

Engender Parliamentary Briefing: Improving Support and Ending the Stigma of the Menopause

November 2021

INTRODUCTION

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation and we work to realise women's political, social, economic and cultural equality with men. We warmly welcome this debate in the Scottish Parliament as a crucial step forward in creating a gender equal Scotland where women and girls' experiences are made visible.

Social stigma and sexism have resulted in the menopause being traditionally undiscussed or marginalised despite the fact that it affects almost all women at some point in their lives and impacts their health, economic and social inequality. In recent years however there has been a greater focus on this issue - led by women talking about their experiences of the menopause - with resulting changes in policy and practice. Most recently, the Women's Health Plan¹ has included a focus on menopause and menstruation leading to commitments published in August 2021 including to:

- Develop, maintain and promote a support network for Menopause Specialists throughout Scotland.
- Establishing a dedicated menopause policy post within Scottish Government.
- Provide a specialist menopause service in every NHS Board, and where sub specialisation is impractical (e.g. in Scotland's islands) develop a buddy system.
- Build a basic understanding of menopause among all healthcare professionals.

RESEARCH

Over the summer of 2019 Engender undertook a survey as part of a research project seeking to understand how current Scottish policy meets the needs of women going through the menopause. Our survey was further supported by desk-based research. This research project found that while there was an increase in public conversation

¹ Scottish Government (2021) Women's Health Plan. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2021/08/womens-health-plan/documents/womens-health-plan-plan-2021-2024/womens-health-plan-plan-2021-2024/govscot%3Adocument/womens-health-plan-plan-2021-2024.pdf>

around the menopause, its impacts and women's needs, most women still felt inadequately supported.²

Key findings included:

1. Many women do not know where to go for information

Almost all survey respondents had sought out information relating to menopause and its symptoms, however 40% reported not feeling informed about the menopause with an additional 10% unsure as to whether they were informed or not. Only 15% were aware of the existence of specialist menopause services.

2. The information women do get is not always of good quality

Women indicated dissatisfaction with conflicting messages and advice, with almost half of respondents receiving confusing information, or being unable to find the information they needed. When asked about their views on the information, only 18% considered the information available was 'about right'. The most frequently chosen descriptions were that the information told them different things (42.9%), did not answer their questions (38.5%) and was useful but difficult to find (35.5%).

3. Women want specific menopause support, but do not always get it

The majority of respondents agreed that NHS Scotland should provide specialist services and invest in recruitment and training for clinicians. Of our survey respondents, 71.4% had sought out care from a doctor, nurse or other health professional but 40% were not satisfied with the attention they received. Only 40 participants (15.3%) knew about the availability of specialist menopause services.

4. Women are not getting the support they need – at home or elsewhere

Just under 60% of women suggested they did not feel supported by medical professionals, which was higher than those who did not feel supported by their employers or friends and families. Around half suggested that their friends and family support or supported them during the menopause. The most common reasons for a lack of support from friends and families included their own lack of understanding, stereotypes, and the view that menopause was "a bit of a joke".³

² Engender (2020) Engender Briefing to the Women's Health Plan: What Do Women Experiencing the Menopause in Scotland Need? Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-Briefing-to-the-Womens-Health-Plan-What-Do-Women-Experiencing-the-Menopause-in-Scotland-Need.pdf>

³ See Response #102/Q26: "Not fully understand the impact just think it is a bit of a joke. Need evidence-based info from a reliable source."

Just over half (50.9%) of respondents felt uncomfortable speaking to their managers about the menopause and a lack of understanding among managers, especially male managers, was cited as a reason, with respondents also calling for guidance for managers to support their employees.

5. Workplaces can do more to support workers

There was broad support for menopause policies within workplaces, with 87.4% indicating that they thought that workplaces should have a menopause policy, but only 11 respondents (3.7%) were aware of their own workplace having one, and 21.7% were unsure if their workplace had such a policy.

Among those who were working or had experienced the menopause while working, only 46 respondents (15.3%) knew about the existence of workplace policies. Furthermore, only four described the purpose of the policy. In response to the question “What would help you manage your menopause symptoms (if you’ve had them) while you’re at work” the most common responses included access to fans and temperature control, breaks in workdays and flexible working, and greater mental health and wellbeing support.

6. Women have mixed views about their own experiences of menopause

The combination of sexism and ageism is particularly potent around menopause. We asked participants to describe with 5 words their thoughts, feelings, attitudes or ideas about the menopause which demonstrated respondents’ experiences of discussions with managers, clinicians, family and friends. Analysis of responses indicated common physical or psychological manifestations such as “tiredness”, “hot”, “exhaustion”, and “anxiety”. They also provided descriptions linked with emotions, such as “confusion”, “sadness”, “isolation”, “frustration”, “fear” and “embarrassment” and with concepts such as “old”, “change”, “life-changing” and “natural”.

Yet not all women felt negative stigma around the menopause, and several indicated that they perceive it as either a neutral or positive transition – for example one respondent described the menopause as “Liberation, fun, wellbeing, joy, happy”. Women with this view also appear to associate the menopause with the relief and liberation of not having the risk of pregnancy and loss of periods or becoming wiser.⁴

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite recent progress there remains a chronic stigma, imbued with sexism and ageism, and a lack of knowledge and public awareness around the menopause which

⁴ Sethi, K., Pitkin, J., (2000) British-Asian women’s views on and attitudes towards menopause and hormone replacement therapy.

prevents health professionals and society from adequately supporting menopausal women. There is a need for comprehensive healthcare training and services, while more workplace policies could be a simple action to improve conditions for menopausal women in Scotland.

Building on this initial research, we suggest that there is a need to:

- Collect and utilise further data, especially from underrepresented groups, when designing services. An intersectional approach to service design and delivery is a critical element of meeting women's needs.
- Develop comprehensive training for GPs and other healthcare professionals about the menopause, and non-specialist services should be adapted to provide longer appointments and space for women to describe their experiences.
- Specialist services should be scaled up and equally available across health boards, with particular consideration on the need to travel for support.
- Undertake further comprehensive research into workplace menopause policies and their effectiveness, to develop best practice.
- Include menopause in all Scottish Government policies which cover health, employment, public space, and inclusion.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact: Eilidh Dickson, Policy and Parliamentary Manager, Engender

Email: eilidh.dickson@engender.org.uk

ABOUT US

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women's social, political and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international level to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.