

Title - How Women's Experiences of Menopause in Business and Management Schools Shape Their Career Trajectories

Abstract

This study explores how women's experiences of menopause shape their career trajectories at Higher Education Business and Management Schools in the UK and Ireland. Despite research showing gender and age inequalities in academia, menopause remains an overlooked factor affecting women's career trajectories. Adopting a feminist standpoint lens, this research uses semi-structured interviews to explore how the intersection of neoliberal culture and postfeminist rhetoric shapes menopausal women's career trajectories. Findings will contribute to our understanding of organisational and cultural barriers that menopausal women face, offering new insights into gendered ageism. This research aims to inform policies and practices that promote career equality for women in academia. Its insights may be transferable to other neoliberal environments, offering a broader perspective on workplace gender inequalities.

Track: Gender in Management

Authors: Lim, Mandy; Alkhaled, Sophie; Rigg, Clare

Introduction

This research responds to Butler's observation that women's experience of menopause in the workplace is under-researched (Brewis et al., 2025; Butler, 2020). Using a feminist standpoint lens, my study foregrounds women's experiences to explore how postfeminism and neoliberalism influence women's experience of menopause and shape their career trajectories in business and management schools in the UK and Ireland.

Emphasising self-reliance and the individual, postfeminism acknowledges past feminist gains and suggests that women have achieved societal equality (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2004). Neoliberalism, likewise, focuses on the individual but does so because of values that prioritise meritocracy, performance and competition (Yarrow & Johnston, 2022). Both perspectives position menopause as an individual challenge rather than an organisational concern (Rottenberg & Gilchrist, 2025), thereby masking the existence of gendered structural inequalities (Meyers, 2013) in business and management schools.

Empirical evidence demonstrates persistent gender disparities in pay, senior roles, and the representation of women in academia (Pecis et al., 2022; Śliwa, Mason, et al., 2022). According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), women made up only 32% of professors in UK universities in the 2023/24 academic year (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2025). In business and management schools, a 6% gender gap in senior positions favours men, and in Russell Group universities, only 25% of professors are women, compared with 34% in post-92 institutions (Śliwa, Mason, *et al.*, 2022). These figures reveal a systemic gender bias that continues to disadvantage women at senior academic levels (Acker, 2006; Davies, Yarrow and Syed, 2020).

In addition to the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership roles (Davies, Yarrow and Syed, 2020), Śliwa et al. (2022a) identify a robust talent pool of women that 'narrows structurally at mid-career' (p. 5). The mid-career period typically coincides with the onset of perimenopause and menopause, raising important questions about the intersection of gender, ageing and careers. My study explores these dynamics by asking: How do women's experiences of perimenopause and menopause shape their career trajectories in business and management schools? By focusing on a context shaped by neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, the research seeks to uncover how these broader discourses shape menopausal women's experiences and career trajectories.

This developmental paper outlines the theoretical and methodological foundations for an empirical study. I aim to share preliminary insights at the conference (September 2025). The paper reviews key literature on menopause, its framing within neoliberal and postfeminist contexts, and their intersection. It then details the proposed methodology.

Literature Review

Reconceptualising Menopause: From Biomedical to Woman-Centred

Historically, both society and scholars have viewed menopause through a biomedical lens, framing it as a decline in reproductive function (Beck et al., 2021; Goldstein, 2000) and defining it by the cessation of menstruation (Hamoda, 2021). While many women experience physical and psychological symptoms — including hot flushes, mood swings, and cognitive difficulties — menopause has also been socially constructed as a disease (Hickey *et al.*, 2022). This framing reinforces negative associations with illness, barrenness, and a loss of femininity (Atkinson et al., 2021; Roberts & Hickey, 2016). These views have contributed to narratives that portray menopausal women as victims of gendered ageism, further reinforcing their marginalisation in the workplace (Ferguson and Parry, 1998).

A growing body of feminist work has challenged the historic narratives about menopause. Moving away from a biomedical lens allows the discussion to progress to women's lived experiences. Indeed, emerging frameworks, such as bio-psycho-cultural perspectives (Atkinson, Carmichael and Duberley, 2021) and identity theory (Steffan, 2021) have shown menopause transition to be a complex interplay of professional identity and gendered expectations (de Salis et al., 2018; Ferguson & Parry, 1998; Hvas & Gannik, 2008).

Women's experience of menopause in the context of neoliberal environments

Neoliberal ideology in business and management schools has been a catalyst for both growth and disparity in the arena of gender equality (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). Market-driven practices encourage competition, individualism, and traits such as rationality and logic (Zaidman, 2020), leaving little space for recognising the vulnerabilities associated with menopause (Edwards *et al.*, 2022; Yarrow and Davies, 2022). Indeed, such vulnerabilities challenge workplace norms of femininity, which are shaped by masculine cultures and the idea of the ideal worker (Acker, 1990). Neoliberal frameworks in Higher Education (HE) position deviation from the ideal worker as an individual problem to be self-managed (Orgad and Rottenberg, 2023). Consequently, the absence of menopause from organisational discourse contributes to policies and procedures that inadequately support menopausal women (Riach and Jack, 2021).

Masculinised workplace norms in business and management schools (Apospori *et al.*, 2021) and the resultant stigmatisation of menopause render conversations about menopause invisible (Beck, Brewis and Davies, 2020; Grandey, Gabriel and King, 2020) and taboo (Beck et al., 2020; Hardy et al., 2019). Therefore, menopausal women are silenced (Collins et al., 2024; Nosek et al., 2008) and organisational expectations reinforce the belief that they must manage their symptoms privately (Grandey, Gabriel and King, 2020; Atkinson, Carmichael and Duberley, 2021; Rottenberg and Gilchrist, 2025). Additionally, women are expected to maintain visibility and the constant appearance of productivity and engagement at work (Mavin and Grandy, 2016). As a result, women engage in aesthetic labour (Mavin and Grandy, 2016) and what Sang et al. (2021) describe as bloodwork – the additional physical and emotional labour required to manage menstruation and genealogical health in the workplace. This includes pain, leakage, stigma and lack of access to facilities (Sang *et al.*, 2021). Both forms of labour often go unnoticed and unrecognised thereby compounding the burdens placed on menopausal women (Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Sang *et al.*, 2021).

As neoliberal universities fail to accommodate life transitions, such as menopause (Beck, Brewis and Davies, 2021; Rottenberg and Gilchrist, 2025), these organisations reinforce structural inequalities that hinder career progression (Apospori *et al.*, 2021). By framing menopause as a personal issue rather than a workplace concern, neoliberal academic cultures reinforce the silence surrounding it. This silence not only shapes menopausal women's day-to-day working conditions (Beck *et al.*, 2020; Collins *et al.*, 2024; Hardy *et al.*, 2019) but may also have implications for how their performance is assessed and managed (Beck, Brewis and Davies, 2021). The interplay of structural inequalities, organisational silence, and performance expectations may significantly affect the career trajectories of menopausal women.

Postfeminist rhetoric and its uneasy relationship with claims of gender equality in Business and Management Schools

Despite postfeminist rhetoric claiming the achievement of gender equality (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, K. Kelan and M. Scharff, 2017), the realities faced by women in the neoliberal academia (Edwards *et al.*, 2022; Orgad & Rottenberg, 2023), especially those navigating the complexities of menopause (Theis *et al.*, 2023), tell a different story. The postfeminist narrative reinforces individualism and self-management, however, this narrative does not focus on structural barriers that impede equality (Benn, 2013). As a result, postfeminist rhetoric, which suggests that feminist goals have been realised, also perpetuates the very inequalities that it purports to have overcome.

Postfeminist sensibilities are characterised by an emphasis on choice, empowerment, and individual responsibility (Gill, 2016). Yet this emphasis can obscure the collective action and support systems required to tackle systemic gender inequalities (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). For menopausal women, this is particularly challenging. Workplace expectations that women manage and mitigate menopause symptoms independently, without burdening the organisation, often neglect the flexibility and understanding menopausal women require (Hickey *et al.*, 2017). This individualised framing discourages collective action and silences open discussion of women's experiences (Nosek, Kennedy and Gudmundsdottir, 2008).

The intersection of neoliberalism, postfeminism and menopause: A critical exploration

In business and management schools, menopause intersects with neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, presenting a unique challenge often obscured by both paradigms. Neoliberal work culture prioritises productivity and meritocracy (Yarrow & Davies, 2022; Yarrow & Johnston, 2022), while postfeminist narratives promote self-management and resilience, suggesting gender equality has been achieved (Gill, 2016; Lewis *et al.*, 2017). Yet curiously, the ideological overlap between these paradigms in business and management schools affects menopausal women by masking structural inequalities and limiting acknowledgement of their lived experiences, including how peri-menopause and menopause influence career trajectories.

In business and management schools, the intersection of menopause with neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies presents a unique challenge that is often obscured by the rhetoric of both theoretical paradigms. The neoliberal work culture, which prioritises productivity within a meritocratic environment (Yarrow & Davies, 2022; Yarrow & Johnston, 2022), curiously intersects with a postfeminist narrative promoting self-management and resilience, positing that equality has been achieved (Gill, 2016; Lewis *et al.*, 2017). Resulting in a masking of structural inequalities and biases that affect menopausal women. This leaves

little room for acknowledging the lived realities of peri-menopause and menopause and how this may shape women's career trajectories.

Gaps in the literature

Literature on gender inequality in business and management schools has primarily examined workplace discrimination (Śliwa, Gordon, *et al.*, 2022) and broader causes of gender disparity. Although these studies illuminate gendered barriers, they often overlook women's experiences of biological phenomena that shape their working lives. Experiences of menstruation (Grandey, Gabriel and King, 2020; Sang *et al.*, 2021), pregnancy (Gatrell, 2013; Gatrell, Cooper & Ernst Kossek, 2017), and menopause (Butler, 2020; Atkinson, Carmichael & Duberley, 2021; Beck, Brewis & Davies, 2021) remain marginal in mainstream discussions of gender inequality and career progression. Given that menopause typically occurs during mid-career, when women are often applying for leadership positions or navigating increased performance demands, its exclusion from career-focused gender research is a critical oversight.

The intersection of gendered ageism with performance management in business and management schools remains underexplored (Beck, Brewis and Davies, 2021). As dominant frameworks are grounded in neoliberal principles of productivity, self-regulation, and meritocracy (Apospori *et al.*, 2021; Zaidman, 2020), they rarely acknowledge the embodied realities of menopause — such as cognitive difficulties, fatigue, and hot flashes (Geukes *et al.*, 2016; Hickey *et al.*, 2017; Steffan & Potočník, 2022). The neglect of these embodied experiences reinforces gendered ageism by failing to accommodate the needs of menopausal women (Beck, Brewis and Davies, 2021). This neglect highlights the need to investigate how performance management frameworks shape menopausal women's career trajectories and contribute to enduring gendered inequalities (Atkinson, Carmichael and Duberley, 2021).

This literature review highlights gaps in how neoliberal and postfeminist rhetoric shape menopausal women's experiences in business and management schools. While gender inequality has been widely studied, the impact of menopause on career trajectories remains underexplored. My research responds to this oversight by examining how women's experiences of perimenopause and menopause shape their career trajectories, offering a more nuanced account of gendered embodiment in the workplace.

Research Design

A qualitative research design is used because it allows for the flexibility to investigate the meanings and personal interpretations women ascribe to menopause, particularly in professional contexts (Seibold, 2000; Voicu, 2018). Qualitative diaries kept over 12 weeks, and/or semi-structured interviews will be used to collect rich, detailed data (Seibold, Richards and Simon, 1994).

This study uses a qualitative design for its flexibility in exploring the meanings and personal interpretations women attach to menopause, particularly in a professional context (Seibold, 2000; Voicu, 2018). Data will be generated through semi-structured interviews, which will enable the collection of rich contextually grounded narratives (Seibold, Richards and Simon, 1994). These interviews provide space for open reflection, enabling participants to explore

the impacts of menopause and the socially constructed meanings they attach to it (Plowman, 2010; Radcliffe, 2013).

Next Steps

Participants who self-report experiencing peri-menopause or menopause are being recruited through an initial questionnaire, followed by an interview.

Data collection will take place between April and September 2025.

Data analysis will follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Preliminary findings will be ready for presentation at the conference in September 2025.

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