

Menstruation & Menopause: Workplace Policy Reform for a Modern Labour Force. A Trade Union Led Initiative

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#StoptheStigma

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Acknowledgements

CWU	Carol Scheffer
Fórsa	Mehak Dugal
FSU	Mandy La Combre
ICTU	David Joyce
INMO	Steve Pitman
INTO	Meave McCafferty
SIPTU	Yvonne O'Callaghan
UNITE	Taryn Trainor
Author	Juliette Cooper, Policy Officer, Fórsa

Foreword

Ireland's largest trade unions have united to urge employers and the government to address issues related to menstruation and menopause in the workplace. This coalition aims to implement reforms that will enhance protection and supports for those experiencing menstruation and menopause in the workplace to align with the evolving workforce. The Stop the Stigma campaign, led by Irish trade unions, strives to adapt workplace protections and policies to modern needs and to eradicate workplace challenges like hardship, stress, and stigma associated with menstruation and menopause.

Made up of Fórsa Trade Union, the Financial Services Union (FSU), the Communication Workers' Union (CWU), the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO), the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the Services, Industrial, Professional, and Technical Union (SIPTU), UNITE the union, and backed by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) we are calling for long-overdue measures to support workers and to stop the stigma surrounding menstruation and the menopause.

We believe this is an essential response to the demands of workers, and an important step towards equality and dignity in the workplace. We further believe that this will represent a low-cost opportunity for employers as they compete to recruit and retain talent in a challenging labour market.

Our pursuit of equality in the workplace would see the introduction of menstrual health policies addressed in practical ways following negotiations with unions. A fit-for-purpose menstrual and menopausal workplace health strategy would see issues experienced by workers addressed in practical ways informed by workplace consultation. This would have a significant impact on the usage of sick leave in Ireland's workplaces, benefiting hundreds of thousands of workers. It is time to change the workplace for the better.

Trade unions have been at the forefront of negotiating for comprehensive workplace policies that address these challenges. Our research and efforts underline the urgency of implementing practical menstruation and menopause workplace policies, focusing on accommodations, training, privacy, and equality.

By championing these policies within existing legislative frameworks such as the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act and Employment Equality Acts, Ireland can lead by example, promoting diversity, inclusion, and equality on a global stage. By explicitly supporting and protecting menopause and menstruation-related workplace policies, Ireland can pave the way for workplaces that prioritise the well-being and rights of all employees, fostering a culture where all people are empowered to thrive.

CWU, Fórsa, FSU, INMO, INTO, SIPTU, UNITE, ICTU

Executive summary

The Stop the Stigma campaign, a coalition of Irish trade unions comprised of the CWU, Fórsa, FSU, INMO, INTO, SIPTU, UNITE, and supported by ICTU, aims to reduce workplace stress and inequality for workers managing menstruation and the menopause in the workplace. Menstruation and menopause are natural biological processes which occur in people who have a uterus, predominantly women. Menstruation involves vaginal bleeding every 28-40 days as the uterine lining sheds, typically occurring between ages 12-45. More complex conditions associated with menstruation often have more severe symptoms, like Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), which affects 1 in 5 women of reproductive age, and endometriosis, which is found in 10% of reproductive age women and girls globally according to the World Health Organization^{1,2}. Menopause, which is the cessation of periods due to lower hormones from aging, usually occurs between ages 45-55. Those who experience menopause can experience an array of symptoms – such as pain, hot flushes, fatigue, and brain fog – for up to 10 years after their last period.

A changing labour force, with women between the ages of 15 and 64 participating more than ever before in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, calls for updated protections and policy in the workplace. The trade unions in this coalition have played a pivotal role in bargaining for advancements in workplace policies regarding menstruation and menopause. The INMO created a comprehensive position statement on menopause, highlighting its impact on healthcare workers. Fórsa conducted a survey which exposed the lack of menstrual health policies at work and collaborated with other unions to launch the Stop the Stigma campaign. The CWU has driven menopause initiatives, addressing gender-specific occupational health. FSU has championed gender equality, negotiating free period products and paid menopause leave in all major banks of Ireland, north and south. The INTO negotiated for menopause awareness in schools, while UNITE has developed guidance for training and educating employers and employees on menopause to reduce stigma and negotiate support. UNITE has also urged amendments to the ROI's Employment Equality Acts (1998-2015), proposing that all employees have the right to choose an equality representative, similar to safety representatives in the 2005 Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work Act.

Our collective bargaining efforts and research with our members as trade unions has also revealed a dire need for implementation and protection of workplace menstruation and menopause policies. Several points are made clear from trade union research on this issue:

1. The menopause and menstruation have a negative impact on the working lives of people who menstruate,
2. These health concerns are treated as jokes in several workplaces,
3. Several workplaces are ill-equipped to deal with these health concerns,
4. A majority of respondents are in favour of implementing a workplace policy that offers a range of supports to help people stay in employment comfortably.

1 World Health Organisation (2023) *Endometriosis*, available at; <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/endometriosis>

2 Health Service Executive (2021) *Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)*, available at; <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/polycystic-ovary-syndrome/>

Our campaign has created a comprehensive list of best practice solutions for a proper menstrual and menopause workplace policy:

- 1. Flexible work arrangements:** We advocate for flexible scheduling options, including remote work and adjusted hours, to accommodate physical discomfort and fatigue due to periods and menopause.
- 2. Enhanced managerial training:** Employers should provide training for line managers to facilitate open discussions about menstruation and menopause, offering guidance on supporting and accommodating affected employees.
- 3. Free menstrual and menopause products:** Employers should ensure free access to essential period products in toilets and provide tailored options upon request.
- 4. Physical accommodations:** We call for reasonable physical accommodations, like ergonomic workstations and temperature controls to alleviate pain and discomfort.
- 5. Access to risk assessments:** Employers must conduct risk assessments with consideration for menstruating and menopausal employees, including aspects like temperature and welfare facilities.
- 6. Promoting a supportive culture:** A culture supporting open discussions and understanding of these processes is vital.
- 7. Confidentiality and privacy:** Information about menstrual cycles and menopause-related symptoms should be treated confidentially.
- 8. Paid time off:** Feasible paid time off should be provided for symptoms without detriment.

Furthermore, we are committed to ensuring that existing employment laws safeguard these policies. These efforts aim to eliminate stress, presenteeism, and lost opportunities for promotion, enhancing equality and workplace safety.

In our commitment to maintaining a healthy and inclusive work environment, we emphasise that existing employment legislation, like the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act of 2005, places a duty on employers to care for employees' health, including those facing menopause and menstruation challenges. The health needs of our workers menstruating or going through the menopause are critical for their well-being. Neglecting these needs perpetuates gender-based discrimination and hinders equality under the Employment Equality Acts of 1998-2015. Unions are bargaining for these workplace supports to ensure that all workers can remain in the workforce without hardship. **By implementing menopause and menstruation workplace policies, Ireland can lead globally in supporting employees' rights and well-being, demonstrating inclusivity, equality, and an understanding of our modern labour force.**

Introduction

Menstruation, menopause, and the changing demographics of workers

As our workforce evolves, so must our workplace protections and policies. The Stop the Stigma trade union coalition developed out of a need to highlight our collective research and bargaining efforts over the last decade, which have focused on negotiating practical and protected menstruation and menopause workplace policies. Survey data has shown that our members recognise that the workplace was not designed with our modern labour force demographics in mind, and to keep people who menstruate and experience menopause, predominantly women, in employment as they desire, the Irish government must ensure that existing occupational safety and equality legislation mandates these supports with employers and the relevant state bodies.

Menstruation is a normal part of the menstrual cycle that results in bleeding out of the vagina every 28-40 days as the body sheds its uterine lining. Menopause is when a person stops having a period due to lower hormone levels as a natural part of ageing. While this can occur any time between the ages of 45-55, the average age of menopause in Ireland is 51. However, early menopause (menopause which begins before the age of 45) is commonly found in those that have a genetic predisposition, have gone through cancer treatment, or undergo surgery for a hysterectomy which includes the removal of the ovaries³. Symptoms of menopause often last for several years, even after the final menstruation. These symptoms can include hot flushes and sweats, tiredness and sleep disturbance, joint and muscle ache, heart palpitations, mood swings, anxiety and depression, forgetfulness or lack of concentration, vaginal dryness, vulvar irritation and discomfort, discomfort during sex, loss of libido, increased urinary frequency or urgency, hair thinning and skin problems.

The menopause can worsen existing disabilities and health issues, or even instigate new ones in disabled women and those with pre-existing conditions. Additionally, migrant women may encounter obstacles accessing adequate medical support due to precarious employment and workplace prejudice. There can also be variations in menopause onset among women of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

In addition to the increased labour force participation and extended working life of women, our understanding of identity has evolved. We now know that not all people who menstruate are female. Thus, while we often use the term woman/women for the simplicity of communication, our campaign and policies advocate for all people who menstruate and experience menopause in Ireland.

The age profile of women in the workforce in Ireland is diverse and evolving. In the past 20 years the number of women working in Ireland has grown dramatically. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 2001, only 29.5% of women participating in the labour force were between the ages of 55-64. In 2021, this was 59.5%⁴. Women between the ages of 15-64 had increased their participation in the labour force by over 10% in the same period, from 59.2% in 2001 to 69.8% in 2021. **These demographic shifts have reshaped the traditional landscape of employment, and it is our responsibility as trade unions to ensure appropriate policy changes.**

3 Health Service Executive (2021) *Early Menopause*, available at: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/early-menopause/#:~:text=Menopause%20usually%20starts%20between%20the%20age%20of%2045,and%20your%20p,eriods%20are%20infrequent%20or%20have%20stopped>.

4 International Labour Organisation (2021) *Data Explorer*, available at: https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer28/?lang=en&segment=indicator&id=EAP_2WAP_SEX_AGE_RT_A

Developments in the Irish Government

The Irish government has made progress in expanding reproductive health and women's health services, most notably with the launch of the Women's Health Action Plan 2022-2023, which derived from the findings from the Women's Health Taskforce established in 2019. €31 million of additional ring-fenced funding was made available for service provision, which resulted in scaling up the number of menopause clinics to four nationally, and the creation of two national endometriosis clinics⁵. Additionally, the Department of Health (DoH) launched the menopause website hub to better deliver accurate information about menopause, its impacts, and treatment options.

In June 2021, Health Minister Stephen Donnelly told the Dáil that work was underway to develop a menopause workplace policy⁶. The Minister indicated that such a policy would look to include measures that allow work adjustments for people going through menopause, such as flexible working, guidance around sickness leave, and time off for necessary appointments. He said a range of actions on menopause were also being developed by his department, including the provision of specialist supports, as well as a national awareness campaign around menopause.

Equality Minister Roderic O'Gorman's recent commitment to conduct further comprehensive research into people's experiences with managing the menopause and menstruation in workplaces is welcomed by this coalition⁷. However, this announcement should not further delay the implementation and protection of people's right to practical menstruation and menopause workplace policies.

The announcements made by members of government thus far, although positive, are slow moving and lack the explicit vindication of people's entitlements to welfare support services when they participate in the labour force. Trade unions continue to be stalled with requests for more evidence of the need and benefits of a menstruation and menopause workplace policy when negotiating for employment protection legislation regarding this issue. Many of the trade unions of this coalition have assessed their own members via survey on menstruation and menopause, and continue to draw the same conclusions, which is that people need a practical policy in place that is both protected and supported by government. Our position paper outlines some of the research conducted by trade unions on this issue, as well as our own draft policies which we continue to collectively bargain for on behalf of our members.



⁵ Department of Health (2022) *Women's Health Action Plan 2022-2023*, available at; <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/232af-womens-health-action-plan-2022-2023/>

⁶ Finn, C., (2021) "Menopause workplace policy for businesses to be developed, says Minister Donnelly", *The Journal*, 2 June, available at; <https://www.thejournal.ie/menopause-owrkplace-policy-5455810-Jun2021/>

⁷ McNally, T., and Ni Aodha, G., (2023) "Menopause and Menstruation plan to help employers improve workplace policies", *Irish Examiner*, 7 August, available at; <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41199277.html>

Research and negotiation: Unions at the forefront of workplace policy

As trade unions our members are our most valuable evidence base for ascertaining workplace needs, policy supports, and campaign actions. Several of the unions involved in this campaign have conducted surveys on what the experience of menstruation and menopause in the workplace is like, and what supports members would find helpful. The following highlights union research, policy, and negotiation successes already in effect in several employments:

Communication Workers' Union (CWU)

The CWU represents members in the postal, logistics, telecoms, tech, and call centre sectors. Many CWU members are in customer-facing situations, and it can be difficult to discuss and arrange options for taking breaks to address menstrual or menopausal symptoms. The CWU has successfully bargained for workplace equality on many gender related issues, securing polices on domestic violence, menopause, enhanced maternity arrangements including breastfeeding breaks, fertility policies, pregnancy loss policies and other gender related initiatives.

Furthermore, the CWU established a diversity and equality committee made up of representatives across the communication sectors to further support members on equality related workplace issues. They provide a one day equality representative training and include a module for all representatives. This integrates equality and diversity into the union agenda, enhancing representative awareness of relevant issues.

In May 2023 the CWU, in association with An Post, launched various initiatives to promote menopause awareness in the workplace. This included a menopause policy, a toolkit, and 'in person' sessions at various locations organised in association with the Menopause Hub which were well received by members. Securing gender-related occupational health supports is a driving focus of the CWU. After successfully hosting lunch and learn sessions for breast cancer awareness with An Post and eir, the union commenced an 'End Period Poverty' campaign. They successfully raised the issue of menstrual health in the workplace with An Post, who have agreed to provide Wellness Packs in their various distribution centres.

Irish Congress of Trade Unions Northern Ireland Committee (NIC-ICTU)

In 2018, NIC-ICTU conducted an online survey in Northern Ireland to investigate how menopause affects people in the workplace, especially as women now constitute half of the workforce in Northern Ireland⁸. The survey ran for four weeks and garnered the most responses to an ICTU survey at that time, totalling 2,471 responses. The survey results depicted a stark picture of the state of employer supports. Some of the most significant findings are outlined in the following table.

⁸ Irish Congress of Trade Unions Northern Ireland Committee (2018) *ICTU menopause survey results*, available at: <https://www.ictuni.org/publications/ictu-menopause-survey-results>

- 59% of respondents said they are currently experiencing the menopause,
- 99% of respondents said they did not have or did not know if they had a workplace menopause policy,
- 49% of respondents said that the menopause was treated like a joke in their workplace,
- 97% of respondents said they would welcome a workplace policy on the menopause.

These results have driven ICTU's continued support of union efforts to negotiate with employers for a range of welfare policies that eliminate stress in the workplace while keeping people in employment. ICTU has joined the Stop the Stigma coalition to enhance its support for protected union backed policies that reflect the modern Irish workplace.

Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO)

In 2019, the INMO developed a comprehensive position statement on the menopause for women in the workplace, which demonstrated the breadth of impact on women in the Irish health service. Women of all working ages are heavily represented in Nursing and Midwifery, with 90% of registrants identifying as female in 2019. Additionally, according to Irish health service personnel data in 2013, around 80% of employees were women⁹.

The position statement highlights two UK based studies on menopause at work. In 2010, a study conducted out of the University of Nottingham by Professor Amanda Griffiths found that nearly half of respondents found it somewhat or fairly difficult to cope with menopause symptoms during work. Additionally, a 2011 study published by the British Occupational Health Research Foundation found that many women did not feel comfortable disclosing their symptoms to their line managers. When women in the study had to take time off to manage symptoms, only half disclosed the real reason, and many women felt that the workplace and working practices are not designed for menopausal women.

Employers have a responsibility to mitigate these difficulties as an Equality issue and an occupational health issue and should be obligated to do so under the Employment Equality Acts of 1998-2015. The INMO continues to negotiate for better working conditions for their members, such as better training for line managers, implementing a form of temperature controls, allowing access to risk assessments, and more. They also encourage trade unions to be leaders of this movement by working with employers to implement support for and commitment to their members experiencing the menopause.

Fórsa Trade Union

Fórsa represents 80,000 workers, of which a majority are female. In May 2022, Fórsa surveyed its membership about their experience of menstruation and menopause in the workplace¹⁰. The results were shocking, with the survey revealing that just 1% of employee respondents benefitted from a menstrual health policy within their workplaces.

One in four respondents were medically diagnosed with conditions like premenstrual dysphoric disorder, endometriosis, or polycystic ovary syndrome, resulting in symptoms such as heavy bleeding, migraines, and nausea. Over 70% had taken time off work due to their periods, with only 40% feeling comfortable disclosing the genuine cause of their absence to their line manager. The survey

9 Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (2019) *Menopause @Work: Position Statement and Guide*, available at; <https://www.inmo.ie/tempDocs/INMO%20Menopause%20Position%20Statement%202019.pdf>

10 Dugal, M., (2022) "Workplace menstrual health policies benefit employers too", *Fórsa*, 28 June, available at; <https://www.forsa.ie/workplace-menstrual-health-policies-benefit-employers-too/>

highlights societal stigma which hinders women from discussing period and menopause-related health issues with their superiors. While 70% felt at ease discussing these matters with colleagues, 65% refrained from sharing their struggles with their supervisors.

Women facing menopausal symptoms noted that access to flexible work options and temperature control at their workplaces would be beneficial. The research also highlighted that remote working during the pandemic improved the menstruation experience for over 70% of those who participated.

Ultimately, over 96% of the 1,800 survey respondents expressed support for implementing a menstrual-friendly policy in their workplaces. In December 2022, Fórsa had the opportunity to meet with Minister O’Gorman on the issue, and his office has since announced they will be commissioning research to inform policies and guidance for employers and employees across the country.

Services, Industrial, Professional, and Technical Union (SIPTU)

As Ireland’s largest union representing over 180,000 workers from virtually every category of employment across almost every sector of the Irish economy SIPTU is actively committed to organising and campaigning to achieve our vision of equality between women and men at work and in society. Significant progress has been made towards achieving equality in recent decades. However, despite progress and the enactment of equal pay legislation and various equality laws, inequalities still persist. In 2020, SIPTU launched a Working Women’s Charter to achieve women’s equality at work including taking action to ensure the introduction of a range of women’s health and welfare measures in the workplace including paid domestic violence leave, menstrual and menopause leave, free sanitary products and reform of breastfeeding legislation.

This charter has been a framework for continuing workplace equality bargaining across the union and action by our National Equality Committee. SIPTU has successfully negotiated a number of policies related to menstrual health issues. Notably, in 2023, SIPTU concluded a landmark collective agreement in the manufacturing sector with Heineken which includes a commitment to provide amongst other measures sanitary products in all female bathrooms and paid time off for menopause-related health appointments.

Financial Services Union (FSU)

FSU represents employees in the Financial Services, Fintech, and Tech sectors, with membership across over a hundred companies. The union operates in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain, and its membership is 68% female. FSU puts gender equality at the fore of its agenda and maintains a Women’s Network of more than 100 activists and has consistently emphasised gender equality in its agenda. Notable achievements include collaborative work with employers on policies concerning domestic violence, extended fully-paid maternity leave, early pregnancy loss leave, fertility leave, and menopause leave.

FSU’s 2021 survey concerning menopause and the workplace garnered insights from 1,335 respondents as well as 6,109 member comments¹¹. The results highlighted the need for policies addressing menopause-related issues, as 97.5% of respondents didn’t have any such policies despite 89.4% saying menopause impacts their working lives. The gender of managers influences discussions about menopause for 74.9% of respondents. Moreover, 96% favour training for management and union representatives to support women navigating menopause, and 38% feel that menopause is treated humorously in the workplace. Only 17% perceive a non-negative treatment of menopause at work, while just 15% are comfortable discussing it there. A considerable 84% are currently experiencing or anticipating menopause.

FSU’s document *You Don’t Just Go through Menopause at Home*, released on World Menopause Day 2022, encompasses subjects like the significance of menopause as a trade union issue and its effects on the workplace. Using the survey’s findings, FSU developed recommended employer actions, guidance for trade union representatives, and a draft menopause workplace policy. FSU had negotiated workplace menopause policies with all the major banks on the island of Ireland, FSU also provide advice for members and representatives. In addition, they run webinars and workshops in collaboration with other unions and organisations like ICTU. Menstrual health issues also feature prominently in FSU’s Equality Strategy for 2023.

¹¹ Financial Services Union (2022) *FSU World Menopause Day*, available at; <https://www.fsunion.org/wmd2022>

Building on the industrial success of their menopause campaign, the FSU's 2023 Menstrual Health Workplace Survey garnered insights from 1,064 respondents and 2,123 comments¹². The findings indicate that 91% believe menstrual health impacts their working lives, and 96% would welcome a menstrual health support policy in the workplace. About half are uncomfortable discussing menstrual health issues at work, with 69% attributing this discomfort to the gender of their managers. Notably, 1 in 5 respondents indicated that periods are subject to workplace jokes.

FSU has successfully negotiated many of the recommended accommodations to mitigate the impact of menopause and menstruation in the workplace and keep people in work, like flexible working arrangements, free period products, and paid menopause leave, with all major banks on the island.

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)

INTO is Ireland's largest and oldest teacher trade union, representing over 50,000 members across the island of Ireland. The teaching profession in Ireland is predominantly female with women representing 79% of INTO membership. INTO Congress 2023 adopted a resolution to raise awareness of the challenges of menopause in schools, and to provide supports, information and resources to teachers who are experiencing the menopause. In 2022, the union's Equality Committee carried out research with INTO members. This research found that 64% of respondents believed that there was a stigma attached to the topic, with 79% of respondents agreeing that they would be in favour of a workplace policy on menopause. The INTO's most recent equality conference focused on Reproductive Health: Exploring Fertility and Menopause, offered members the opportunity to engage with keynote presentations, discussion groups, workshops and an expert panel. The importance of women's health and menopause policy is also clearly evidenced by the interest in an INTO Health Webinar Series on Menopause, HRT and Women's Future Health and on Reproductive Health, Infertility and Pregnancy Loss. The INTO believes that to be serious about inclusion, reproductive health must be discussed openly and steps must be taken to ensure that supports are in place for teachers and their partners as they face different stages in their reproductive health journeys. Doing so will ultimately better reflect the needs of a modern workforce and keep more teachers in employment that want to be, which is crucial during the current shortages in schools.

UNITE the union

Unite has directed its focus toward addressing issues surrounding menopause within the workplace to secure better workplace policy members. The union initially developed a draft policy and guidance for negotiators in 2012, called *Women's Health, Safety and Well-being at Work*, which emphasised securing employer policies that would protect women effected by domestic violence, health and safety for pregnant workers, the menopause, and more¹³. Unite has since expanded this guide to more broadly include supports for menopause as their membership voices more concern with managing symptoms at work.

The absence of effective menopause workplace policies can contribute to the gender pay gap, as women may either leave their jobs or reduce their working hours. Menopausal women represent the fastest-growing demographic in the workforce. Unite has revised and reinforced its model policy and guides in response to ensure that more women are supported by their policies to stay in employment when negotiating with employers. The topic of menopause has been incorporated into Unite's educational courses, with representatives actively encouraged to negotiate for these policies within their respective workplaces.

The campaign's key objectives encompass workplace support through the Stop the Stigma campaign, which is committed to raising awareness about menstrual and menopausal health in the workplace, providing a union backed policy framework for members to bring to their employers, and ensuring that the Irish government leads the charge in supporting those who menstruate or experience menopause in both the public and private sectors.

12 Financial Services Union (2023) *Menstrual Health: Welfare at Work*, available at: <https://www.fsunion.org/latest/news/menstrual-health-survey-results-show-the-need-for-employers/>

13 UNITE the Union (2012) *Women's Health, Safety and Well-Being at Work*, available at: <https://www.unitetheunion.org/media/1480/womens-health-safety-well-being-at-work-unite-guide.pdf>

Workplace policy recommendations

Each trade union's research and collective bargaining on this issue has generated similar recommendations for improving working life for people who menstruate and experience the menopause. The Stop the Stigma campaign has adopted these recommendations with the aim of negotiating for them with employers and governments to ensure that the health and safety concerns of people who menstruate and experience menopause are properly met so that they remain supported to stay in employment.

Outlined below are the workplace supports we have, and are currently fighting, to implement for our members across the unions:

- 1. Flexible work arrangements:** The employer should offer flexible scheduling options where reasonable to employees facing period or menopause-related symptoms. This includes the flexibility to work remotely or adjust work hours as needed to accommodate physical discomfort, fatigue, or other symptoms.
- 2. Enhanced training for line managers and supervisors:** To enhance understanding, employers should provide training for line managers and supervisors. This training would aim to break down the barriers that often hinder open discussions about these topics, while offering guidance on how supervisors can effectively support and accommodate affected employees.
- 3. Provision of free menstrual and menopause products:** The employer should ensure that menstrual and menopause-related products, such as period products and pain relievers, are readily available in all toilets and provided at no cost to employees. Additionally, employees should have the option to request specific products tailored to their needs.
- 4. Physical accommodations:** Reasonable accommodations should be made to assist employees facing physical discomfort or symptoms related to periods and menopause. This may involve offering ergonomic workstations, adjustable chairs, or other equipment designed to alleviate pain or discomfort.
- 5. Access to risk assessments:** Risk assessments should be conducted with the needs of menstruating and menopausal employees in mind. These assessments should ensure that the working environment doesn't exacerbate their symptoms. Aspects such as temperature, ventilation, welfare facilities, and access to necessities like cold drinking water will be taken into consideration.

6. **Promoting a supportive culture:** The employer should cultivate a culture that actively supports employees experiencing periods and menopause. This includes educating all employees about the biological processes involved, and fostering an environment where individuals feel comfortable discussing their needs and seeking assistance from colleagues and supervisors.
7. **Confidentiality and privacy:** Recognising the personal nature of periods and menopause, the employer should be committed to upholding employees' privacy and confidentiality. Any information regarding an employee's menstrual cycle or menopause-related symptoms should be treated as confidential and must not be shared without the employee's explicit consent.
8. **Paid time off:** The employer should offer paid time off, whenever feasible, to employees in need due to period or menopause-related symptoms. Such absences should not be deducted from an employee's sick or vacation leave entitlement, and should be considered reasonable accommodations as outlined by the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

These supports are only as effective as a person's ability to avail of them without the threat of victimisation or detriment in the workplace. The absence of these policies maintains the presence of stress and hardship on nearly half of the Irish workforce, contributes to continuing issues of presenteeism, and lost opportunities for promotion for those who must take additional sick leave for severe symptoms. Explicitly mandating protections for these policies in all employments through the occupational health and equality legislations would ensure promises of workplace safety and equality are fully delivered.

Legislative framework: Pathway for reform

The Stop the Stigma coalition is fighting to ensure that existing employment legislation vindicates the use and protection of menstruation and menopause workplace policies in Irish law. Occupation health and equality legislation imposes a duty of care on employers to maintain the health and safety of their employees, which must include those suffering needlessly from debilitating symptoms of menopause and menstruation in the workplace. These are natural biological processes that impact a significant portion of the workforce, predominantly women. Acknowledging and addressing these issues is imperative for maintaining a healthy and inclusive work environment that reflects the modern labour market and supports people to remain in employment.

The Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act of 2005 is designed to protect the physical and mental well-being of employees, and menstrual and menopausal health directly contributes to that wellbeing. Menopause, for instance, can result in various physical and psychological symptoms that affect an individual's performance, productivity, and overall quality of work life. For people who already suffer from an underlying physical or mental health condition or are disabled, menopause may exacerbate their health conditions and force them out of the workforce early when not properly

treated. Additionally in 2019 a Dutch study conducted with 33,000 women between the ages of 15-45 found that women often lost up to nine days of productivity a year due to severe symptoms from menstruation¹⁴.

Moreover, excluding or neglecting to address the specific needs of individuals experiencing menopause and menstruation perpetuates gender-based discrimination and creates an inequitable work environment. The Employment Equality Acts of 1998-2015 mandate employer responsibility to implement protective policies for all employees. Failing to implement a menopause and menstruation workplace policy will continue to hinder equality in the workplace by potentially affecting career trajectories, work performance, and mental health.

Northern Ireland

Health and Safety at Work Order (Northern Ireland) 1978

Occupational health legislation in Northern Ireland is primarily governed by the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, which is the foundational legal framework for ensuring the health, safety, and welfare of employees in the workplace. This legislation ensures that employers are legally obliged to create safe working environments, provide necessary training and resources, and collaborate with employees and safety representatives to ensure compliance with health and safety standards.

The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) is the regulatory authority responsible for enforcing occupational health and safety regulations. It works closely with employers, employees, and other stakeholders to ensure compliance with the law and to promote a safe working environment.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Order, employers in Northern Ireland have a legal duty of care to maintain health and safety for their employees. Creating practical menstruation and menopause policies which provide proper facilities, sanitary products, temperature controls, options for flexible working, and access to risk assessment must be part of their duty of care to properly reflect the demographics of the workforce and safeguard women and people who menstruate and or experience the menopause from exiting the workforce. The HSENI has a responsibility to take union workplace policies for this under consideration for mandate in Northern Ireland workplaces.

¹⁴ Bunici, D., (2019) "Painful periods cost women NINE DAYS of productivity each year", *Evoke*, 29 June, available at; <https://evoke.ie/2019/06/29/wellness/painful-periods-cost-women-nine-days-of-productivity-per-year>



By mandating that menopause and menstruation workplace policies be recognised within the framework of health, safety, and equality legislation, the Irish Government could send the signal that employers must prioritise health, safety, inclusion, and equality, and must foster a workplace culture where individuals of all genders are valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. The supports put in place by the Women's Health Action Plan to assist those suffering needlessly from symptoms of menopause or endometriosis are only as effective as those workers' ability to use them without fear of detriment or victimisation. Current non-action from the government is directly in conflict with supporting people to access these supports. Ireland would not only demonstrate its commitment to upholding the well-being and rights of all employees, but also set a progressive example for workplaces globally, by explicitly supporting and protecting menopause and menstruation related workplace policies.

Conclusion

The evolving landscape of the workforce necessitates a corresponding evolution in workplace protections and policies. The Stop the Stigma campaign, a collaboration of Irish trade unions, is dedicated to improving menstruation and menopause workplace supports, aiming to eliminate hardships, stress, and embarrassment from the workplace. As a coalition, we recognise that menstruation and menopause are natural biological processes that significantly affect a substantial portion of the workforce, predominantly women. Acknowledging and addressing these issues in our collective bargaining practices and conversations with government is paramount for fostering a healthy, inclusive work environment that aligns with contemporary labour dynamics.

Trade unions have been at the forefront of negotiating for comprehensive workplace policies that address these challenges. Our research and employment policy wins underscores the urgency of implementing practical menstruation and menopause workplace policies, focusing on accommodations, training, privacy, and equality.

By mandating menstruation and menopause workplace policy for employers and relevant state bodies within the existing legislative frameworks such as the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act and Employment Equality Acts, Ireland can lead by example, promoting health, safety, inclusion, and equality on the global stage. By explicitly supporting and protecting menopause and menstruation-related workplace policies, Ireland can pave the way for workplaces that prioritise the well-being and rights of all employees, fostering a culture where all people are empowered to thrive.



Annex:

Learning from international best practice

EMAS Global Solidarity Statement 2021

The European Menopause and Andropause Society (EMAS) has issued a position statement on addressing menopause-related issues in the workplace, recognizing that menopause can significantly impact a woman's working life¹⁵. With 657 million women globally aged 45-59, approximately half of whom are part of the workforce during their menopausal years, this statement addresses the need for supportive workplace environments.

Key recommendations include:

- Prioritising menopause-related health and wellbeing in the workplace.
- Establishing a clear business case for supporting women with menopausal symptoms to ensure retention and wellbeing.
- Zero-tolerance policies against bullying, harassment, or discrimination related to menopausal symptoms.
- Assessing and managing workplace conditions that can exacerbate menopausal symptoms.
- Providing training for managers and supervisors on how to have sensitive conversations and offer support.
- Incorporating menopause awareness into workplace training and development programs.
- Ensuring access to healthcare services and confidential advice for menopausal women in the workplace.

The recommendations emphasise the importance of creating inclusive and supportive workplace cultures to address the diverse experiences of menopause, ultimately promoting gender and age equality, reproductive and post-reproductive health, and women's wellbeing in the workforce.

¹⁵ Rees, M., et al (2021) "Global consensus recommendations on menopause in the workplace: A European Menopause and Andropause Society (EMAS) position statement" *Maturitas*, available at; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.maturitas.2021.06.006>

Spain: Menstrual leave

In February 2023, Spain became the first European country to pass a **law entitling people who menstruate to 3-5 days of paid leave from the workplace**¹⁶. The policy was part of a larger set of reproductive health changes which include the distribution of free period products in certain government buildings like educational institutions and prisons. The Spanish Minister for Equality, Irene Montero introduced the new policy positively, stating “the days of (women) coming to work in pain are over”.

Japan: Menstrual and menopausal leave

A Japanese postal union has recently secured several progressive wins for its members, including one day of menstrual leave per menstrual cycle and the right to paid leave for menopause symptoms¹⁷.

United Kingdom

Coexist, a Bristol community interest firm, also introduced a "period policy" to give women more flexibility and a healthier work environment¹⁸. Hoping to break down the menstruation taboo, Coexist became the first company in the United Kingdom to implement this policy. As a result, managers at Coexist reported increased commitment and productivity.

Channel 4: Channel 4 launched a policy in 2019 which supported employees experiencing menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes, anxiety and fatigue, giving women access to flexible working arrangements and paid leave if they feel unwell because of the side-effects¹⁹. This was the first known strategy among UK media companies, and offered staff a private, cool and quiet workspace, a workplace assessment to ensure their environment is not worsening their symptoms, and a range of support and guidance resources. As part of this policy, Channel 4 introduced menopause awareness briefings to its leadership teams, and its HR team now has a dedicated menopause champion. The channel's in-house gender equality staff network, 4Women, was responsible for the policy's conception and rollout.

Vodafone

Vodafone made a global commitment in March 2021 to ensure its employees are supported during the menopause. The commitment applied across all Vodafone markets and forms part of the company's broader strategy of supporting all employees through every life stage to create a culture of inclusion. Vodafone estimates that menopause currently affects around 15% of Vodafone's 100,000 employees. To ensure that all Vodafone employees feel comfortable seeking support, their commitment introduced a balance of support and assistance, training and awareness²⁰.

16 Bello, C., and Llach, L., (2023) "Painful periods? Spain Just passed Europe's first paid 'menstrual leave' law" *Euronews*, 2 February, available at; <https://www.euronews.com/next/2023/02/16/spain-set-to-become-the-first-european-country-to-introduce-a-3-day-menstrual-leave-for-wo>

17 Uni Global Union (2023) *Congratulations to Japanese Postal Union #JPGU on its wins for women*. Available at: <https://twitter.com/uniglobalunion/status/1695441031888617570?s=43&t=YjnCRdjkNtfXuTeaJZ8iA>.

18 Morris, S., (2016) "UK company to introduce 'period policy' for female staff" *The Journal*, 2 March, available at; <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/mar/02/uk-company-introduce-period-policy-female-staff>

19 Channel 4 (2019) *Menopause Policy*, available at; <https://www.channel4.com/corporate/about-4/menopause-policy>

20 Dev, B. (2021) Vodafone announces New Global Employee Commitment on Menopause, #ChangeTheFace. Available at: <https://www.change-the-face.com/vodafone-announces-new-global-employee-commitment-on-menopause/>

Northern Ireland

Unions recently welcomed the establishment of a working group to work on a menstrual policy for civil servants in Northern Ireland. The decision follows news that civil servants in Northern Ireland will be provided with greater support under a new agreed policy, which was developed to recognise the needs of a civil service workforce that is comprised of a 50% female staff, 55% of which are over the age of 45²¹.

The new policy aims to allow civil servants to ask for “reasonable adjustments” to help them cope with effects of their periods, and to eliminate the stigma around periods in the workplace²². The creation of a group to develop a similar policy in the Republic has been hailed as a welcome development.



21 Northern Ireland Executive (2022) *Civil Service launches menopause Policy to support staff*, available at; <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/civil-service-launches-menopause-policy-support-staff>

22 Dugal, M., (2022) “Civil Service to develop menstrual health policy” *Fórsa*, available at; <https://forsatradeunion.newsweaver.com/designtest/yxhdti8t3x7>

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