Women's Health in the Workplace: A Toolkit

Introduction

This toolkit aims to provide practical guidance for businesses to create a supportive and inclusive environment that addresses the unique health needs of women*. By understanding and accommodating women's health experiences, employers can foster a culture of empathy, allyship, and belonging, ultimately benefiting the entire organisation.

*When we use the term 'women' we include all people who identify as women.

The Importance of Women's Health

Supporting Women's Health is not just a women's issue. While it may directly impact 50% of the global population, it indirectly impacts every person and workplace.

Recognising the significance of women's health is essential for promoting gender equality and ensuring a thriving workforce. Diverse teams, start-ups, companies and groups have been conclusively shown to be more innovative, productive and successful. Supporting women's health benefits everyone.

57% of women feel a gynaecological or hormonal health condition has negatively impacted their career.

81% of women believe their employer would not be willing to make reasonable adjustments if they spoke up about a women's health issue.

Source

Women's Health Outcomes

Research is clear that women statistically experience poorer health outcomes than men. The government recognises that health is still modelled, designed and normalised around *'the male body as the default'*.

Women are more likely to leave their jobs, not take up promotions, reduce their hours and leave work altogether than male counterparts.
Academic studies on women's health in the workplace have highlighted that 'sickness absences are increasing for women as opposed to men' and that women are experiencing more chronic illness and illness with non-specific symptoms making the symptoms harder to treat.

Recognising Gender Diversity

It's crucial to acknowledge the diverse needs of transgender women:
- Policies must be inclusive of all gender identities, including non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals.
- Recognise some transgender individuals may possess female biological traits without identifying as women is essential.
- Health policies aimed at male employees should account for these nuances to prevent exclusion from relevant benefits.

Addressing Women's Health

Women's health is a broad topic, so it is important to clarify what could be covered where we refer to Women's Health. We have outlined three distinct areas to consider.

Medical conditions and experiences that are unique to women

There are health conditions and experiences that are unique to women due to their biological makeup, and often the main area we think of when talking about Women's Health.

- **Gynaecological conditions** – such as endometriosis, fibroids and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome
- **Cancer** – such as cervical cancer and ovarian cancer
- **Menstruality** – such as menstrual health, periods and menopause
- **Pregnancy and fertility** – such as early pregnancy, postnatal support, pregnancy loss, abortion, fertility and IVF
- **General health conditions and experiences** can affect women differently to men e.g. heart attack symptoms are very different for women

Mental Health & Wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing affects everyone, but women are more likely to experience certain common mental health conditions than men. Also, it is important to be aware that diagnosis and treatment for medical conditions can have a strong impact on a person's mental health – so a holistic view of health is needed that recognises mental health and wellbeing at all times.

Discrimination within the Healthcare system

Finally, a recognition that the health care system is still disproportionately biassed towards men. It is important to understand that this can make women feel dismissed, struggle to get a diagnosis, or make finding relevant resources and support more of a challenge.

1 in 10

women in the UK have endometriosis

Source

10%

of women leave their job due to menopause

Source

2x

women are twice are likely to be diagnosed with anxiety than men

Source

The Bigger Picture: Intersectionality and Inclusion in Women's Health

How different factors affect women's health and well-being at work.

What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality is a way of understanding how different aspects of a person's identity, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and others, interact and shape their experiences.

Intersectionality shows that inequalities are not just added up, but multiplied and intensified by the combination of different factors. Work is an important area where intersectionality matters, because it affects women's opportunities, income, health, and well-being.

Why is intersectionality important for women's health?

- Women's health is influenced by many factors, such as biology, environment, lifestyle, access to health care, and social determinants of health.
- Women who belong to marginalized or minority groups may have worse health outcomes than women who do not.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the health inequalities that women face, especially those who are more vulnerable and disadvantaged.
- Employers have a responsibility to address intersectional inequality in women's health, by creating inclusive and supportive work environments that respect and value diversity.

What are some examples of intersectional inequality in women's health?

- Women with lower incomes are more likely to experience mental illness.
- LGBTQ women are more likely to experience depression than women who are not LGBTQ.
- Women from Black Ethnic Backgrounds are five times more likely to die during or within 42 days after pregnancy.
- Disabled women are more than 3.5 times likely to die of COVID-19 than non-disabled women.

RACE

GENDER

DISABILITY

INTERSECTIONALITY

AGE

CLASS

SEXUAL ORIENTATION
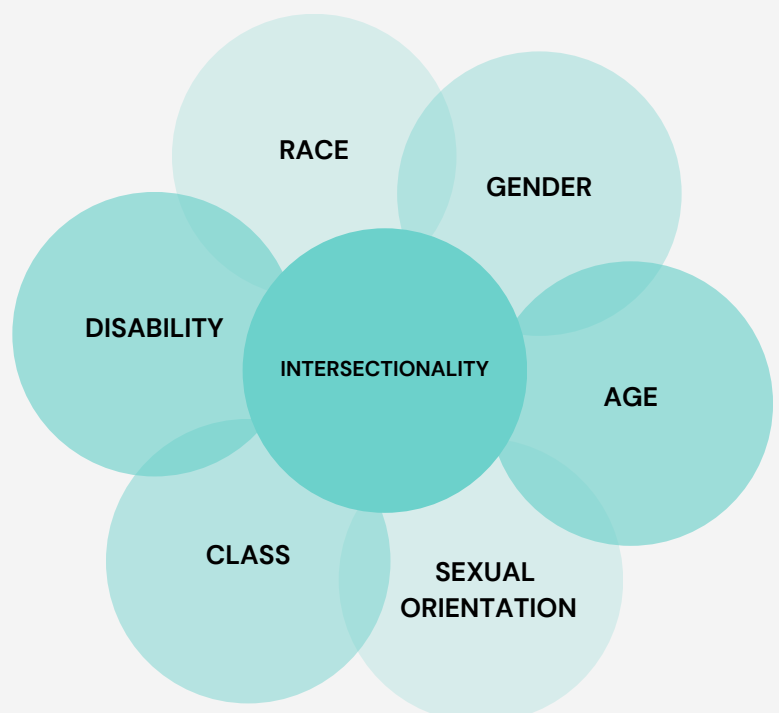
What can organisations do?

To better support employees, the most important thing an organisation can do is to create a culture of understanding and empathy. Alongside this, ensuring the relevant HR policies and procedures in place, implementing practical tips to better support staff and signposting individuals to resources and support will bring further benefits.

Fostering an inclusive culture

Improving Women's Health often requires cultural change and engaged leadership. Research suggests that **allyship is key** to creating inclusive workplaces. Principles of Allyship include amongst others: **Deep Curiosity, Empathetic Engagement, Authentic conversations.**

- **Understanding:** Each workforce is unique, understand the current situation with anonymous surveys and group or individual discussions to gauge what you are doing well and where you can improve. Employees are best placed to highlight the most important issues.
- **Culture and Leadership:** Top-down commitment to women's health enshrined in policies, values and actions. Tackle the culture of presenteeism (working while sick or excessive overtime) and show the importance of time off when ill.
- **Involve men** as well as women in discussions about women's health so that everyone is included.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Regular workshops and awareness sessions can educate employees about women's health issues and the impact that these can have on women.
- **Break Stigma:** Normalise discussions around women's health by encouraging open conversations so that words like menopause and periods become less taboo.
- **Increase Diversity**: Have diverse points of contacts for individuals, such as male and female advocates, as some people may avoid talking with their line managers.
- **Emotional Intelligence**: Managers and colleagues should actively listen and empathise. However, it is also vital to understand that some women may be more open to conversations, while others would still rather not discuss health topics.
- **No One-Size-Fits-All Solution:** Women's health is complex and individual. There is no perfect workplace solution and individuals will want to deal with their health in many different ways. An empathetic rather than prescriptive approach is recommended.

Allyship & Inclusion

Employees of organisations that foster strong allyship (supporting people even if they are not part of their group) and inclusion cultures are:

50% less likely to leave

56% more likely to improve their performance

75% less likely to take a sick day

167% more likely to recommend their company as a great place to work

What can organisations do?

Training and Resources

Equipping managers and colleagues with knowledge and resources is essential. One-off training is not sufficient but should be regularly reviewed and repeated.

- **Manager Training:**
  - Train managers to recognise signs of health-related challenges faced by women.
  - Provide guidance on handling sensitive conversations and accommodating health needs.
- **Colleague Education:**
  - Offer resources such as pamphlets, webinars, and online courses.
  - Promote understanding of common health conditions affecting women.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexibility is key to supporting women's health and empowering women.

- **Flexible Time:** Allow women to adjust their working time hours to accommodate health appointments or family responsibilities. For example, part-time, or compressed hours or job sharing.
- **Remote & Hybrid Work:** Enable remote and hybrid options, especially during menstruation or when dealing with health issues.

Policies & Procedures

Ensure the relevant HR policies and procedures in place that protect people.

- **Clear Entitlements**: Make sure policies are easy to find and clearly outline the benefits to employees.
- **Create New Policies**: Ensure you have the relevant policies and review any additional policies that need to be created.
- **Return to Work**: Consider risk assessments, regular check-ins and be mindful that it can be a challenging time for women returning to work.
- **Regular Reviews**: Review your policies regularly and ensure they remain current and beneficial.
- **Inclusive wording:** Ensuring policies are worded to be inclusive of gender diversity.

Practical Tips

Comfortable facilities contribute to overall well-being.

- **Clean Bathrooms**: Regular maintenance and cleanliness are essential.
- **Period Products**: Address period poverty by providing free period products in toilets.
- **Safe Spaces**: Provide safe spaces for breastfeeding, or for giving staff a place to take a break for their mental health.
- **Air Conditioning**: Provide fans or air conditioning for menopausal support.
- **Appropriate facilities**: Facilities should be adequately sized, located and with private basins to accommodate requirements.
- **Mental Health First Aiders**: Organisations can train individual mental health first aiders to give internal points of contact for those with mental health concerns.

12 questions to ask in your workplace

Every workplace and its individuals have different starting points, strengths and needs. Here are some questions to stimulate discussions in your leadership and teams and commit to initiatives that work for your business and improve women's health in the workplace.

CULTURE

- ☐ How can we improve how we promote a culture of respect, allyship and inclusion, where women are valued, recognised, and rewarded for their contributions?
- ☐ What kind of ongoing training can we offer to ensure we are educated and equipped to support women's health in the workplace?
- ☐ How can we monitor and evaluate the impact of our actions and initiatives on women's health?

GENERAL HEALTH

- ☐ How can we raise awareness and foster dialogue on the benefits of supporting women's health in the workplace?
- ☐ What physical changes to our workplace environment should we make that will better support women's physical health?
- ☐ What do we do (or should we do) to promote preventive health care and wellness programs, such as screenings, vaccinations, and health education?

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

- ☐ How do we accommodate women's reproductive health needs and concerns in the workplace, such as flexibility, privacy, and comfort?
- ☐ What resources should we provide that support women who have experienced reproductive health issues or complications, such as infertility or endometriosis?
- ☐ What do we (or should we) do that demonstrates our respect for women's choices and preferences regarding their reproductive health and rights?

MENTAL HEALTH

- ☐ What should we do to actively include women in decision-making and consultation processes, and solicit their feedback and suggestions on how to improve the workplace environment and policies?
- ☐ How can we facilitate social connection and engagement among coworkers and peers to support women's mental health?
- ☐ What do we need to put in place to reduce stress and burnout, and to address any issues related to work-life conflict, family responsibilities, or personal challenges?

💡 We recommend selecting three questions to focus on and set a commitment date.

Further Resources

The below links are intended to support further research into women's health, training and resources that you may find useful - however we cannot vouch for the organisations.

NHS Women's Health
UK Gov Women's Health Strategy for England
Results of the UK Gov 'Women's Health – Let's talk about it' survey
House of Lords Library – Women's health outcomes: Is there a gender gap?
Women's Health At Work: Why it's time for an honest appraisal
Bupa Women's Health at Work Resources

7 Ways to Practice Active Allyship
Lean In: Build an inclusive workplace (Free Training Resources)
Interculture Training (Bristol based)
Bristol Women's Voice Training (Bristol based)
See Her Thrive: Workplace Training
Kensa health: Women's Health in the Workplace
Peppy Health App
HeyFlow: Reproductive Health Inclusion

Creators

Lisa Treasure – Lisa Treasure is Head of Marketing at Chorus, an IT & Cybersecurity company in Bristol.

John Bradford – John is CEO of DigiLocal, a charity supporting community based coding clubs for marginalised young people.

Helene Jewell – Director of Jewell Facilitation providing facilitation, training and organisational development support.

Michael Legge – Commercial Director at AzurianHealth, a healthtech company supporting women in the workplace through menopause.

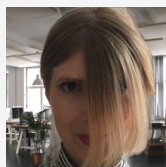**Adrian Shedden** – Serial startup founder, helping businesses focused on people and planet.

Sarah Louise Hopkins – Designs imaginative services to make a difference, consulting for organisations in health and social care for good, former mental health charity CEO and Founder.