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The shifting landscape of work and working lives

Silently dancing on the ceiling: women's workplace experiences peri-, menopausal and post- menopause in the UK

Conference Paper

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Summary

The nature of female employment means women are more likely to be affected by a changed national default retirement age, since women in the UK have historically retired earlier than men, but also because the term 'career' is potentially a masculine model. The 'career' has historically been a male model of working life, derived before women generally entered the workplace. This paper reports a structured literature review undertaken which has sought to examine the work experiences of older women (aged 50+) in the UK. It identifies possible issues concerning caring demands and their workplace health during the periods of peri-menopause to post-menopause in order to raise awareness of the shifting landscape of female employment. It seeks to identify current research within the UK to address gaps and to make recommendations for future practices in the workplace.

Introduction

The Office for National Statistics (2017) reported that life expectancy in the UK, from birth, has increased three years per decade over the last 100 years. This means men and women are living longer, yet women are currently living on average up to 83 years of age and above. As the general UK population ages, coupled with a declining birth rate, this leads to a widening gap in taxation and national insurance contributions to support both a state pension scheme and age-related health service offer. As part of a Fuller Working Lives Framework, the DWP suggested that reasons for increasing the state pension age for both men and women to 68 by 2037–39 include extended life expectancy and the high level of post-war 'baby boomers' coming up to the pre-existing national default retirement age (NDA) (Altman 2015; see also DWP 2013, 2017; State Pension Age Review 2017). Plans seek to support older workers to remain in employment in later life. Jack et al (2014) recognised in Australia the number of women aged over 45 contributing towards their future ageing workforce and conducted a study which sought to understand the experiences of this workforce. Despite reflections on

older workers' choices (see Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al 2015 and Constantine et al 2016), there remains a dearth of research in terms of the experiences of older female employment within the UK, regardless of their increasing total contribution in the numbers employed in the wider workforce.

The issue

The nature of female employment means women are more likely to be affected by changing the national default retirement age (NDA), since women in the UK have historically retired earlier than men, but also because the term 'career' is potentially a masculine model. The 'career' has historically been based on a male model of working life, derived before women generally entered the workplace. It fails generally to reflect the impact of mothering upon female working lives or potentially other caring commitments towards the wider family, such as ageing parental needs. It also fails to reflect the lack of value placed upon women's work in these areas. There has historically been further concern of women facing poverty in retirement, subsequent to a limited pension pot. Yet working for later in life represents new challenges for the female workforce, particularly where this may represent under-reported peri-menopausal/menopausal/post-menopausal periods in their working life.

The aim of this paper is to report from a structured literature review which sought to examine the current sources surrounding UK work experiences of older women (50+). This attempted to consider possible issues concerning family/caring demands or matters around their workplace health during the periods of peri-menopause to post-menopause to highlight important issues for employers considering the impact of the national default retirement age. It sought also to identify current practices and recommendations for the workplace. This review limited its scope to issues of the workplace. Specific needs/issues arising from wider medical health concerns of older women are not addressed.

As objectives for the investigation, three main themes were identified for consideration:

- 1 to identify the current contribution of older women to the UK workforce
- 2 to explore the workplace experience reported specific to this age group
- 3 to examine current employment practices to support their employment.

Further to conducting a structured literature review (Denyer and Tranfield 2008) to identify gaps in the research in the UK, we sought to critically review identified sources. The significance of this review is to inform future workplace innovation.

Methodology

The authors followed the systematic review process (structured literature review – SLR) (Denyer and Tranfield 2008, Tranfield et al 2003). Using the search process, as

determined by way of Denyer and Tranfield's (2008) structured literature review (SLR), the majority of sources identified covered medical and menopausal health issues not included by the scope of this research and therefore discarded. The constraints of the study were determined as from January 2010 to July 2017, restricted to the UK, for which a total of 91 documents published were thematically analysed initially. A further stage of refining and narrowing the search to the criteria of 'older women in the UK workplace' published between 2010 and 2017 following a panel review approach by way of considering an intersection of the three identified themes for the review was then narrowed down to 27 articles selected based on the criteria identified (see Appendix 1). This facilitated accessing government sources or organisations, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the International Longevity Centre-UK, Business in the Community, Centre for Ageing Better, the Age and Employment Network, Age UK, and National Institute for Adult and Continuing Learning, and conference/journal articles.

We initially intended to undertake a review of ten years prior but given the possible negative impact upon the workplace of the global financial crisis, we considered that starting in 2010 might alleviate historical issues but capture current work practices directly stemming from that period to the current day.

The criteria for article selection are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Criteria for article selection

Criteria	Explanation
Current research	UK sources
Where published	UK government publications Business journals Age-related organisations
Who published it	Academic papers or relevant and legitimate business/women's organisations
Relevance of article	Articles which fell within the scope of the study
Timeframe	2010 to 2017
Number of articles	27 identified

Results – themes identified

The analysis of the three themes evolved from the examination of articles on older women in the workplace of a length of 1,000 or more words.

From the identified sources, three main themes emerged:

Theme 1: Current contribution of older women to the UK workforce

There was general agreement from sources on the following statistics:

There are currently 11.6 million people in the UK aged 50–64, where 3.3 million are economically inactive (not seeking work), while another 347,000 are registered as unemployed. Some have chosen to retire and withdraw from the workplace, while others may have been forced out through various factors such as own health, family commitments, organisational restructuring/downsizing, and so on (BITC 2015). Life expectancy is increasing for both men and women; with improved health and lifestyle choices, people are living longer and the average age for women in the UK has risen to 82.8 years (ONS 2017, Vandenberghe 2011). By 2030, the number of people in England aged 65 will go up by 50% and the number aged 85 and over will double (BITC 2015, GOFS 2015).

Older women, classed as ‘baby boomers’, were born during the years of 1952–67. This stereotyping of an age group is unhelpful, as their range of work and life experiences are great. What can be said of this age group is that they are the first group to have equal pay legislation and equal rights as a norm in the workplace. Despite this statement there are still, after nearly 40 years, gender pay gaps. These women might probably be the first to see their long-term career goals flourish, more than likely to have taken a career break to raise children and, as such, may have gaps in their national insurance contributions and accumulated savings for post-retirement. Coupled with the increasing number of women over 55 who are now single with no partner pension to support them, this leads to the further need to continue working post state pension age. The Women’s Business Council (2013) agree this is not a homogenous group. There are disparities in levels of skill, qualifications, income, job security, and relevance of skills to the changing labour market forces. With an increase in older motherhood, as well as higher life expectancy, there are differences in the work–life balance needed to manage caring responsibilities. Some will be combining caring for children with caring for elderly relatives and/or grandchildren, termed as ‘sandwich care’.

Where do older women work?

The Women’s Business Council (2013) stated that two-thirds of older women are working in just three sectors: education, health and retail – occupational segmentation for working women aged over 50 is particularly stark. There remains a mismatch between the sectors where women work and where job growth will be over the next

decade. Some female-dominated industries and occupations are projected to grow – such as retail, caring and personal services – but these tend to be for lower-paid jobs. Limited current research of older women coping with menopause in the workplace has been undertaken largely with professional women, who have some degree of influence on own working practices (see also further in theme 2, workplace experiences). Little has yet been done looking at women who are employed in low-paid, low-skilled jobs and part-time work, who comprise the majority. These are often referred to as the five Cs: cleaning, catering, cashier, clerical and caring. As they are less likely to be affected by technological advances in the future, these jobs are vital for economic prosperity. They still remain low-paid, with little in the way of job security (LoPAQ – low pay, low skills and few qualifications). LoPAQ workers face the same life and health challenges as professional women of the same age, yet we identify that there has been limited attention in terms of later life career support nor training to ensure financial solvency post-retirement for them.

Theme 2: Women and menopause: workplace experiences

‘Given the financial and social changes of future ageing populations and the current workforce ... there will be a “never before encountered” post-menopausal workforce working up to retirement age.’ (Professor Jeffery Grierson, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, presentation at Positive Ageing Research Institute (PARI) meeting, 21 June 2017)

This review focused upon the issues surrounding employed women coping with menopause. Hunter and Rendall (2007) state that on average menopause occurs between the ages of 50 and 51. It typically lasts for four to eight years. We did not address medical issues arising from the menopause nor seek to highlight clinical treatments, but looked for studies of older women’s workplace experiences through transition from peri- to post-menopause and what changes to work practices might support this segment of the working population.

A preceding study that triggered and initially informed this SLR was the work done by Jack et al (2014) at La Trobe University, Australia. Their work identified three factors associated with work and the work environment. They recognised these played a crucial role in older women undergoing menopause transition. They were:

- gendered ageism – unfavourable attitudes on both gender and age
- organisational sub-cultures – behaviours of particular departments
- workplace formality – discussions on experiences with workmates.

The La Trobe University study was undertaken with academic and support staff. Assumptions regarding the number of LoPAQ jobs cannot be made beyond clerical and administrative workers. This further represented the gap in the understanding of LoPAQ female workers.

The Office for National Statistics (2013) reports that 64.4% of older women, aged 50–64, are in employment, with a further 3% registered as unemployed. For women over 65, these figures drop to 7.6% employed and 1.6% registered unemployed. It must be asked as to where the remaining 32.6% of 50–64-years-olds, as well as the 91.8% of women over 65, are. What are they doing currently? When the state pension age rises to 68 in 2028, many of these women will still be in full-time work. We found little on the financial contribution of the classified ‘inactive’ older women, or their earning with regards to third sector volunteering work, childcare and social care activities, and so on. We suggest that women in this age group remain invisible but may be ‘busier than ever’ – but within gainful unpaid employment-like activities. There remained a gap in the current investigations addressing this cohort.

Why do older women leave employment?

The Centre for Ageing Better (2015) identifies that there are six segments of the overall population aged 50 and over:

- thriving boomers
- downbeat boomers
- can-do and connected
- worried and disconnected
- squeezed middle age
- struggling and alone.

Older women (post-50) who inhabit the first three segments are most likely professionals with a good salary and personal/workplace pension. They may have enough transferable skills to negotiate different work patterns with existing employers or change careers completely. There is a dearth of writing regarding the last three categories, where women who ended up in LoPAQ jobs are financially struggling. They may face long-term unemployment and lack training opportunities. Working women in these categories are more likely to leave work if they receive lower pay compared with average wage levels, feel isolated at work, or are the victim of sexism in the workplace (Centre for Ageing Better 2015, 2017). This is exacerbated if they do not think their work is fulfilling. Questions arise as to what other contributing factors affect an older woman’s decision to leave work; issues such as own health, health of partner/family member and caring commitments can contribute to early exits.

In their electronic survey, Griffiths et al (2013) stated 39.6% of the female workers questioned felt their work was not affected by menopause symptoms. They state their research is the first large-scale exploration of women’s experiences of menopause and work in the UK. A high level of results that report no impact on their workplace may reflect upon the sample determined. Griffiths et al (2013) identify that their sampling came from a wide range of industry sectors, including: professional, scientific and

technical, information and communication, education, transportation and storage, wholesale and retail, public administration and defence. Results show that most of these women had considerable control over their working environment and work patterns and this potentially ameliorated coping with the menopause.

Theme 3: Current and future employment practices to support their employment

Griffiths et al (2016) made recommendations to improve workplace conditions for peri- and post- menopausal workers as follows:

- raise awareness
- disclosure of symptoms
- temperature control
- stress reduction
- flexible work arrangements
- access to water and toilets.

These recommendations are echoed by similar advice from unions such as the TUC (2013), USDAW (2016), and BOHRF (2010). Jack et al (2016) continues with further recommendations, which address the issue of older women feeling they are overlooked for training and career advancement opportunities (Marvell and Cox 2016). They highlight the continued need for further training and development policies incorporating management awareness training, health promotion programmes and risk assessment for occupational health issues to assist older women's needs.

It should be noted that there are a number of government initiatives, such as Fuller Working Lives, which gives a framework of initiatives to support older workers. Since its launch in 2014, the UK has undergone a general election. Although this has not resulted in a change of government, it has occasioned a change of priorities. The most urgent identified lie with the work currently under way around Britain leaving the EU. Businesses have made statements and written policy recommendations regarding the best ways to engage, support and work with this part of their workforce further to this. However, there was no apparent evidence of whether these recommendations have been put into practice. Further research would be necessary to determine whether, especially in those industry sectors with a high proportion of older women workers in low-paid, low-skilled jobs, have enacted any of the recommended actions.

The conclusion remains that the empirical evidence is limited. There is some evidence of older women 'hitting', not breaking through, the 'glass ceiling'. The majority of menopausal women were identified as being placed on the 'sticky floor', either through lack of education and training or making work-life compromises to give up full-time employment before the age of 65 (Morgan 2015).

Further research might be useful to extend the understanding of the experience of older UK female workers by looking at future peri-menopausal workers. Given the constant changing gender demographic of work increasing the number of older women in the workplace, it may be likely those currently entering the menopause years, having grown up in a more technical and connected environment than the current post-menopausal female workforce, will be better able to work collaboratively in higher-qualified, higher-paid employment or in roles of greater responsibility.

Conclusions

There are gaps in the current sources surrounding understanding the employment experiences of older female workers in the UK relative to the peri- to post-menopausal periods, particularly for LoPAQ workers whose employment may be technologically resistant. A common concern for older women is a societal invisibility, and perhaps this has limited the level of current research in the UK outside clinical interest in the cohort. LoPAQ work contrasts with current expectations that technology would result in a lowering of demand for these roles and that the issues surrounding older female workers might lie with those who have more career-related positions (Jack et al 2016) While Griffiths et al (2016) highlight the importance of raising awareness for the 'unseen' needs of older female workers relative to the menopause, a shift in attitudes is needed towards a workforce who, at entering the menopause, may still have 20 years of employment given the changed NDA. This workforce may have their careers limited during the periods of mothering but may be ripe for development for work where current skills shortages may exist, for example in scientific, technological, engineering and mathematical (STEM) roles. However, there is limited evidence of current consideration of their experiences, needs and the labour market supply opportunities which may be bestowed by these [human resources] people and it demands to be paid greater importance.

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Appendix 1: List of papers analysed thematically/used for this SLR

<p>Theme 1</p> <p>Contribution of an older workforce</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State pension age review</i> (2017). • NIESR (National Institute of Economic and Social Research) (2017) <i>Older workers in the workplace: evidence from the Workplace Employment Relations Survey</i>. Research Report No 939, on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. • BITC (2015). • DWP (2014). • UKCES (UK Commission for Employment and Skills). (2014) <i>The future of work: jobs and skills in 2030</i>. Evidence Report. ISBN: 978-1-908418-63-0 • McCarthy, J., Heraty, N. and Cross, C. (2014) Who is considered an ‘older worker’? Extending our conceptualisation of ‘older’ from an organisational decision maker perspective. <i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>. Vol 24, No 4. pp374–93. • Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. (2013–14) <i>Women in the workplace</i>. First report of session (2013–14), Vol 1. House of Commons. • Women’s Business Council (2013). • The Commission on Older Women. <i>The Commission on Older Women interim report</i> (September 2013). • TUC. (2013) <i>Older women and the labour market</i>. A report for the TUC women’s conference (March). • BITC (Business in the Community). International Women’s Day factsheet: <i>Women and work: increasing women’s success at work benefits business and society</i>. • Vickerstaff, S. (2010) Older workers: the ‘unavoidable obligation’ of extending our working lives? <i>Sociology Compass</i>. Vol 4, No 10. pp869–79.
<p>Theme 2</p> <p>Workplace experience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constantine et al (2016). • Duberley, J. and Carmichael, F. (2016) Career pathways into retirement in the UK: linking older women’s past into the present. <i>Gender, Work and Organisation</i>. Vol 26, No 6. • Marvell and Cox (2016).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DWP. (2015) <i>Attitudes of the over 50s to fuller working lives</i>. • Centre for Ageing Better (2015). • Jack et al (2014). • Griffiths et al (2013). • Payne and Doyal (2010). • Griffiths et al (2010). • Griffiths, M. and Moore, K. (2010) 'Disappearing women': a study of women who left the UK ICT. <i>Journal of Technology, Management and Innovation</i>. Vol 5, No 1.
<p>Theme 3 Current and future employment practices to support their employment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centre for Ageing Better (2017). • Griffiths et al (2016). • Jack (2016). • Scottish Commission on Older Women. (2015) <i>Older women and work: looking to the future</i>. Glasgow: Scottish Commission on Older Women. • Ball, C. (2015) <i>Local economic strategies for ageing labour markets: The Life Skills project in Neath Port Talbot and Swansea, West Wales, UK</i>. OECD Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Working Papers, 2015/02. Paris: OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jrnwqk7889n-en • Earl, C. and Taylor, P. (2015) Is workplace flexibility good policy? Evaluating the efficacy of age management strategies for older women workers. <i>Work Aging Retire</i>. Vol 1, No 2. pp214–26. • CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development). (2012) <i>Managing a healthy ageing workforce: a guide for employers</i>.