



Australian Government

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

OFFICE FOR WOMEN

Inquiry into issues related to menopause and perimenopause

Responding to the health, workforce and economic impacts of
menopause

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Introduction

The Office for Women (OFW), in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee inquiry on issues relating to menopause and perimenopause. Any queries related to our submission can be sent to:

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Or

In developing this submission, OFW consulted with:

- Department of Health and Aged Care (Health)
- Australian Public Service Commission (APSC)
- Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR)
- Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA)
- State and territory Offices for Women

OFW's submission is based on early analysis through a literature review it conducted in May 2023, and consultations across Government, private sector, non-government organisations and academia. The literature review examines the impacts of menopause and the intersections with workforce participation, and identifies existing evidence and gaps, policy responses, experiences in overseas jurisdictions and potential risks. The literature review is provided in full at [Attachment A](#).

OFW recognises there is a diverse range of gender identities and that these identities may differ from sex recorded at birth. Unfortunately, there is very little evidence on how gender diverse people experience menopause. While the language in this submission generally refers to women, this is not intended to exclude people with diverse gender identities who experience menopause.

Government commitment to addressing impacts of menopause

Menopause is a multi-faceted condition that affects all women differently, with a range of symptoms and severity of negative impact.¹ The impacts of menopause are not confined to women's physical and mental health. Menopause can impact women's sense of self, relationships, and ability to participate in the workforce. Experience of menopause poses intersecting challenges for people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and gender diverse people, although more research is needed to understand these experiences. Australia's response to the impacts of menopause must be inclusive and intersectional.

¹ Where this paper uses the term 'menopause', it is intended to cover menopause but also the period preceding, known as perimenopause, unless explicitly stated.

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The Australian Government is committed to addressing women's health and wellbeing throughout the life-course, including the impacts of menopause. This is consistent with:

1. *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality*, published in March 2024, which outlines where the Government will focus its efforts over the next decade to achieve its vision – an Australia where people are safe, treated with respect, have choices and have access to resources and equal outcomes no matter their gender. The Strategy includes health as one of five priority areas for action and aims to achieve gender equity in healthcare access and outcomes.
2. *Working Future: The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities*, published in September 2023, noted the potential impacts of reproductive health issues, including menopause, on women's workforce participation.
3. The *National Women's Health Strategy 2020-2030* identifies maternal, sexual and reproductive health, and healthy ageing as key priorities. The Strategy includes recommended actions to support women and their healthcare providers to manage the effects of menopause and acknowledges the need for further research into menopause and its impact on women's work decisions and economic security.
4. The Government's emphasis on gender equality as a central economic priority.²

State and territory governments (specifically NSW, Victoria and the ACT) have also started to address menopause as an underrepresented topic in healthcare and employment, through a variety of approaches that include dedicated health clinics, awareness raising and education for GPs and communities, and consideration of menstruation and menopause policies and leave provisions. We understand there may also be other small-scale efforts underway across Government to promote policies that will assist women experiencing menopause or perimenopause.

Office for Women and its contribution to the work of Government on menopause

The Office for Women reports to the Minister for Women and is the central gender equality institution within the Australian Public Service (APS). Its role is to advance the Government's commitment to achieving gender equality, working in collaboration across Government.

OFW's engagement on menopause has focused on understanding its impact on women's participation in the workforce and their economic security. This aligns with OFW's broader focus on women's economic equality and in the context of this intersection not being addressed elsewhere in Government. OFW notes that, at the Commonwealth level, leadership on health responses to manage menopause is the responsibility of the Department of Health and Aged Care.

The OFW wishes to share the research it has undertaken to date with the Senate Committee, for its benefit. OFW is committed to engaging across Government to support research, awareness and policy responses on the impacts of menopause on women's health and wellbeing, workforce participation and economic security into the future, as requested by Government.

² Prime Minister Albanese's speech to the Australian Economic and Social Outreach Conference on 2 November 2023 (<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/australian-economic-and-social-outreach-conference>), accessed 13 December 2023).

Key findings of OFW literature review

The OFW literature review found there was evidence to suggest that menopause is having a negative impact on women's participation in the workforce, including correlations between menopausal symptoms and work satisfaction, intent to stay in the workforce and women's early retirement. However, this was limited to individual, relatively small-scale studies and could not always draw a direct causal link to menopausal symptoms. Recently, a Jean Hailes for Women's Health report found that the impact of menopause on workforce participation is smaller than some have estimated, while Australian women's experiences of symptoms that they attribute to menopause (i.e. with or without a formal diagnosis) were broadly consistent with previous studies.³

The review identified significant data gaps around the impact of menopause on women's workforce and economic participation in the Australian context. There are also broader gaps in research relating to the experiences of people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culturally and linguistically diverse people, and gender diverse people. There is not enough Australian research to link experiences of menopause with women's work decisions and economic inequalities – specifically whether and how much menopause contributes to the gender pay gap, women's early retirement or decreased workforce participation. There is similarly a lack of information on women's use of unpaid leave to manage menopausal symptoms, transition from full-time work to part-time work and the impacts on career progression and promotion.

The review recommended that any future research use holistic frameworks that consider biological, psychological, economic, social and cultural factors to target gaps in understanding of menopause and workforce participation.

Looking forward – key considerations

OFW's broader analysis and literature review have identified a number of gaps and issues that could be considered by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee. In particular, we have identified that more research is needed on the impacts of menopause on women's workforce participation and economic security, along with an exploration of what practical and large scale actions can be taken to improve women's lives. There are a range of possible actions to improve workforce participation and inclusion, which are likely to have a broader benefit to society.

1. Need for further research to address gaps and underpin evidence-based policy

Proposed policy responses to the impacts of menopause and perimenopause need to be strongly underpinned by evidence and data. Where data isn't available, responses could be implemented incrementally to understand the gaps in information, leveraging ongoing development of national data assets and design new data sources to capture relevant information. However, the current lack of evidence into specific impacts of menopause should not preclude organisations from making simple and practical adjustments for women experiencing menopause and

³ Jean Hailes for Women's Health, *The Impact of symptoms attributed to menopause by Australian Women*, October 2023

perimenopause, such as flexible work patterns, remote working options, resources in the workplace, and awareness training.

2. *Using a comprehensive and tailored approach*

Menopause cannot be approached solely as a health issue. Even with well-treated symptoms, women may still experience stigma or discrimination in the workplace. A comprehensive and coordinated approach would allow an understanding of the range of impacts and how these can be addressed across Government, the private sector, industry, employers and the health sector.

3. *Consideration of menopause in the context of broader reproductive health*

Responses to the impact of menopause on workforce participation are part of a broader policy question on reproductive health accommodations, i.e. for endometriosis, heavy or painful menstruation, and pelvic pain. Policy responses to the impacts of menopause would be an opportunity to consider broader reproductive health issues to ensure a consistent approach. This would also address recommendation 36 from the Senate inquiry into universal access to reproductive healthcare:

The committee recommends that the Australian Government considers commissioning research policy responses on the impact of reproductive health on women's participation in the workforce and the adequacy of existing leave entitlements under the National Employment Standards.⁴

4. *Mitigating risk of backlash and unintended negative consequences for women of specific policy reforms*

Cultural attitudes to discussing menopause and perimenopause are only just starting to change, particularly in the workplace. Recent global surveys show many women feel either uncomfortable or unsupported to discuss and manage their symptoms in the workplace. Attitudes towards menopause at work may be more complex to navigate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, women with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse women and gender diverse people. Any reform to address the impacts of menopause in the workplace should be considered carefully and balanced against the possibility of unintended consequences such as backlash or further entrenching discrimination against older women, particularly given the economic and workforce barriers already faced by women.

5. *Learning from international experiences*

Australia can learn from international experiences of addressing the impacts of menopause and perimenopause. For example, in 2022, the UK Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee produced a report on menopause and the workplace.

⁴https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/ReproductiveHealthcare/Report/List_of_recommendations