclose menopause symptoms due to fear that this negatively affects performance appraisals (Atkinson et al., 2020) or targets them for redundancies (Jack et al., 2014), which might be caused by gendered ageism (Atkinson et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The people who participated in the IADT study were self-selected; they were the ones who wanted to speak about menopause. As the researcher was going about the research and setting up the focus groups initially people were slow to come forward. Everyone the researcher spoke to about the project were very positive. There was an enthusiasm for the project – it was presumed this would make it easier to get people on board for the focus groups. But there were challenges. Getting volunteers to come forward wasn't easy. Then once on board, arranging times and dates to suit members of the focus groups was problematic. Everyone's workload is heavy and women have a lot going on in their lives already. Was it their menopause symptoms or the taboo that prevented more women from coming forward? Is this still something that is not spoken about? More research needs to be done.

It is hoped this study has in some way contributed to the breaking of the menopause taboo and gone a first step of the way to addressing a knowledge gap that exists in this area.

This study revealed the lived experience of a sample women ~~is~~ working in Higher Education Institutions. As to the question of whether women's careers are affected by menopause – the evidence certainly points in that direction. This study revealed: lack of awareness around symptoms, women losing confidence, workplace pressures, lecturing challenges and in some cases not putting themselves forward for promotion. Further research is needed to support these findings, but the data suggests menopausal women face many challenges at work due to their menopause, and most likely do have career development disadvantages.

It is difficult to measure the exact impact of menopause. But indeed, the multiple roles that women continue to face, which society expects of women are also a factor in their lives.

The organisations that took part in the study have an enthusiasm for creating menopause policies for their staff. These organisations intend to use the study findings to push forward policies in this area, considering the experiences of participants.

Recommendations for supports

- 1) Revise the equality legislation to include menopause as a protected characteristic.

Within the workplace:

- 2) Speak to the women affected – what supports would they like to see? Respectfully, consult with women, perhaps through a workplace survey in a larger organization. Each woman going through menopause and perimenopause will have different experiences and no two women will have the same needs.
- 3) Menopause policies were written and rolled out across all Higher Education Institutions. These policies should include:
 - Training for managers and supervisors of all genders
 - Flexible working arrangements / blended working
 - Look at timetabling for lecturers (if requested)
 - Comfortable working environment
 - Guidance for colleagues – increasing awareness
 - Information on where employees can get more support
- 4) Room to use as a rest area.
- 5) Work towards an organisational culture that is open and supportive environment removing barriers or stigma – where women can talk about perimenopause or menopause as part of normalized work conversation.
- 6) Appoint menopause ambassadors or champions.

- 7) Menopause leave? This has already been introduced in some organisations including Vodafone and Bank of Ireland.

Presentations

Throughout the project the researcher raised awareness of the study by speaking at various events and conferences, including:

7th March 2023 - Exploring women's lives and gendered experiences in research and T&L projects - An IADT panel for International Women's Day 2023

13th March 2023 - UCD Equality Diversity and Inclusion, Menopause Conference

23rd March 2023 - The National Menopause Summit

28th April 2023 - Menopause in the Workplace, Colloquium [details below]

8th June 2023 - Sociological Association of Ireland, 2023 Conference

Colloquium

The Menopause in the Workplace Colloquium was organised by the researcher. This took place on the 28th April 2023 to disseminate the findings from the study. The venue was The Studio, DLR Lexicon. The event was publicised through the IADT website, with registration via Eventbrite. The morning was introduced by IADT President David Smith. The researcher presented the findings from the study to those gathered.

The colloquium also included insights on this topic from speakers: Bridget Nicholas, MBus EDI; Loretta Dignam, Founder & CEO, The Menopause Hub; Marcellina Fogarty, Strategic Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Manager UCD and an introduction to EDIFY EDU by Dr. Audrey Stenson.

Kevin Wallace chaired the morning, and a discussion on the findings from the panel Claire McGing, EDI Manager IADT; Linda Murray, Employee Engagement, Organisation, Change & Culture, TU Dublin; and Dr Sharon McGreevy, Lecturer Human Resource Management at IADT, was had.

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