Why reproductive health is a workplace issue



Earlier this year, the SSTUWA contributed to the Australian Education Union's submission into the inquiry into issues related to menopause and perimenopause to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee. The Senate's final report should be available in September.

Results from the 2023 National Women's Health Survey found that there is a limited understanding of menopausal symptoms in society. The survey also found that 17 per cent of women (45-65 years old) have taken a break from work in the last five years and in some cases have retired early.

As reported on The Conversation website: "Women retire 7.4 years earlier, on average, than men. This means a loss of earnings upwards of A$577,512 per woman."

At the start of the year, the SSTUWA contacted several women member networks to gain some understanding of their experience of menopausal symptoms.

A key concern from members is the psychological burden that women carry with the perceived silence around perimenopause and menopause in society.

For many women their experiences are burdensome and often with little or no industrial support to rely on.

Within the classroom environment perimenopause and menopause symptoms vary, with some educators reporting extreme fatigue, hot flushes and the constant anxiety of unpredictable menstrual cycles.

Furthermore, in any school environment, teachers have a duty of care to their students, so it is extremely difficult to leave students unattended, particularly when experiencing these symptoms which in itself comes with a fear of judgement and shame.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that women working in educational settings are still primary caregivers, thus impacting their leave entitlements to fulfil caring responsibilities, with little or no leave provisions available for personal needs such as the adverse impacts of perimenopause and menopause.

Currently in Western Australia (and at the time of publication) there are no leave provisions that provide specific entitlements for menstrual cycles, perimenopause or menopause.

This suggests that within Western Australian workplaces women are viewed as not having any requirements separate, or in addition, to any other worker within
the state.

Current WA building codes state that the provision of toilets is based upon a minimum ratio which in some workplaces, the scheduling of workers' breaks will affect the number of toilets required.

The ratio is one toilet per 15 people. In the instance of women experiencing perimenopause or menopause, more consideration would be needed for
easy access to toilets.

Further consideration should be given to facilities with showers and cubicles, thus enabling women to meet all the needs of her reproductive life from menstruation and breast feeding, through to menopause.

We know from research that good mental health strategies support sharing of experiences, however in our society perimenopause/menopause is experienced alone with limited sharing of experiences.

These experiences are further compounded for women living in regional or remote communities of Western Australia in areas of extreme weather events. The heat and recent flooding incidences impact further upon women going through perimenopause/menopause.

Through WA's Gender Equity 10-year plan, SSTUWA welcomed the announcement in 2022 of free period products for all public high schools and now it has been extended to primary schools as well.

We know from research that providing access to tampons and pads ensures that girls' attendance is not impacted, supports student engagement in learning, removes any concerns for girls experiencing period poverty and improves overall health outcomes.

With the inclusion of period products in schools, it is hoped the WA government will continue to action and implement strategies to reduce stigma associated with women's reproductive health including perimenopause and menopause.

Recently, Queensland Unions achieved 10 days of paid reproductive leave for public sector workers.

Jacqueline King, general secretary of Queensland Unions said: "We know that one million Australian women have been diagnosed with endometriosis. One in six couples will experience fertility issues. And early detection of breast or prostate cancer can save lives. Access to additional leave and flexible work options will help them manage these issues better."

Ms King stated that many workers – women and men – experienced reproductive health issues throughout their working lives.

Their campaign, *It's For Every Body*, describes reproductive health leave as an "entitlement that provides leave and flexibility for workers to address reproductive health issues that impact on their capacity to work or take preventative measures like health screening. Reproductive health can impact all workers; it affects everybody, at every stage of their working life including menstruation, managing chronic conditions, managing fertility related issues, breast and prostate screening and issues related to perimenopause and menopause. This list is not exhaustive; these issues can be complex and unique. It is an indication of the nature of health issues that reproductive health leave is intended to cover."

At the recent 2024 ACTU National Congress, union delegates were asked to rally support for the introduction of 10 days paid reproductive health leave as a national employment standard for all Australian workers.

This paid leave must cover all types of all reproductive health matters: preventative screening for breast and prostate cancer, fertility and IVF treatment, endometriosis, menstruation or menopausal conditions and other treatments like hysterectomies and vasectomies. It is imperative that this leave entitlement is flexible.

Provision within industrial laws to allow workers to manage reproductive issues is something that benefits us all and we are committed to advocating for these rights until we see them come to fruition in our workplaces.



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