

The Gender Health Gap

A guide to breaking
down barriers
for women in
the workplace



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About this guide

But first, what exactly is the Gender Health Gap?

The Gender Health Gap defines a disparity within healthcare experienced by different genders, specifically the poorer services and care received by women. With the help of the Fawcett Society, we're bringing awareness to the Gender Health Gap within the workplace.

In this guide, we use our first-hand research to delve into the impact the Gender Health Gap has on women in workplaces all over the UK. We sought the opinion of 10,000 UK women, 5,000 female employees and 1,000 male and female business owners to understand the barriers they face, and begin to explore ways in which we can make positive shifts to close this gap.

When we begin to understand the barriers, we can start to overcome them. By laying the groundwork and implementing the policies and practices to support women in workplaces for generations to come.



Women are consistently held back...

It's time for change.

"At Fawcett, we believe in workplaces that work for women, at every stage of life.

But women are consistently held back in many ways. This is even worse for further marginalised groups including black and minoritised women, disabled women, and those in insecure work.

Benenden Health's research shows how much work there is still to do to begin to understand how stark inequality is in the UK today, and in ways that can seem 'invisible'. Sexism and misogyny in the health system has meant that women routinely have their health concerns ignored and dismissed, and medical research is primarily based on men's bodies and symptoms. The evidence shows unequivocally that this creates a Gender Health Gap.

Women have a right to demand dignity from our services: a fair system must take women's concerns seriously and they should be able to expect fair treatment.

It's a matter of urgency, because the effects of a health system that disadvantages women bleed into all aspects of women's lives, especially in our participation in the workforce. We urgently need structural and cultural change to close the Gender Health Gap and make sure women aren't left behind in both work and life.

We are delighted to work with Benenden Health on this research tackling the Gender Health Gap and look forward to seeing employers and Government step up to the challenge and take up these recommendations. It is time for change."

Jemima Olchawski
Chief Executive, Fawcett Society

Fawcett 
Equality. It's about time.

Methodology

The research supporting this guide includes three separate studies conducted in October 2023 – the first with 10,000 UK women, the second with 5,000 female employees and the final with 1,000 male and female business owners.

The aim was to paint a full picture of the experiences of female employees, relating to their health and wellbeing, understand their barriers and identify immediate needs in the workplace.

We know that intersectionality can also be a big part of women's experiences – where their gender meets another important part of their lives, such as race or sexuality. This can add to discrimination and inequity amongst women. Our research therefore included demographic information to enable us to look into this. However, the findings didn't show a notable difference that we could comment on with certainty, but this shouldn't be taken to mean we should exclude this from our considerations in supporting women.

It's vital we share the stories of women and ensure their experiences are understood. Due to the physiological focus of this research, when we refer to 'women/females' within this guide, we mean those who experience women's health issues such as periods, pregnancy and menopause.



Changing the conversation on women's health

Failing to empathise with women in the workplace, has continued to drive the taboo around women's health and prevent an equitable workplace culture.

We still have a long way to go

37% heard comments about women being more emotional than men

33% experienced period-related "jokes"

18% were treated differently when experiencing health issues

42% heard derogatory comments about a female employee's health

For generations, women's health has been talked about in whispers and euphemisms – "the change" and "the time of the month" – with fluctuating hormones usually bearing the brunt of the blame for expressive responses or challenges.

This research demonstrated that poor culture around women's health impacts self-esteem. Even though only a quarter (28%) of women believe the Gender Health Gap exists, many more recognise the ways in which the language their colleagues use maintains inequality.

Letting discrimination go unnoticed, or worse, accepting it, leaves women feeling less valued and less secure in asking for the support they need.



How can employers and managers tackle discrimination?

Breaking down these taboos can only happen when people feel safe enough to talk about their health at work.

1. Positively challenge derogatory comments or “jokes”.

A third of research respondents have experienced period-related jokes at work. These microaggressions perpetuate taboos around women’s health. The tone for the workplace needs to be set by managers and senior leaders, making clear what is and isn’t acceptable and demonstrating visible boundary setting and allyship.

2. Empower managers and senior leaders to support women’s health.

Make sure managers take an active role in understanding women’s health issues. Support them to know what information is available, where to find it, and how to use it so they can be an ally for the women on their teams.

3. Educate everyone on women’s health.

Invite guest speakers to provide learning and development. When talking about conditions that affect everyone, include information about how conditions present differently across genders, such as for Alzheimer’s, heart attacks, strokes, urinary issues and Parkinson’s.

4. Provide easy access to information.

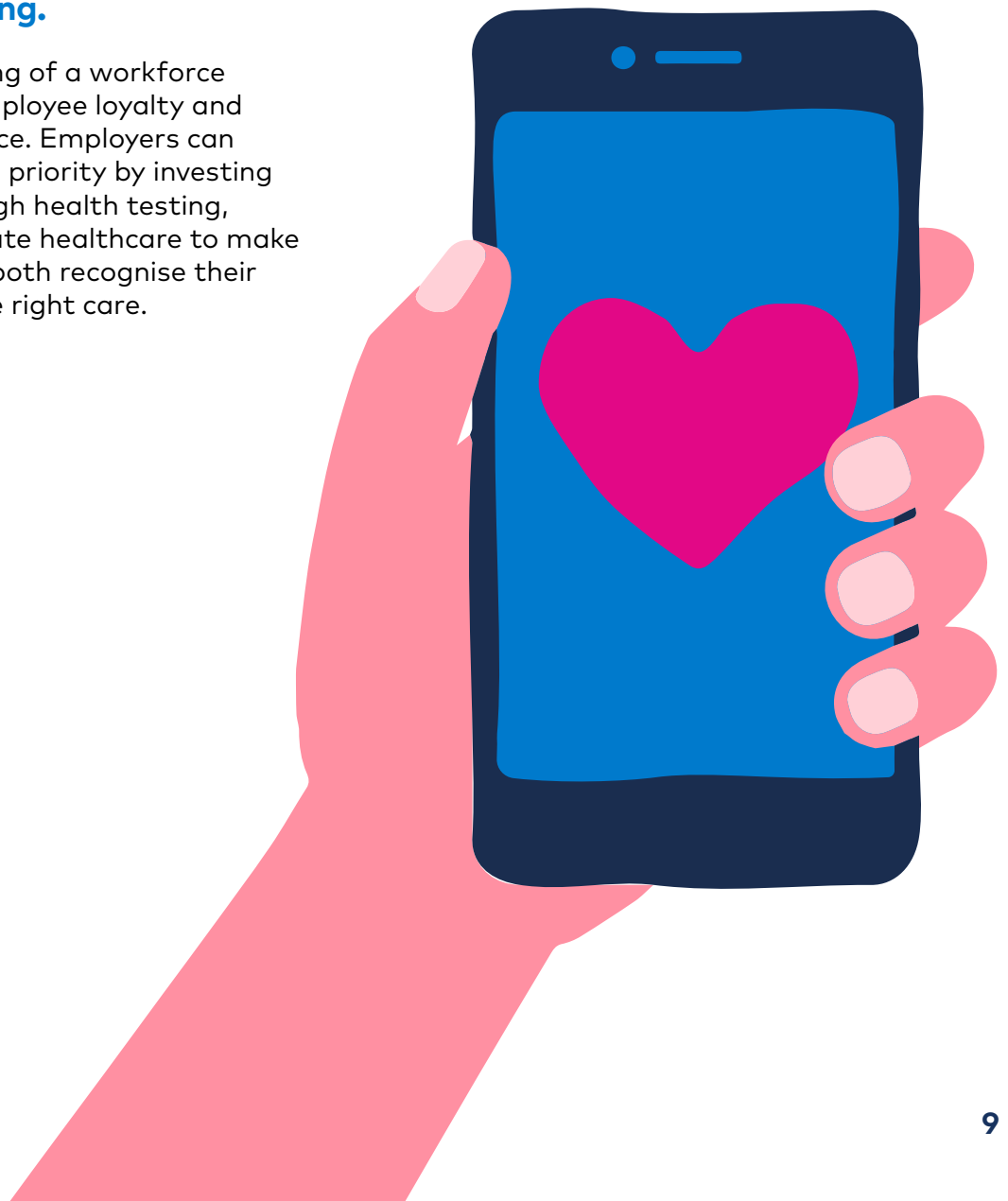
Create women's health pages on your intranet, health leaflets from expert organisations in break rooms and linking to health information in regular communications, such as newsletters.

5. Invest in services that support women's health and wellbeing.

Investing in the wellbeing of a workforce is closely linked with employee loyalty and reduced sickness absence. Employers can make women's health a priority by investing in their wellbeing through health testing, counselling and/or private healthcare to make it easier for women to both recognise their symptoms and seek the right care.

Learn more about the menopause

Benenden Health provides Benenden Health members with access to a Menopause Hub via the app, where employees and managers can learn more about the menopause. There's information to support employees every step of the way including courses, live events with medical experts and videos.



Women's health in focus

Discrimination in women's health

Endometriosis and gynaecological health

When dealing with a debilitating, long-term health condition, such as endometriosis, being described as "emotional" or on the receiving end of period-related "jokes" reinforces discrimination. This creates an additional layer of difficulty for women already suffering both physically and mentally.

Our Gender Health Gap research found that:

45% of women have struggled to receive a key diagnosis in their lives.

26% are currently awaiting a diagnosis for a women's health condition.

In the meantime, women can be in debilitating pain, particularly around their periods, and the lack of a diagnosis can lead to additional struggles with mental health and overall wellbeing.

Endometriosis affects one in ten women,



yet it takes, on average...

7 years to diagnose.

Endometriosis UK provides guidance for employers and an Endometriosis Friendly Employer Scheme.¹

Heart attacks and coronary heart disease

Unfortunately, it's not only gynaecological health conditions where women's health provision is worse.

A little known fact

Coronary heart disease and heart attacks present differently for women than in men.

Because of this, women delay seeking medical help longer than men because they (and those around them) don't recognise the symptoms, and therefore are:

50% more likely than a man to receive the wrong initial diagnosis for a heart attack.²

Which indicates that education for all is central to reducing this gap and to eliminating health-based discrimination.



Provide access to 24/7 GP support

Providing easy access to a GP can be the difference between employees finding more about the symptoms they're enduring or ignoring them. Benenden Health members can call our GP helpline or log in to the Benenden Health app 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to book an appointment for a telephone or video consultation with a UK-based GP for themselves or their immediate family.

¹ <https://www.endometriosis-uk.org/endometriosis-friendly-employer-scheme>

² British Heart Foundation briefing: Bias and Biology

Training managers to support women's health

Changing workplace culture on an issue as important as the Gender Health Gap requires a universal approach, supported by approachable senior leaders who understand women's health.

We still need more support

Of the 1,000 female and male business owners we surveyed in our Gender Health Gap research:

36% of business owners said they don't understand women's health issues

50% of business leaders believe health issues make women more difficult to manage

Female business owner respondents were just as in the dark about women's issues and how to manage them as their male counterparts.

42% of women feel uncomfortable discussing their health with their manager



How can employers empower managers to improve the experiences of female employees?

Starting from a place of empathy enables managers to have constructive conversations with employees about their health.

1. Start by recognising that women and men have different health experiences and be open to understanding why.

We've included a list of resources on page 28 to organisations that provide guidance for employers on different health conditions.

2. Train managers and leaders in how to have compassionate conversations.

Creating an open, respectful dialogue about health is key to breaking the stigma. Training should focus on treating each employee individually, respectfully and confidentially.

3. Prioritise compassionate leadership.

Compassionate leaders don't have all the answers and don't tell people what to do; instead they engage with the people they work with to find shared solutions to problems. For leaders to be compassionate, they must also be inclusive and open to all needs. The King's Fund has a guide explaining what compassionate leadership is.³

4. Remember that managers are employees too.

Managers should have access to a HR representative to support them when managing difficult issues. This becomes more important with more senior managers who may report to C-Suite level and feel less confident discussing their own health issues with such senior leaders. Having colleagues at all levels on board can improve communication and co-operation.

5. Invest in an employee assistance programme (EAP).

Giving managers somewhere to signpost employees to crucial services such as confidential counselling, will help managers if employees are too embarrassed to share their health concerns, for example. While the ideal is to create workplaces where people feel comfortable raising health issues, we still have a long way to go and a channel that is not directly between manager and employee can be very valuable.



Women's health in focus

Health in the workplace

Perimenopause and menopause

Our Gender Health Gap research found that:

64% of women

believe having to manage the transition to menopause at work makes their working life more difficult.

Open conversations

are crucial to understanding what women need and for creating an inclusive environment where they can request reasonable adjustments. Employers need to work to break the stigma and taboo surrounding the menopause at work while creating an inclusive environment.



According to Fawcett Society research, about

one in ten women
aged 45-55 left their jobs last year

due to perimenopause or menopause symptoms and lack of workplace support.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) offers guidance for managers to support women experiencing the menopause.⁴

Mental health

Mental health support in the workplace should be a priority for all businesses.

Our Gender Health Gap research found that:

39% of female employees have experienced anxiety in the last year.

27% of female employees have experienced depression.

And yet respondents for the Government's Women's Health Strategy survey highlighted that better mental health support in the workplace would help them, or had helped them, to reach their full potential.⁵

The Mental Health Foundation provides guidance on how employers can support mental health in the workplace.⁶



Provide mental health support

There are lots of ways employers can improve their mental health support in the workplace and partnering with a health and wellbeing provider is one of them. With Benenden Health for Business, employees have access to Mental Health Support, a service that provides short-term structured support for those facing life stressors such as bereavement, issues with work or relationship difficulties, and support for mild to moderate distress. The Benenden Health App also provides numerous resources to support mental wellbeing.

³ <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/what-is-compassionate-leadership>

⁴ <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/menopause-people-manager-guidance/>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-health-strategy-for-england/womens-health-strategy-for-england#mental-health-and-wellbeing>

⁶ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/publications/how-support-mental-health-work>

Driving change through health policies

Many health issues faced by women are painful and mentally and physically exhausting. Yet women aren't supported by policies.

Women are expected to carry on as normal

70% of respondents, to our survey of 5,000 female employees, said managing period symptoms at work is difficult

64% said managing menopause symptoms at work is difficult

62% said managing pregnancy at work made their lives more difficult

42% said they will go as far as hiding a pregnancy at work

Health policies provide employees with education and reassurance of fair treatment in case of an unexpected health issue, while managers benefit from a strong and consistent starting point from which to build a support plan.



How can employers and managers promote equality through policies?

Policies help employees and employers by providing a standardised framework for support.

1. Develop clear, supportive policies.

Good policies make life easier for everyone. Our Gender Health Gap research reveals a big gap between what women want and what employers offer:

- **Flexible working:** including to accommodate pain or long-term illness. Currently only 14% of employers offer flexible working
- **Parental leave:** 31% of survey respondents said enhanced maternity leave is the most important thing an employer can do to support women's health, yet only 15% of employers offer enhanced maternity leave
- **Pregnancy loss:** 41% of survey respondents said pregnancy loss leave is the most important thing an employer can do to support women's health, yet only 12% of employers have pregnancy loss policies, procedures or leave

2. Offer appropriate support and clear sign posting in the workplace.

Benenden Health found only 18% of businesses currently provide period products in the workplace, with 14% offering flexible working arrangements. A robust internal communications strategy that includes opportunities for HR to share policy updates regularly ensures the workforce knows the efforts employers are making and where to find information.

3. Provide training and support for managers.

With policies in place, manager training is key to make sure they're applied consistently. Also provide support for managers who may be uncomfortable having health-related conversations.

4. Consider the needs of carers.

One in four women (compared to one in six men) have caring responsibilities that impact on their personal and professional lives. Employers should keep this in mind when developing policies to ensure there is enough flexibility to meet the varied needs of the workforce. The Carer's Leave Act 2023 comes into force on 6th April 2024 and will allow carer's to take five days unpaid leave a year to support caring responsibilities.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) provides a wealth of information on creating HR policies.⁷



Women's health in focus

Supporting health through policies

Periods

80% of women experience period pain at some stage in their lifetime.

5-10% experience pain severe enough to disrupt their lives.⁸

49% of women feel they have had their pain ignored or dismissed.⁹



Our research found that almost three-quarters (70%) of female employees believe that having to manage periods at work makes their lives more difficult.

The CIPD provides guidance on menstruation support,¹⁰ but employers should take the time to listen to their employees.



Baby loss and miscarriage

It's estimated that one in four pregnancies in the UK end in loss during pregnancy or birth,¹¹ and employer support is pivotal in the employees' overall grieving process.¹²

An important finding of our research demonstrated that:

31% of women

think having a pregnancy loss policy is amongst the most important things an employer can do to support women's health in the workplace.

The Miscarriage Association offers guidance for managers.¹³



Support employees following a bereavement

Managing conversations on an employee's bereavement can be daunting and challenging. Our **Multigenerational Guide** gives guidance on how to approach these conversations. There are many aspects an employer needs to consider before their employee returns to work but offering access to a trained professional, who can guide employees through their grief, can also support their journey back into work. The Benenden Health Mental Health Helpline is available to members 24 hours a day and can direct members to structured wellbeing counselling when it's clinically appropriate.

7 <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/factsheets/hr-policies-factsheet/>

8 <https://www.womens-health-concern.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/20-WHC-FACTSHEET-Period-Pain-NOV2022-B.pdf>

9 <https://www.nurofen.co.uk/static/nurofen-gender-pain-gap-index-report-2023-94a5039e65c1051240cc359d8bc2787a.pdf>

10 <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/menstruation-support/>

11 <https://www.tommys.org/baby-loss-support/pregnancy-loss-statistics>

12 <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/supporting-employees-guidance-pregnancy-baby-loss/#:-:text=Pregnancy%20and%20baby%20loss%20is%20an%20important%20workplace%20wellbeing%20issue,a%20daunting%20and%20isolating%20experience>

13 <https://www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk/miscarriage-and-the-workplace/employers-and-managers-information-and-support>

Closing statement

Benenden Health's research results not only highlighted some significant data around the Gender Health Gap, but also the concerning experiences women are facing when overcoming this gap in the workplace.

However, this is not about apportioning blame. This isn't the manager's fault, just as it isn't that of any female employee. Instead, we want to remind professionals that inequality between genders very much exists, and that it's key we work together to help narrow or even remove the gap.

Our overall aims are to:

1. Enable women to feel more empowered in raising their health concerns in the workplace
2. Support people managers to understand how the Gender Health Gap can impact in the workplace, and how to support their female line reports

If you are a female employee experiencing unfairness when it comes to your health, whether it be through discrimination or ineffective policies, speaking up is the first step. Make your voice, and health-related concerns heard. And if you're met with potential dismissal, push for a second opinion. It is the role of the employer to then ensure that these conversations are heard, respected and actioned, and is why we have built this guide to help.

I am proud that Benenden Health is spearheading this activity, and I'm optimistic that with the support of this guide, you can make leaps in this space too. On behalf of the whole Benenden Health team, we are looking forward to seeing positive strides made in the workplace to better health outcomes and experiences for women.

Rebecca Mian
Head of HR, Benenden Health



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your
business,
at Benenden
Health,
we've got
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With affordable private healthcare for everyone

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When you join, every employee gets access to 24/7 GP and Mental Health helplines, plus speedy access to physio, medical diagnostics and treatment for just one affordable monthly fee. There are no exclusions to joining, and no hidden costs. So you can get peace of mind and support the wellbeing of your whole workforce.

Because what really makes us different is that we're run for our members, and everything we do is for our member community.

We're not about private healthcare for the few – but for the many.

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Benenden Healthcare for Business

We offer employees access to the following benefits from day one of membership:



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Benenden Health App



24/7 Mental Health Helpline



Rewards and Discounts



Care Planning and Social Care Advice



Medical Diagnostics



Mental Health Support



Medical Treatment



Cancer Support



Physiotherapy



TB Treatment

Find out more



www.benenden.co.uk/business

Additional resources to support managers

We've collated a list of resources to support a manager's journey on closing the Gender Health Gap in the workplace. Each of the below titles are clickable links which provides further reading.

[Benenden Health website](#)

[Benenden Health's Menopause Guide](#)

[Benenden Health's Multigenerational Guide](#)

[CIPD – Menopause](#)

[CIPD – Menstruation support](#)

[Endometriosis UK](#)

[Mental Health Foundation](#)

[Miscarriage Association](#)

[NHS – Pregnancy](#)

[SANDS](#)

[Wellbeing of Women](#)