

**Title: Addressing the class bias in research on the menopause
– exploring the lived experiences of menopausal women in the
workplace**

Author: Samantha Evans

Contact address: Kent Business School, University of Kent, CT2
7PE

Email: S.J.Evans@kent.ac.uk

Addressing the class bias in research on the menopause – exploring the lived experiences of menopausal women in the workplace

Abstract: This paper sets out to explore the lived experience of menopause through an occupational lens to challenge the middle-class bias in existing studies whereby working-class women have largely fallen outside of the menopause discourse. This paper presents the preliminary findings of a project that used qualitative methods. This paper outlines the initial findings which explore the lived experiences of menopausal women in the UK. The final conference presentation will include further findings exploring the menopause workplace experience of women across different occupational and social class lines.

Word Count: 1921 (excluding tables and references)

Track: Human Resource Management

ADDRESSING THE CLASS BIAS IN RESEARCH ON THE MENOPAUSE – EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MENOPAUSAL WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the lived employee experience of menopause through an occupational lens, challenging the middle-class bias in existing studies, in which women working in lower socioeconomic roles have largely fallen outside of the menopause discourse. It presents a pilot study in which interviews and focus groups were conducted with employees across a range of occupations in one organisational setting, to explore the experiences of menopausal women in the workplace and if there are any occupational and socioeconomic differences in these accounts.

THE CLASS BIAS IN RESEARCH ON MENOPAUSE AND THE WORKPLACE

The impact of menopausal symptoms on women's working lives, performance, career trajectories, and workforce participation makes this a critical area of study. Work is central to how many women experience menopause, with the potential to generate, exacerbate, or alleviate symptoms (Jack et al., 2019; Rowson et al, 2025). These symptoms can disrupt performance and progression, with consequences for well-being, pay, pensions, and organisational participation (Bazeley et al., 2022). As women over 50 now form the UK's fastest-growing workforce group (Grandey et al., 2020), understanding menopause at work is increasingly important. Due to the age at which most women experience menopause, they are more likely to be highly skilled and experienced, possessing key tacit knowledge and acting as positive role models for younger employees. As such, these women typically make a significant contribution to their organisations and the wider economy in both tangible and intangible ways. Yet, a lack of workplace support can lead them to reduce hours, avoid promotion, or leave work altogether. In one survey, 44% said their ability to work had been affected, and over half reported declines in confidence and motivation (Bazeley et al., 2022). In addition, menopause remains a taboo topic at work, leading many women to conceal their symptoms (Collins et al., 2024). This suggests that menopause symptoms are a significant cause of disruption and underperformance, but remain under-reported and under-researched (Atkinson et al., 2020).

When looking at women's experience of the menopause through a social class lens, class has been found to shape the experience of menopause (Riach and Rees, 2022), with research showing that working-class women report more intense and debilitating symptoms (pain, illness, devaluation), while middle-class women are more likely to associate symptoms with appearance and ageism (Delanoë et al., 2012; Bazeley et al., 2022). Symptoms are also greater among those in households where the main earner is employed in manual work (Bazeley et al., 2022). Despite these social class differences, much of the emerging research on menopause and work focuses on women in professional or managerial roles (Brewis et al., 2017; Grandey et al., 2020; Jack et al., 2019) with only a few exceptions (e.g., Atkinson et al, 2024; Yoeli et al, 2021). Given that nearly half the UK population identifies as working class - rising to 54% among those aged 50–64 (Social Mobility Commission, 2021), and only 35% of employed women work in managerial or professional positions (Buchanan et al., 2023), this class bias in

menopause-at-work research is significant. Furthermore, although evidence shows that supportive workplace policies such as flexible work, absence provisions, and health programmes can mitigate menopausal challenges (Beck et al., 2022; Steffan & Potočnik, 2022), this guidance is often more relevant to white-collar, professional, and managerial roles, exacerbating class disparities. As a result, the relevance and effectiveness of these policies for semi-routine and routine, often deskless workers, is poorly understood. More inclusive research is needed to address this class bias and ensure workplace support reflects the full spectrum of women's menopausal experiences.

To explore how women's experiences of menopause at work are shaped by workplace structures and norms, this study draws on Beck et al's (2022) use of Forbes' (2009) notion of organisational co-modification. The concept describes how organisations subtly and implicitly shape individuals' behaviour and identities by influencing how employees present themselves and manage their bodies and experiences to fit organisational norms. Beck et al. (2022) applied Forbes' framework to review how women's bodies are shaped or hidden to align with workplace expectations. In doing so, they identified four themes of co-modification: bodily moulding, non-disclosure, failing, and resistance/redefinition/reclamation. These themes offer a valuable lens for analysing how menopausal women navigate workplace expectations, shedding light on the embodied and relational dimensions of their experience at work.

METHODS

Most empirical research on menopause at work is predominantly quantitative, clinically oriented, and situated within a biomedical approach with an emphasis on symptoms (Atkinson et al., 2020: 53). Therefore, to understand more about the lived employee experience of menopause, an inductive design and qualitative methods were employed. This took the form of an exploratory pilot study in a single case study organisation using interviews and focus groups. A single organisation was considered appropriate for piloting the research and informing potential future multi-site studies and to explore the notion of co-modification within one organisational context. To counter the professional/managerial bias in existing workplace menopause research, the suitability of organisations was assessed using the Approximated Social Grade (ONS, 2024), selecting those with a diverse workforce across occupational classes to increase the likelihood of a more socially representative sample. The University of Kent met this criterion and granted access for the pilot study, offering a range of staff roles (see Appendix 1). The project received full ethical approval from the Kent Business School Research Ethics and Advisory Group in December 2024.

To explore the influence of occupation and social class on women's lived experience of menopause at work, questions focused on: participants' experiences of the menopause; disclosure at work; the role of employer/line manager; the impact of role and environment; and work-life interplay. Data collection is ongoing, with 22 one-to-one interviews and one in-person focus group (6 participants) conducted to date. Of these, 7 participants were classified as managerial/professional workers (AB) and 7 working in manual occupations (DE), with the remainder in administrative, clerical and supervisory occupations (C1).

Data analysis is ongoing using both deductive and inductive approaches. Drawing on Beck et al.'s (2022) work, their four themes of bodily moulding, non-disclosure, failing, resistance/redefinition/reclamation were initially applied as deductive codes. Given the exploratory nature of the study, an iterative and reflexive approach was then used, enabling inductive coding alongside the deductive framework. This allowed additional patterns and meaning-making practices to emerge. Through this process, five key themes were identified:

1. *Lived Experience of Menopause*: symptom impact; duration and visibility; identity and self-perception.
2. *Navigating the Workplace*: role and workload; organisational culture; impact of work environment and colleagues; coping strategies.
3. *Disclosure and Silence*: selective disclosure; barriers; concealment.
4. *Institutional and Managerial Support*: formal support; the role of the line manager; effectiveness and gaps in support.
5. *Beyond Work – the Intersection with Personal Life*: home responsibilities; financial capital; social capital; exercise and diet.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

This paper outlines the initial findings and discuss the lived experiences of menopausal women in the UK. The final conference presentation will include the next stage of analysis which will explore these menopause workplace experiences across different occupational and social class lines.

Lived Experience of Menopause

Participants were at different menopausal stages – peri-, post-, and menopausal, and reported a broad range of symptoms. Common physical symptoms included hot flushes, sleep disruption, menstrual changes, weight gain, hair loss, and heart palpitations. Mental/emotional symptoms included brain fog, anxiety, mood swings, irritability, low confidence, and rage. Some participants, however, also reported positive outcomes of the menopause such as a renewed sense of confidence or self-assurance.

Work-related factors

Workplace conditions played a central role in how participants experienced and managed symptoms. Flexibility, particularly hybrid arrangements and flexible hours, was consistently cited as important for women to manage their menopausal symptoms at work. In contrast, long hours, shift work, and inflexible scheduling were viewed as exacerbating symptoms. Interestingly, women working in manual occupations did not necessarily feel they were disadvantaged in their workplace menopausal experience as a result of the physicality of their role. Some even suggested that the physical nature of their occupation was helpful in managing their menopausal symptoms at work:

I don't think it would be easier to work in an office because I like manual stuff. I like to keep busy & be physically active & I find it can be a good distraction. (Stores, Coordinator)

Shared workspaces and temperature control also emerged as challenges while line manager and peer support significantly influenced women's ability to cope. Although the gender of line managers and colleagues did not consistently affect perceived support, the age of their colleagues was a factor for many women. And a number of women did express a preference for disclosing to a female line manager or colleagues:

My team are all women of a similar age so I find it very easy to be open about my menopausal symptoms and get support from my colleagues (Receptionist)

Navigating the workplace

Participants reported masking, speaking out, retreating, or adjusting as key workplace coping strategies. Some concealed symptoms and discussed "putting a mask on" while others embraced openness. Some reduced their working hours or level of responsibility at work:

I was running my own business and had to step back because I developed imposter syndrome where I thought I can't hold this job anymore. I've always been a highly confident person - very sociable, but my goodness, when that hits you around the corner....I can now only cope with working part time. (Marketing Officer)

Others made environmental adjustments when possible, such as working hybrid/working from home, working flexible hours, or changing their place of work:

We moved a colleague – she used to get hot sweats where she was working because they were too hot, so we took her out and moved her to clean in cooler buildings – we had to make some adjustments. (Housekeeping Supervisor)

Beyond the workplace

Our data shows how financial constraints, home responsibilities, and social networks intersected with women's workplace experience of the menopause. Costly recommended supplements and the financial infeasibility of reducing hours were raised:

"I went to a menopause talk at work and the woman was talking about different types of nuts and oils and stuff that that we could see having and supplements, but that is expensive. A lot of that stuff. The sachets were like 30 lbs just for six or seven sachets, which I certainly couldn't afford. (Housekeeping)"

"I would go part time because I just genuinely some days don't feel that I can hack it, but I can't afford to. So, I have to carry on and pretend that everything's working". (Academic)

While some partners were supportive, others struggled to understand menopause. Peer and friend networks were often cited as more helpful. Exercise and diet was also widely cited as an effective strategy for both symptom relief, well-being and ability to navigate the menopause at work.

Initial conclusions

This study highlights the complexity of menopausal experiences at work. Manual work is not necessarily inherently more challenging, whereas flexibility of working arrangements, the degree of agency held by the employee, and the presence of supportive colleagues and managers are influential. The gender of line managers and colleagues did not always affect perceived support, while age appears to be a strong factor. The findings also highlight the interaction between work and personal life, a dimension often overlooked. Notably, some participants reported positive outcomes from their menopause journey that had an impact on their workplace experience, such as greater confidence and resilience, which challenges the dominant deficit narratives surrounding menopause.

References

Atkinson, C., Carmichael, F. and Duberley, J. (2024), "Menopause and Workplace Well-being", Wilkinson, K. and Woolnough, H. (Ed.) *Work-Life Inclusion: Broadening Perspectives Across the Life-Course*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 147-158.

Atkinson C, Beck V, Brewis J, Davies A, & Duberley J. (2020) Menopause and the workplace: New directions in HRM research and HR practice. *Journal of Human Resource Management*. 2021;31:49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12294>

Bazeley A., Marren C., and Shepherd A. (2022). *Menopause and the Workplace*. London: Fawcett Society.

Beck V., Brewis, J., Davies, A. & Matheson, J. (2022), Cis women's bodies at work: co-modification and (in)visibility in organization and management studies and menopause at work scholarship, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 25(3), 495-514, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12318>

Brewis, J., Beck, V., Davies, A., & Matheson, J. (2017). The effects of menopause transition on women's economic participation in the UK. London: Department for Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/menopause-transition-effects-on-womens-economic-participation>

Buchanan, I., Pratt, A. & Francis-Devine, B. (2023) *Women and the UK Economy*, Commons Library Research Briefing, 3 March 2023

Collins, H., Harry, S.H., Grace . (2024) 'Difficult to Divulge': The Impact of Organisational Silence around the Menopause, *Work, Employment and Society*, 10.1177/09500170231212127, **38**, 5, (1445-1456)

Delanoë, D., Hajri, S., Bachelot, A., Draoui, D. M., Hassoun, D., Marsicano, E., & Ringa, V. (2012). Class, gender and culture in the experience of menopause. A comparative survey in Tunisia and France. *Social Science & Medicine*, 75(2), 401–409.

Forbes, D.A., 2009. Commodification and co-modification: Explicating black female sexuality in organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 22(4):577-613.

Grandey, A. A., Gabriel, A. S., & King, E. (2020). Tackling taboo topics: A review of the three Ms in working women's lives. *Journal of Management*, 46(1), 7–35.

Jack, G., Riach, K., & Bariola, E. (2019). Temporality and gendered agency: Menopausal subjectivities in women's work. *Human Relations*, 72(1), 122–143.

ONS (2024), *Approximated Social Grade: Census 2012*, London: Office for National Statistics.

Riach, K. and Rees, M. (2022). Diversity of menopause experience in the workplace: Understanding confounding factors. *Current Opinion in Endocrine and Metabolic Research*.

Rowson, T.S. and Jones, R.J. (2025). Understanding the Subjective Experience of Menopause at Work: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Model, *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 10.1080/10720537.2025.2465611, (1-20).

Social Mobility Commission (2021), *Social Mobility Barometer – public attitudes to social mobility in the UK*, 11 March 2021.

Steffan, B., & Potočník, K. (2023). Thinking outside Pandora’s box: Revealing differential effects of coping with physical and psychological menopause symptoms at work. *Human Relations*, 76(8):1191-1225.

Yoeli. H., Macnaughton. J., McLusky. S. (2021) Menopausal symptoms and work: a narrative review of women's experiences in casual, informal, or precarious jobs. *Maturitas*. 2021 Aug 1;150:14-21. doi: 10.1016/j.maturitas.2021.05.007

Appendix 1

Alignment of four-category version of ASG with universities

Approximated Social Grade (ASG)	Descriptor	Examples of related occupations in universities
AB	Higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations	Academics & Senior Leadership & Management positions
C1	Supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations	Professional Services

C2	Skilled manual occupations	Hospitality, Housekeeping, Catering & Estates
DE	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, unemployed and lowest grade occupations	