**19 - Highflyers navigating potential turbulence ahead – a phenomenological study about airline pilot experiences of the menopause**

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

According to the Taylor Review (2017), work is a critical right and a force for good. Despite this, the Women and Equality Committee (2022) study found that 72% of UK workplaces have yet to implement reasonable adjustments to support and retain female employees during and beyond menopause. This study employs an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of airline pilots in evaluating the effectiveness of menopause support in restrictive workspaces: dynamic work environments subject to unpredictable change (Claessen & de Lange, 2015). The study uses thematic analysis and listening theory (Gilligan et al., 2003) to analyse qualitative interview data. By exploring the intersection of two critical topics: menopause in the workplace (Bryson, et al., 2022; Steffan, 2020) and increasing female participation in the commercial airline industry (ICAO, 2023; McCarthy et al., 2015) opportunity exists to transform attitudes, workplace culture, menopause guidance and practice to address this business problem to find sustainable solutions. The research aims to uncover valuable insights to create an inclusive and enabling work culture that supports menopause and promotes collaboration among stakeholders.

**1.1. Research questions**

I. What are the lived experiences of airline pilots working through menopause, and can shared insights inform menopause policy and strategy to better serve employee needs?

II. Does work impact menopause, or does menopause impact work?

**1.2. Aims and objectives**

The research aims to develop a sustainable business model to shape workplace culture, policy, and design to attract, recruit and retain airline pilots during and beyond menopause. The research objectives will i) establish if restricted work environments contribute to the experience of those working through the menopause, ii) evaluate the effectiveness of workplace menopause support and guidance to establish if needs are being met, iii) capture co-worker reactions to menopause reasonable adjustment, iv) establish what workplace support pilots require to remain productive, connected and valid during the menopause.

**2. Justification**

With governments encouraging retention of older workers and the average retirement age rising, women can spend over a third of their working life in work (Carter, et al., 2021). This research explores how women’s menopausal health impacts work and how restrictive workplaces can impact menopause health, a circular debate yet to be determined (Atkinson, et al., 2020; Verdonk, et al., 2022). Given the growth in women pursuing careers in aviation, it is crucial to gain insights into attitudes to menopause and "how women pilots adapt to survive in the industry" (Gorlin & Bridges, 2021, pg. 2). A daunting prospect in an industry where gender based discrimination is prevalent (Gorlin & Bridges, 2021; ICAO, 2023). Mills (2006) argues that gendered practices ingrained in aviation culture offer unique opportunities for positive change. A more equitable and inclusive industry culture can be achieved by reframing and addressing pervasive norms and adopting measures to support recruitment, retention and the positive employment experience of all pilots, irrespective of gender.

**3. Literature review**

In 2022, the House of Commons Women and Equality Committee recommended employers provide personalised policies and training to support menopausal employees. Although guidance and training about menopause are more readily available, due to the taboo surrounding the topic (Grandey, et al., 2020), there is still a significant lack of strategic implementation (Hardy, et al., 2019). This has created a gap in effectively integrating menopause support within different workplace contexts (Verdonk, et al., 2022), with broad based blanket policies proving to have little impact at an organisational level (Steffan, 2020). Gibbon (2014) highlights the potential for tension and resentment among colleagues when gender policies lack diversity protocols, leading to perceptions of special treatment, which can create conflicts. This was evidenced by the UK Government rejecting calls to trial menopause leave, deeming it discriminatory towards men and counterproductive for women (The Conversation, 2023). Inclusive work environments enable employees to voice their concerns about how work impacts their health, engagement, motivation, performance, and relationships (Rees, et al., 2021). Promoting the benefits of an inclusive workforce, Riach and Jack (2021) suggest centralising menopause policy decisions to enhance workforce capability. A crucial point in policy decision-making is understanding the experiences of those going through menopause, which negatively impactsthree in five UK working women, with one in ten leaving jobs unsupported (Women and Equality Committee, 2022). Co-designed policies to reflect functional working environments in the specific context of implementation and evaluation can help to promote collaborative menopause support at work (Voorberg, et al., 2015).

**4. Theoretical basis**

A gender-related topic rooted in liberal feminist theory, the research uses a phenomenological interpretive lens of hermeneutical idealist philosophy to provide a ‘self’ experience of phenomena (Groenewald, 2004). To ensure the research output is reinforced, the principles of inclusive climate theory (Nishii, 2013) and social stigma theory (Link & Phelan, 2001) are utilised to provide a nuanced analysis of a gender-related issue.

**5. Research design**

This study uses a qualitative research design with purposive sampling via LinkedIn. Forty online, semi-structured, in-depth interviews using Microsoft Teams are planned. Data analysis uses thematic and listening guide methodology (Gilligan et al., 2003) to explore subjectivity and extract multiple voices within interview transcripts to compose I-poems. The research follows an anonymous approach, capturing female pilots' and co-workers' views and experiences to inform decision-making and future-proof policies.

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