

# Research

## A workplace for change

**Women going through menopause, and their employers, all stand to gain from a new workplace resource.**

By Jess Gleeson

**Y**ou're sitting at work in the middle of a team meeting, when suddenly it hits you: a wildfire of heat runs through your veins. In seconds, an explosion of hot red splotches spreads up your neck and face. Then comes the sweat.

You're experiencing a menopausal hot flush.

Yet despite the internal chaos, you're nodding to your boss and smiling through gritted teeth. You're trying to stay focused, appear professional, silently hoping your colleagues don't notice a thing.

For some women, menopause can be a tricky time of navigating symptoms and change, and especially so in the workplace. So, a team of researchers has spent six years tackling the issue.

The result is the Menopause Information Pack for Organizations (MIPO), a recently-released suite of free resources for workplaces to help support women through this life stage.

### **A silent experience**

Hailing from diverse fields of business, health and medicine, the researchers – Professor Kathleen Riach from Monash and Glasgow Universities, Professor Gavin Jack of Monash University and Professor Martha Hickey from the University of Melbourne – became increasingly aware that while so many women were going through menopause in the workplace, it remained a topic enveloped in silence.

Alongside researchers from La Trobe University and Yale Medical School, the trio began working towards a solution that focused on what workplace support menopausal women needed, and how managers and workplaces could best provide it.

Their research included speaking to more than 2000 women through surveys, interviews and focus groups.

### **Why is menopause a workplace issue?**

Prof Riach (pictured) says more than one million women in Australia are currently experiencing the menopausal transition in the workplace.

"Often, you're asked to work as hard as you can, but you're almost expected to be a robot and leave your body, and body issues, by the door," she says.

"Only now are organisations becoming more aware that if

you look after employees – and their bodies – you're going to be rewarded in not only employee commitment and job satisfaction, but also in creating a workforce that thrives, so they can work into their later life.

"There's also the broader social message; given that 50% of the population go through the menopause transition, and it's about acknowledging that older women are welcome in the workplace."

### **Not a one-way street**

The research also showed that when it comes to menopause and the workplace, it pays to see the effects from both sides.

"When we think about menopause in the workplace, there's often a focus on how menopause affects people's work," says Prof Riach.

"But in fact, what we found was how the workplace environment positively or negatively affected women's experience of menopause."

Whether you can easily access a desk fan or control your office room temperature, whether your uniforms are made from breathable materials and whether you're able to take breaks if and when you need them, workplace conditions can either hinder or help a woman's experience of menopause.

"It's really important to think about that – it's not just a one-way street," says Prof Riach.

The team's research also revealed the level of support offered by a workplace can be closely connected to a menopausal woman's frequency and severity of symptoms. "If you have a supportive supervisor,



Professor Kathleen Riach

you are less likely to report troublesome symptoms,” says Prof Riach.

“This really goes to the heart of organisations either being hospitable or inhospitable to women of menopausal age in terms of their culture.”

### **Renewed, ready and raring to go**

Far from being at the tail-end of their careers, Prof Riach says midlife working women are a workforce raring to go.

“Women at this age often have a renewed focus on their careers. They are ready to go and often looking for leadership positions to transition into,” she says.

“The challenge is that their managers and organisations may not look at them as their next pool of talent.

“This talks to the broader issue of older women often being considered invisible. We’ve got a long way to go in terms of challenging these cultural conceptions and their flow-on effects to the workplace.”

Despite living in a world where the word ‘menopause’ is still often met with silence or discomfort, Prof Riach says many women have already personally shown how menopause can be accommodated in the workplace.

She is therefore excited by the possibilities for women if the menopausal experience was welcomed into the workplace vocabulary and culture, and sensitive support was made universally available.

“What we found from the research is that women are remarkably creative, resilient and inventive at negotiating menopause in the workplace without organisational support,” Prof Riach says.

“So, if you provide a working environment in which they can thrive, they will grab it with both hands.” **JG**

**For more details on MIPO, visit [menopauseatwork.org](http://menopauseatwork.org)**

## **THREE WAYS WORKPLACES CAN BE MENOPAUSE-FRIENDLY**

1. “Start from a positive position,” says Prof Riach. Rather than viewing menopause as a workplace problem, ask how you can create a positive environment that will help menopausal women thrive. “It’s the framing that is incredibly important,” she says.
2. Provide training and support to managers and supervisors so, if needed, they can have sensitive conversations about menopause with confidence. “In general, supervisors can feel underequipped or worried about saying the wrong thing, so it’s about providing support for positive and constructive conversation,” Prof Riach says.
3. Women don’t want a separate, menopause-specific policy at work, says Prof Riach. What they want is for workplace practices and policies to become “menopause-sensitive”. “For example, the policy that talks [about] flexible working can mention menopause,” she says. “This ensures there’s an awareness that menopause is not an ‘issue’, but also, it’s easier to integrate into existing policies.”



To learn more about menopause, visit [www.jh.today/meno1](http://www.jh.today/meno1)

Continued from page 3

**DL:** What are some of the biggest issues facing girls today? How can we help as parents/mentors/friends/employers?

**NSD:** One in four Australian women over the age of 15 has experienced some form of violence in her lifetime. The figures in our region are even more disturbing; in some parts of Papua New Guinea, for example, up to 90% of women have experienced some form of violence, which is why it is imperative that we share our information resources and support as a good neighbour.

There are so many things we can do to create an Australia that is violence-free. We all have a role to play. We have to challenge the historically-entrenched beliefs and behaviours that drive it, and the social, political and economic structures, practices and systems that support it.

The good news is that this violence is preventable. That's why I wrote [the book] *On Violence*, to provide helpful hints to employers, parents, caregivers, sporting organisations and the media about the role they can play in creating a more respectful community.

Even simple things matter, including the language we use to describe boys and girls. The messages we send children about the roles of men and women in our society begin from birth. Ensuring we do simple things like share the housekeeping work, or even reminding our children that they can be anything they want and they're not limited by rigid gender stereotypes, makes a huge difference.

One way of changing the landscape for so many girls around the world is to ensure

access to education. In Australia, education is also key to understanding what constitutes a healthy and ethical relationship. Children learning about respect at school is absolutely essential. This is one important area of the work of Our Watch.

Across the world, including in Australia, we also need more women in leadership positions. Apart from this being the fair thing to do, having an increased number of women in leadership roles actually has a positive effect – right down to measures as simple as profit and loss.

Research also shows that having women in leadership positions changes perceptions regarding the roles and aspirations of girls (including reducing the time girls spend on household chores), and results in more girls attending school and becoming equipped themselves to play leadership roles, including in conflict prevention.

Organisations need to practise what they preach – ensuring women are valued, supported and promoted, and that there does not exist impediments for women that their male counterparts wouldn't encounter.

A work environment that has respectful and healthy relationships at a senior management level sends a strong message throughout the organisation.

**For the full transcript, including questions to Ms Stott Despoja on her time as a member of the World Bank Advisory Council on Gender and Development, please go to [www.jh.today/feature1](http://www.jh.today/feature1)**

Ask

## Dr Jean

Your women's health questions answered by our experts.



Dr Sonia Davison

**Dear Dr Jean:** I feel like I have one normal week out of a 4-week cycle. I feel like I have PMS for two weeks, fatigue, irritable, stomach pain, a number of symptoms and the week after my period, I have clarity and feel normal.

**A:** Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is very common, and most women of reproductive age will have some symptoms related to normal fluctuations in hormone levels throughout the month. These symptoms usually occur with the fall in progesterone and oestrogen in the week leading up to the period, but can also occur with the drop in oestrogen at mid-cycle. Some women have prolonged symptoms and severe PMS that can drastically impact quality of life. Symptoms can be physical or psychological and vary throughout reproductive life.

There are several strategies that are useful for PMS. Our website has detailed advice about lifestyle measures, supplements and medications that may help.

For more information on PMS, visit [www.jh.today/peri6](http://www.jh.today/peri6)



Have a question for Dr Jean?  
Visit [www.jh.today/news78](http://www.jh.today/news78)