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Managing menopause is a challenge all leaders must rise to

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[STANDFIRST] Menopause is more inevitable than childbirth, writes Katy Marsh-Davies, yet we don't have the systems and policies to manage it that we can and should

[QUOTE] Simply going part-time could be counter-productive

You are hot, sweaty, anxious, lacking in confidence, forgetful and possibly bleeding heavily – but you still have to teach. This is happening to you regularly, and you know that changing your working patterns could carry costs to for career and wellbeing.

So you're a teacher experiencing the menopause. What do you do?

Two recent Sheffield Hallam research projects shed light on the key issues. I explored women's experiences of [teaching flexibly during the pandemic](#), and my colleague, Suzanne Brown looked at [career progression for women teachers who work part-time](#). Our findings highlight menopause as only one of a number of difficult personal challenges women face that lead them to make requests for flexible working.

What makes menopause different is that it isn't often talked about. And it should be: women can encounter a range of challenging [menopausal symptoms](#), precisely at a time in their lives when their care responsibilities for family members might increase.

But simply going part-time could be counter-productive. [Government advice](#) recognises that work 'contributes far more than just a salary' for menopausal women. It can be a source of fulfilment and self-esteem, as well as meeting social needs.

And why should school leaders care? Well, menopausal women are the [fastest growing demographic](#) in the UK workforce. And yet, in a female-dominated profession, the number of teachers over the age of 50 has [decreased over the past 10 years](#). The average age for [menopausal onset](#) in the UK is 51.

Women know that their chances of [becoming a senior leader while working part-time](#) are slim. Those in [our research](#) reported a lack of role models and a lack of clear, transparent policy around promotional opportunities for part-time staff as particularly problematic.

Those who had gone part-time felt their commitment was questioned and that their voices were not sought. Worse, rather than helping to manage their work-life balance, many felt their professional and caring roles were still too demanding of their time. They found themselves caught between the stress and guilt of not doing enough at work and the stress and guilt of not being there for their loved ones. But fear of not coping was the determining factor which deterred them from seeking the full-time work they perceived as necessary to promotion.

And so a negative feedback loop is formed. Few women who work part-time make it into senior positions, their voices and experiences are not involved in developing policies and practices to accommodate them, resulting in women who work part-time continuing to miss out on promotion.

But full- and part-time work are not the only options. Since 2014, all employees with [26 weeks' continuous employment](#) are entitled to seek flexible working arrangements. Sadly, requests for flexible arrangements are more likely to be [rejected for teachers](#) than the wider workforce.

Change is hopefully on the way. The government has appointed eight [flexible working ambassador schools](#) to provide examples of workable practices. Meanwhile, our research allows us to set some early guiding principles.

First, working flexibly means different things at different times to different participants. Women should therefore be able to select options that address the challenges they are facing at a given time. Accommodating flexible working can't be a simple question of developing a fixed arrangement but means recognising arrangements as temporary measures. Like good teaching, it should be about supporting individual needs.

Second, managers need to do more than just promote practical solutions. Developing flexible working practices means challenging assumptions about the commitment and competence of those who require different arrangements and about leadership as an exclusively on-site, full-time endeavour.

Menopause is more inevitable than childbirth, and there's no reason we should be any less accommodating of it. It may be less predictable, but in the end disruptive symptoms don't last forever.

Supporting women at this stage of life will not only improve the quality of their lives. It has the potential to increase gender equality in leadership roles, and to ensure the profession hangs on to a wealth of experience and expertise that it is currently squandering.

What are we waiting for?