

# Menopause behind locked doors - a phenomenological study of UK prison officers

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## 1. Introduction, research question, aim and objectives

The research focuses on UK prison officers (POs) working through menopause to explore if menopause policy provision meets the needs of those working in restricted work environments: dynamic environments besieged with unpredictable changes (Asonganyi, 2011). The Taylor Review (2017) describes work as a force for good, a fundamental right. Yet, a study by the Women and Equality Committee reveals 72% of UK workplaces are still to introduce reasonable workplace adjustments to support menopause at work, despite research highlighting 3 in 5 women experience menopause negatively at work, leading to 900,000 women leaving jobs prematurely (UK Parliament, 2022). A phenomenological interpretive research approach is used to explore the lived experiences of those directly impacted by menopause at work and capture the views of those indirectly affected. Addressing an urgency for academic insight into menopause policy provision in restricted work environments, the research takes a novel approach to reveal vital insights to shape the fundamentals of creating a menopause-friendly work culture.

### 1.1. Research question

What are the lived experiences of prison officers working through menopause and can shared insights inform menopause policy to better serve employee needs?

### 1.2. Aim and objectives

The research aim is to capture the lived experiences of female and male prison officers pre and post menopause policy implementation. The research objectives are i) to investigate if restricted work environments contribute to the experience and impact of those working through the menopause, ii) to evaluate the effectiveness of menopause policy post implementation to establish if employee needs are met, iii) to capture insights into male PO reactions towards 'reasonable adjustment' for menopausal colleagues, iv) to establish what female menopausal prison officers want in terms of support from their employer.

## 2. Justification

With governments encouraging retention of older workers and the average age of retirement rising, women can be spending over a third of their working life in work (Carter *et al.*, 2021). The research explores how women's menopausal health impacts work, and how restricted workplaces can impact menopause health, a circular debate yet to be determined (Atkinson *et al.*, 2020). The research will advance empirical and practical knowledge about the relationships between women, work, and menopause in UK prisons; rarefied workplaces where 'staff face a unique set of ideological tensions and pragmatic hazards' (Fletcher *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). Yet, unlike, policing and the probation service, PO experiences receive little attention or critical

examination, resulting in a paucity of knowledge about the impact of menopause on work productivity (Beck *et al.*, 2021), evidenced by the absence of a menopause policy in this sector.

### **3. Literature review**

In 2022 The House of Commons Women and Equality Committee published its findings into menopause in the workplace. The report encouraged employers to support employees, provide training and bespoke policies (UK Parliament, 2022). To foster an age and gender-inclusive workforce, research advocates are putting menopause health at the centre of policy decisions to enhance workforce capability (Riach & Jack, 2021). Pivotal to this, employers, need to recognise the lived experience of those working through menopause, to develop practical policies that meet employee needs (Brewis *et al.*, 2017). A study by Hardy *et al.*, (2018) concludes working menopausal women want support for symptom management, empathy, supportive policies, and menopause awareness training for line managers. The Institute of Government and Public Policy (2022) suggests tackling menopause at work involves addressing inadequate workplace practices and raising visibility, albeit this could prove derisory as menopause policies might be perceived as special treatment (Shaw & Frisby, 2006).

To offset the negative effects of menopause at work, Steffan & Potocnik (2022) advocate a life-span developmental approach to provide support through flexible working and additional time to maintain performance – a recent measure implemented by the Ministry of Justice in response to claims the prison officer annual fitness test was failing menopausal women (UK Parliament, 2021). Paolillo *et al.*, (2021) promote inclusiveness in work through employee enablement to voice concerns about how lived experiences serve to highlight how work can exacerbate poor health and impact engagement, motivation, performance, and employee relations (Rees *et al.*, 2021).

### **4. Theoretical basis**

Nishii's (2013) principles of Inclusive Climate Theory with its focus on eliminating 'sources of bias' to reduce conflict and turnover through fair treatment enables employees to build trust about transitioning through menopause, reassured they hold the same social value as men (Nishii, 2013. p. 1758). Continued study of the literature is needed to establish the correct ethical lens to answer the research question.

### **5. Research design**

The qualitative research design uses purposive sampling. Recruitment is by gatekeepers at HMP Thorncross, Kirkham, and Parc, a mix of closed and open, public and private prisons. Semi-structured, online, in-depth interviews will be conducted pre and post menopause policy implementation using a sample of female menopausal POs (n30) and male POs (n10). A gender-related topic rooted in liberal feminist theory the research uses a phenomenological interpretivist lens of hermeneutical idealist philosophy to provide 'self' experience of phenomena (Groenewald, 2004). Data analysis uses listening guide methodology to explore participant subjectivity and multiple voices within interview transcripts by listening for contrapuntal voices and composing poetry - I-poems (Gilligan *et al.*, 2003).

### **6. Implications for practice**

To retain female workers, research suggests menopause be termed a work, health and safety issue (Atkinson *et al.*, 2020; Carter *et al.*, 2021). Due to taboo, menopause remains unaddressed within an organisational context. New theoretical and methodological approaches towards

menopause in work and health are therefore required to match and inform the variety of work contexts worldwide (Verdonk *et al.*, 2022). This research seeks to find out what women, particularly menopausal prison officers require to remain safe, healthy and productive at work.

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