

Women's Reproductive Health Needs and Work – Lived Experiences, Tensions, and Most Importantly, Solutions

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1. Introduction

- Context – uncertain whether women can use personal leave for IVF

'We are getting questions from clients about this. Technically it is not a legitimate use of personal leave (you are not ill or injured) so it makes for some tricky conversations in the workplace'

– email from anonymous

- Problem (x 3) – problem itself, minimal guidance / research, and how do I meaningfully contribute to this area?
- Methodology



1. Overview of the BMC article



1. Findings - problem / solutions



2. Tensions



3. Comments – Prof Beth Gaze



4. Questions

2. Findings (pain)

'I put up with pain for a long time, undiagnosed, went to work all the time and felt like ... like I wanted to saw my body off from the top of my torso down I'd be in that much pain. I thought that's what women went through'

'I was just in pain throughout the month rather than just those two or three days. I was just struggling to manage everyday activities ...'



2. Findings (difficulty managing symptoms)

‘Sitting at a desk and I have cramps or sometimes my knees really hurt as well. So, trying to sit there and focus on what I’m doing ...’

‘... it’s difficult having endometriosis because I’m on my feet ... I average about fifteen thousand steps a shift, so I’m on my feet running around constantly, so it’s not something I could even attempt to do when I have ... my flares’



2. Findings (pressure to perform)

'... I'd sit there with my phone trying to message my boss and be writing. What do I say? What do I tell him? Then I'd be like – get out of bed and go to work. Because it's private and it's uncomfortable. That was challenging and I used to go to work feeling like crap. Constantly it's so embarrassing, to be looking over your shoulder to make sure you haven't bled through. It's really heavy, really awkward, but that's just what happens'

'I have had thoughts of "would the company be better off with someone that didn't have an illness like that" because I have had to miss quite a lot of work because of it ...'



2. Findings (exhaustion of sick leave)

'From a workplace point of view, it has always been a really difficult thing, especially when I went into fulltime work because I would lose all of my sick leave within the first two months of starting a job... And then to have surgery. I lose pay every month because I can't really use my annual leave. I take a massive pay cut and have in all my jobs basically'

'So it's definitely been challenging and being casual as well, being punished if you take the day off, by your shifts getting cancelled in the future and having your workplaces think you're lazy'



2. Findings (reducing work and negatively impacting career)

'As far as career progression goes, I do feel like my promotion has been delayed because I have had to take time out. Same with maternity leave. The military try not to punish women for going on maternity leave or taking personal leave, but if you're not in the office and not being reported on, it's difficult for them to assume that you would have done a good job if you were there'



2. Findings (all consuming)

'I actually gave up my career for a family that didn't exist. Because I couldn't handle that anymore and wanted to put all of my focus into the IVF and everything like that ... But at the time it was a massive thing to be like, infertility, endometriosis has completely taken over my life that I cannot have the capacity to do a career that I've been doing for a decade. It is life changing and all consuming'



2. Findings - solutions

1. Workplace flexibility and WFH
2. Paid reproductive healthcare leave (policies, EAs, awards, NES)
3. Workplace trust, understanding, education

'I think just an understanding workplace would be the best, like educating a workplace that sometimes you do need to go home because of your period or because of the pain'

'The culture is changing, and workplaces are realising that people can be trusted and that you can work from home. People can be trusted that they want to keep their jobs; things do happen.'



3. Tensions

- Substantive (cf formal) gender equality and recognising women's bodies as 'different'
- Is cultural shift in the workplace possible? Voice referendum suggests 'no'
- Privacy and uptake of workplace supports
- Who pays for this workplace entitlement?

- Meaningful change and growing interest
 - My PhD – intersectional and feminist labour law perspective on CARM women's experiences of IVF and work
 - Supports available (Pink Elephant; EndoZone)
 - Momentum with research / point of interest (Wong, Oxlad and Turnbull)
 - Other researchers (Danielle's 'Endo@Work' Project; Sydney's 'New Equality Bargaining for a New Generation of Reproductive Rights' PhD)
 - Government inquiries – into women's pain (Vic DoH) and menopause and perimenopause (Cth Senate Community Affairs References Committee)

4. Comments

- Professor Beth Gaze



5. Questions / Discussion

- Feedback / email: tom.hvala@student.unimelb.edu.au
- Supports
 - Endo – Endo Australia (<https://endometriosisaustralia.org/support-groups/>)
 - Pregnancy loss – Pink Elephants (<https://www.pinkelephants.org.au>)
 - Fertility and PNDA – Gidget Foundation (<https://www.gidgetfoundation.org.au>)
- Resources
 - Amy Wong, Melissa Oxlad and Deborah Turnbull, 'Exploring Australian Women's Attitudes Towards Paid Menstrual Leave: A Mixed-Methods Study' [2025] *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* ajo.70031
 - Danielle Howe et al, 'Policies, Guidelines, and Practices Supporting Women's Menstruation, Menstrual Disorders and Menopause at Work: A Critical Global Scoping Review' (2023) 11(22) *Healthcare* 2945
 - Sydney Colussi, Elizabeth Hill and Marian Baird, 'Engendering the Right to Work in International Law: Recognising Menstruation and Menopause in Paid Work' [2023] *University of Oxford Human Rights Hub Journal*
 - Thomas Hvala, 'In Vital Need of Reform: Providing Certainty for Working Women Undergoing IVF Treatment' (2018) 41(3) *University of New South Wales Law Journal* 901

