



EQUALITY IN LAW FOR THE MENOPAUSE

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



Equality in law for the menopause

Too many women are experiencing discrimination at work and in wider society during the menopause. The NFWI calls on the Government to strengthen equality law by including the menopause as a protected characteristic alongside pregnancy and maternity under the Equality Act 2010, in order to provide better protection for women and to help tackle the stigma around menopause

Proposer's position

The proposer would like to see the menopause added as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 to provide women with greater protection and to help tackle the stigma around menopause.

The scale of the problem

The menopause is a natural part of ageing that usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age, as a woman's oestrogen levels decline.

Most women will experience menopausal symptoms. Some of these can be quite severe and have a significant impact on everyday activities. Menopausal symptoms can begin months or even years before periods stop and can last around four years after the last period, although some women experience them for much longer. On average, most symptoms last around four years from your last period.

Symptoms can include (among other things): hot flushes, night sweats, difficulty sleeping, a reduced sex drive, mood changes, heart palpitations, reduced muscle mass and recurrent urinary tract infections.

Research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) in 2019 found that 59% of working women between the ages of 45 and 55 who are experiencing menopause symptoms said it had a negative impact on them at work. The research found that nearly a third of women surveyed (30%) said they had taken sick leave because of their symptoms, but only a quarter of them felt able to tell their manager the real reason for their absence.

Independent research conducted in 2021 by Opinium on behalf of Vodafone with 5,012 people who had experienced menopause while at work found that a third (33%) of those who had symptoms said they hid this at work, and 50% felt there is a stigma around talking about the menopause. In addition, 44% of women who experienced menopause symptoms said they have felt too embarrassed to ask for support in the workplace, rising to 66% of women aged 18-44.¹

¹ Opinium surveyed 5,012 people who have gone through menopause and were in work at some point while going through this in the UK, Germany, Spain, Italy and South Africa between 23 February and 4 March 2021.

The current situation

The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. There are nine protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010. They are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Menopause is not included as a specific characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. However, it is largely covered by the three protected characteristics of age, sex and disability discrimination.

Including menopause as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 could make it easier for women to bring claims for discrimination. It could also help drive progress in employment policies and practices in workplaces by requiring that employers do not discriminate against those going through the menopause.

In July 2021, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee launched an inquiry into menopause and the workplace, which will look at how well current legislation protects women from discrimination and whether it should be amended. The Chair of the Committee, Caroline Noakes MP, has said she will not rule out looking at whether menopause should be a protected characteristic.

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

At local and regional levels, WI members could engage with their local MPs to raise awareness of women's experiences of this issue in the workplace and in wider society, and the need for greater protection in legislation. WIs and federations could also help to bring local stakeholders together to raise awareness of the scale of the problem by holding events.

Nationally, to build the evidence base for legislation to be strengthened, the NFWI could carry out research to understand women's experiences of the menopause, such as in the workplace. Working alongside others in the sector, the NFWI could raise awareness of the issue among key policy makers and call for change, as well as contribute evidence to relevant national consultations or inquiries.

Points to consider:

- This resolution would allow the WI to challenge the taboos surrounding the menopause and supports the NFWI strategy to be a strong campaigning voice for women.
- As an educational charity, WI members can already share information about the menopause to raise awareness. However, a resolution on this issue (which the NFWI does not currently have) would enable the WI to launch a national campaign to call for greater protection for women through legislation.
- This resolution has a targeted and clear focus which could bring together the efforts of the NFWI and WI members under a single ask. However, would it provide enough opportunities for the WI to take action to address the discrimination and stigma around the menopause?

Further information

NHS: www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/

The Menopause Charity: www.themenopausecharity.org/

CIPD research: www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/menopause-at-work#gref

Video content

Caroline Noakes MP interviewed on Good Morning Europe:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PBFQWbmo2g

An introduction to the Equality Act 2010, Equality and Human Rights Commission:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4MWVEAww2g

Public Affairs Department Contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI Public Affairs department.

Post: National Federation of Women's Institutes, 104 New Kings Road, London, SW6 4LY

Telephone: 020 7371 9300

Email: publicaffairs@nfwl.org.uk

Website: thewi.org.uk