

Menopause matters: Understanding how women conceptualise the impact of menopause on academic careers

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The Problem:

- Women face unique academic career barriers (e.g. maternity, menopause) creating a "glass ceiling" and "leaky pipeline" (Quickfall, 2025)
- The higher the academic position, the lower the representation of women (Galan-Muros et al., 2023)
- Menopause transition (usually ages 45-55) coincides with prime leadership years in academic careers

The Impact:

- Menopausal symptoms can impact work performance and career progression (Beck et al, 2021)
- Severe menopausal symptoms linked to leaving work or reducing hours (Evandrou et al., 2021)
- Working conditions and organisational culture can worsen symptoms (Brewis, et al., 2017)

Current Gaps:

- Limited research on menopause in academia despite growing awareness
- Lack of research on perceptions of support/barriers across menopause stages (i.e. pre/peri/post) and academic discipline (e.g. STEM vs social sciences)

Aims of the study

- Qualitatively explore how pre/peri/postmenopausal academics understand menopause's impact on their careers
- Identify challenges and best practices across career stages
- Inform recommendations and tailored policies to support retention and progression of academic women

Method

- Three in-person focus-groups with female academics across different disciplines from the University of Warwick
- 13 participants at different career stages: from Teaching Fellows to Professors
- Data analysed using Thematic Analysis

A sense of loss in academic abilities and identity

"The loss of sharpness, the lack of energy... it just feels like it's too much." (P11)

"My particular fear is kind of the brain fog... that's what I've always relied on, as like a part of my identity - is how sharp I've been and how quick I've been." (P8)

The fear of negative perception and stigma

"That's why I don't talk about it. Because I think I have that perception if you do talk about it, people always start to judge and think you're not capable. I think it's easier not to talk about it." (P9)

"It's seen as a weakness...you show weakness. You can't be weak..."(P15)

Menopause-related challenges impacting career trajectory

"I thought my life was almost falling apart so much that I had to say no to things. Potentially even saying no to putting in my promotion case. So, I held back on that for a couple of years because I just couldn't." (P6)

Results

Navigating gendered expectations in academia

"I think that in academia there are lots of female leads because they adopted very male, you know, characteristics and I think I'm perceived differently just because I've not adopted them. So the way that those females would go through menopause would be probably different to the way that I will go through menopause. (P10)

Expressing the need for menopause support

"It's disappointing that we all have heard about the menopause network and we don't know what they do, right? I know there are cafés. I know they're in person, but I don't know what it is discussed in each café..." (P10)

Key recommendations:

- Improve visibility and accessibility of menopause support across the university.
- Train line managers/heads of departments to support menopause-related conversations and workplace adjustments
- Appoint menopause intermediaries or 'champions' across departments
- Ensure flexible working options and workload adjustments are available to those experiencing menopause
- Promote anonymous, inclusive menopause discussion spaces
- Integrate menopause support actions in all department Athena Swan commitments

References

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