ACCOMMODATING DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

3rd Accommodating Diversity in the Workplace Conference

16th -17th June, London Road Campus**,** University of Reading and Online

The conference will take place in room L22 110, London Road Campus

Conference Programme

Day 1: Monday 16th June

9:30-9.55: Arrival and refreshments

9:55: Welcome and Introduction

Session 1: Special Session: Menopause and the Workplace

10:00-10:40: Menopause as a Career Disruptor? A narrative study of how menopausal women make sense of career disruptions, Tatiana Rowson, University of Reading

10:40-11:20: Menopause support in the Workplace, how can we break the Taboo, Katrina Forbes-McKay, Robert Gordan University

11:20-12:00: Exploring the Lived Employee Experience of Menopause: Challenging the Middle-Class Bias, Samantha Evans, University of Kent

12:00-13:00: Lunch

Session 2

13:00-13:40: Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Conducting Feminist Research Concerning Women in Employment, Devran Gulel, University of Portsmouth and Frances Hamilton, University of Reading

13:40-14:20: Rapid Evidence Assessment on what promotes employer behaviour change in relation to EDI, Meenakshi Krishnan, Institute for Employment Studies

14:20-14:40: break

Session 3

14:40-15:20: A Systematic Review of Flexible Work Practices in the Workplace Neurodiversity Literature, Lisa Barclay, University of Reading

15:20-16:00: Navigating Work, Life, and Care in Marginalized Urban Communities: Insights from Rio de Janeiro, Clarice Santos, Middlesex University (Online)

16:00-16:40: Workloads, Mental Health and Women Academics in the Current UKHE Workplace, Hadar Elraz, Swansea University

University of Reading

Day 2: Tuesday 17th June

9:30-9.55: Arrival and refreshments

9:55: Welcome and Introduction

Session 1: Special Session: LGBTQAI+ and the Workplace

10:00-10:40: LGBTQIA+ Experiences of Allyship at Work, Katrina Pritchard and Helen Willams, Swansea University

10:40-11:20: 'Straight for pay', living queer: Strategic identity performances in online sex work, Bianca Ioana Mares, Swansea University

11:20-12:00: We are what we wear: An exploration into how appearance and identity intersect at work for LGBTQIA+ and non-binary creatives, Alice Elworthy, Swansea University

12:00-13:00: Lunch

Session 2

13:00-13:40: The potential of Shared Parental Leave for transforming gendered divisions of labour, Katherine Twamley, UCL

13:40-14:20: Approaches to and impact of EDI work in the UK's Higher Education and Research Institutes, Clare Matysova, Health Data Research UK

14:20-14:40: break

Session 3

14:40-15:20: Minority Leadership Paradox? The Role of the Ethnicity of Boss in the Wages of Ethnic Minorities in the UK, Jagriti Tanwar, University of Westminster and Alita Nandi, University of Essex

15:20-16:00: Negotiating Identity and Care: Gendered Labour and Religious Expectations in Contemporary Muslim Households, Feranaaz Farista, University of Cape Town (Online)

For more details and how to register [see our conference web page](#).

ACCOMMODATING DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

<u>**Abstracts**</u>

Monday 16th June

Session 1: Special Session: Menopause and the Workplace

Menopause as a Career Disruptor? A narrative study of how menopausal women make sense of career disruptions

Tatiana Rowson, University of Reading

This narrative study explores how women make sense of career disruptions during the menopause transition. We analysed 29 biographical interviews with professional and executive women aged 47–70 who experienced career disruptions during menopause. Our findings show that menopause is a highly individualised, multifaceted process shaped by symptoms, the age of onset, work and family circumstances, and attitudes towards menopause and ageing. Three main career-disruptive experiences emerged: (1) Health Shock, encompassing physical, cognitive, and psychological menopause symptoms. (2) Realisation of being older involves accepting ageing and being accepted and included as an older person. (3) Midlife Existential Shift, prompting women to reassess life priorities and meaning, often linked to age and changes in health. Building on Career Shock Theory, we introduce the "Menopause as a Career Disruptor" conceptual model, which shows how menopause can impact women's lives in several ways. The analysis of the career shocks triggered by disruptive experiences during menopause can help us to understand how to turn these into an opportunity for a positive career change by providing women with the necessary information, support and a sense of control over their careers. Our study highlights the need for greater workplace awareness, open discussions, and support to mitigate menopause's career consequences. Age discrimination exacerbates these challenges, necessitating organisational and cultural changes to foster supportive environments for menopausal women.

Menopause support in the Workplace, how can we break the Taboo

Katrina Forbes-McKay, Robert Gordan University

Menopause typically occurs between the ages of 46 and 52, with 80% of women reaching menopause by 54. Perimenopause is the period lasting 7-14 years before menopause, where fluctuations in oestrogen cause irregular menstrual cycles, vasomotor symptoms, sleep disturbance, cognitive decline, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. A significant and ever-growing proportion of the UK workforce is, thus, likely to be experiencing adverse menopausal symptoms, which can have a negative impact on women's well-being, work productivity, career progression and intention to leave the workplace. We undertook two studies. In study 1, our online survey found 55% of menopausal women scored at or above the cut-off score for depression caseness, with those in the perimenopausal group scoring significantly higher than the pre or post-menopausal group. Lower depression was significantly related to higher perceived social support, especially from friends and family. In study 2, we interviewed 8 women who have lived experience of menopausal symptoms. The findings noted that menopause is a frightening and silent journey, during which women struggle with symptoms that they do not understand and are reluctant to discuss their menopausal status for fear of facing ageism, stigma and ridicule, whilst being perceived as less competent. This fear and silence led to a desire for allies who understand the

University of Reading

unique experiences of being a menopausal woman and who can provide support which is empathetic, grounded in lived experience, confidential and informed. Enhancing social support for women during perimenopause could lower levels of depression and enhance social adaptation to menopause

Exploring the Lived Employee Experience of Menopause: Challenging the Middle-Class Bias

Samantha Evans, University of Kent

This paper examines the lived employee experience of menopause through an occupational lens to address the middle-class bias in existing studies. To date, empirical research on menopause at work has been focused on quantitative, clinically oriented, and rooted in a biomedical approach predominately drawing on the experiences of professional and managerial women for their studies (Atkinson et al., 2020; Grandey et al., 2020). As a result, we know less about the experiences of women in lower-paid, lower-skilled, and often deskless occupations. This paper presents findings from interviews with female employees across diverse occupational roles to: 1) identify occupational and socioeconomic differences in menopausal experiences and 2) provide more nuanced insights into how women manage their menopause symptoms in different workplace contexts. Existing research has largely focused on professional, white-collar roles (Grandey et al., 2020; Jack et al., 2019), even though only 35% of employed women work in these roles (Buchanan et al., 2023). This study seeks to redress this imbalance by exploring the menopause experiences of women working across a range of occupations, who have been largely overlooked in workplace menopause research. Data collection is ongoing, with fifteen interviews conducted to date. The study applies Beck et al.'s (2022) use of Forbes' (2009) concept of organisational co-modification to examine the key themes of: Experiences of menopause at work, Disclosure and workplace support, Employer and line manager roles, The impact of job roles and working environments, Work-life interplay. Further interviews are planned, and preliminary findings will be presented at the conference.

Session 2

Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Conducting Feminist Research Concerning Women in Employment

Devran Gulel, University of Portsmouth and Frances Hamilton, University of Reading

Through case-based analysis of our own and colleagues' studies, we highlight issues faced in carrying out research addressing the important topic of tackling barriers to women's employment. Specifically we consider the issue of attracting participants and ensuring the appropriate balance between employer and employee participants. Whilst employee participants raise concerns about balance and maintaining anonymity, persistent difficulties are encountered in attracting employer participants at all. This piece analyses the reasons for lack of employer participation and highlights this as a barrier to effective feminist legal research in such an important area as addressing women's participation in the workplace. Conducting feminist research concerning women in employment remains an important topic as women face significant barriers. Research is needed due to the complexity of the issues involved. Gender pay gaps are caused by multiple, complex and intersecting reasons e.g. caring responsibilities (Fawcett, 2023), discriminatory attitudes of

UNIVERSITY of READING

employers (BEIS, 2018) and occupational segregation. Across the world different jurisdictions have taken multi-pronged approaches to tackle the issue. However it is clear that legislation alone will not solve the issues and education and cultural changes are needed to move away from the image of the ideal worker which remains tied to male role models (Berdahl et al 2018). The full cause of identifying and addressing women's lack of equal participation in the workplace and the best ways of addressing this are not fully understood and need further investigation. This highlights the need for continuous research in this area.

Rapid Evidence Assessment on what promotes employer behaviour change in relation to EDI

Meenakshi Krishnan, Institute for Employment Studies

The Inclusion at Work panel report emphasised the benefits of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within organisations but cautioned against the dangers of adopting interventions that have little or no impact. IES research has shown that initiatives such as staff training and celebrating diversity days are widely prevalent but seen to be much less effective compared to having complaints/ grievance procedures and encouraging senior leadership engagement with EDI. The current study reviews the available evidence on what promotes employer behaviour change in relation to adopting equality, diversity and inclusion. Using a systematic Rapid Evidence Assessment methodology, this research analyses 30 pieces of evidence to uncover the key organisational drivers which motivate employers to take action on EDI. These include environmental and operational drivers that shape the choice to invest in EDI for different employers. Next, the study identifies the organisational enablers that support inclusive retention, recruitment, and progression of marginalised groups and the organisational barriers that prevent or slow down the rate of change or uptake of inclusion programmes. Finally, despite the absence of robust impact evaluations at NESTA level 3, the study points to changes resulting from employer action on EDI. This research has practical implications for employers and employer-facing bodies in terms of engaging senior leaders and line managers on EDI as well as for strengthening the evidence base.

Session 3

A Systematic Review of Flexible Work Practices in the Workplace Neurodiversity Literature

Lisa Barclay, University of Reading

The growing discourse on neurodiversity in organisational settings highlights the need for inclusive practices that support neurodivergent employees. Neurodiversity is an integral aspect of workplace diversity, shaping both employee well-being and overall organisational success (Le-Fevre et al., 2023). A key approach to fostering inclusivity is the adoption of flexible work practices, which have been shown to benefit not only neurodivergent employees but also their neurotypical colleagues (Klinksiek et al., 2023; Doyle & McDowall, 2021; Hennekam & Follmer, 2024). Despite its importance, limited research systematically examines how flexibility is conceptualised and implemented to support neurodivergent employees. This study addresses this gap through a systematic review of the workplace neurodiversity literature. The research explores the operationalisation of "flexibility" in existing literature, identifying practical implementations. Guided

UNIVERSITY of READING

by the research question, "How is flexibility conceptualised in the neurodiversity workplace literature, and what evidence exists of its implementation through flexible working practices?", this study employs an inductive approach to categorise key themes in flexibility. The findings identify six core dimensions of flexibility: hours, location, environmental, procedural, behavioural, and social flexibility. This research contributes to the broader discourse on flexibility as a key strategy for fostering inclusivity by providing a typology of flexibility. It establishes a foundation for future research on flexible work practices in supporting neurodivergent employees whilst serving as a practical tool for organisations seeking to enhance workplace inclusivity. Ultimately, these findings are essential for shaping inclusive workplace practices that accommodate diverse needs, improve well-being, staff retention, and overall organisational performance.

Work, Life, and Care in Marginalized Urban Communities: Insights from Rio de Janeiro

Clarice Santos, Middlesex University

The intersections of work, life, and care responsibilities pose significant challenges for marginalised urban communities, particularly affecting women's participation in the formal labour market and their reliance on informal care networks. Persistent gender disparities hinder career advancement for women from these communities, largely due to insufficient family support, inadequate organisational and public policies, and entrenched gender norms (Saville et al., 2024). Additionally, unmet caregiving needs in formal workplaces often compel women into informal work, perpetuating cycles of economic vulnerability. Informal care networks emerge as adaptive strategies but frequently place unsustainable demands on women, further exacerbating gender inequities. Motherhood at the margins introduces additional complexities, as societal expectations around caregiving intersect with economic precarity and racial hierarchies. These intersecting oppressions shape caregiving experiences and reinforce social exclusion, necessitating a deeper exploration of race, class, and gender dynamics in work-life scholarship. Building on discussions from the 9th International Community, Work & Family Conference in Rio de Janeiro – which emphasised "Inclusive Community, Work, and Family: Imagining Global Futures through Local Contexts" – this research examines work-life challenges within marginalised urban communities. Employing a participatory approach, this study captures lived experiences in Rio de Janeiro's urban context, focusing on the dynamic interactions between informal care networks and contemporary workplace demands. Centring the voices of mothers from marginalised racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, this approach highlights how colourism and racialised gender norms shape work-life experiences. By prioritising narratives often excluded from mainstream discourses, this research reveals the cultural, social, and economic factors influencing caregiving and employment choices.

Workloads, Mental Health and Women Academics in the Current UKHE Workplace

Hadar Elraz, Swansea University

When it comes to dealing with Mental Health Conditions (MHCs), there is a dearth of 'organizational research related to mental illness [and] how individuals navigate the workplace' (Hennkeman et al., 2021; Beatty et al., 2019). Even fewer studies have focused on MHCs under conditions of work intensification and excessive performance demands (Elraz and Knights, 2021; Sang et al., 2021; Elraz, 2018). In the specific sphere of UK Higher Education (UKHE), there are growing staff critiques that connect 'feelings of suffering' amongst workers to the neoliberalist

University of Reading

influence on universities (Jayman et al., 2022; Morrish, 2019). Such feelings are increasingly linked to 'performance culture' and metrics, perceived restrictions on academic freedom, and job insecurity (Jayman et al., 2022). Yet, the research/knowledge gap persists regarding how (negative) mental health experiences intersect with UKHE work intensification, particularly for academics who identify as female. This paper presents preliminary findings of a qualitative research project exploring the experiences of UKHE women academics, with specific focus on their mental health and workloads. Analysis of data generated in conversations with 43 UKHE academics who identify as female reveals significant, self-experience-grounded experiences. Across disciplines, contract- and responsibility-types, and career stages, female-academic mental distress is connected to the difficulties of navigating a increased labour, involving unnoticed and uncompensated emotional and administrative tasks. Moreover, societal gender role expectations continue to place additional burdens; these intertwine with traditional UKHE institutional structures/power operations, often hindering career advancement and contributing to burnout.

ACCOMMODATING DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Tuesday 17th June

Session 1: Special Session: LGBTQAI+ and the Workplace

LGBTQIA+ Experiences of Allyship at Work

Katrina Pritchard and Helen Willams, Swansea University

Our research explores experiences of allyship with LGBTQIA+ workers. Drawing on interviews and a qualitative questionnaire of LGBTQIA+ employees, our research question is: what does allyship mean to LGBTQIA+ employees? While research has focused on gender and race, there is an emerging interest in the LGBTQIA+ community. However, it is often treated as a homogenous community (Chen et al., 2023; Collier-Spruel & Ryan, 2024), with little attention to specific groups or tensions between these (Fletcher & Marvell, 2023). Our research affords insight into the complexities of theorising allyship and its role in queer worldmaking. Queer worlds are assumed as homogenous and separate from contemporary hetero-cisnormative organisations, thus allyship becomes a mechanism to enable queer bodies to exist within organisational spaces (Bourke, 2020). Our analysis highlights how individuals experience disadvantage in complex and shifting ways. Allyship is never assured but requires continual effort. Participants described needing to prime colleagues, reassure them or provide reciprocal support. Moreover, where participants' own identities shift, they spoke about an ongoing demand to reposition themselves. The bounded and often passive nature of allyship was raised by many participants, with one noting: 'for me, an ally is someone who will stand-up for you in the rooms you are not in. To stand up in a crowd when they don't have to'. Analytically then, our research aims to develop a nuanced understanding of these experiences to secure allyship and further theorise 'the ally' within in contemporary organisations. Findings also offer insight into the complexity of intersectional disadvantage.

Straight for pay', living queer: Strategic identity performances in online sex work

Bianca Ioana Mares, Swansea University

My research explores the impacts of digital labour platforms on the work experiences of LGBTQIA+ online sex workers. Employing qualitative data from 41 interviews, the core research question I seek to address is: How do LGBTQIA+ online sex workers navigate identities in digital workspaces? Scholarship has shown that opportunities introduced by digital platforms affect sex workers differently due to distinctive circumstances (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011). Online sex work encompasses services where sexual content is exchanged for compensation without physical contact between provider and client, whilst still requiring active engagement (Jones, 2015). Digital sex work includes interactive experiences like webcamming and phone sex, as well as indirect consumption of sexual content, such as pornography or exclusive paywalled material (Cunningham et al., 2018; Rand, 2019). Experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQIA+) sex workers, are treated as a peripheral or negligible subject of inquiry (Smith, 2015). My research provides insights into the complexities inherent in the identity experiences of LGBTQIA+ online sex workers navigating digital labour platforms. My research aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how LGBTQIA+ online sex workers strategically compartmentalise their identities to navigate platform constraints and opportunities while ensuring economic viability. The identity experiences of LGBTQIA+ online sex workers remain shaped by normative ideals that

University of Reading

encourage masking queerness and conforming to hyper-feminine aesthetics. Despite the perceived affordances of identity fluidity of digital spaces, hetero-cisnormative ideals persist, underscoring the importance of further research.

We are what we wear: An exploration into how appearance and identity intersect at work for LGBTQIA+ and non-binary creatives

Alice Elworthy, Swansea University

This research contributes to understanding how appearance and identity intersect at work for LGBTQIA+ and non-binary creative workers. Using semi-structured interviews that incorporate participant-led photo-elicitation methods, this research considers the following overarching research question: In what ways does appearance matter to LGBTQIA+ and non-binary creatives at work? The idea of the gendered body and how that impacts an individual's experiences of the world are inextricably linked, with those not conforming to binary ideas of gender facing experiences of discrimination (Sharp et al., 2022; Bates et al., 2021; Suárez et al., 2022). The experiences of the gendered body can be further reflected through clothing, accessories, makeup and tattoos (Banet-Weiser, 2018), identified here as 'appearance' (Stanko et al., 2022).. However, 'work' is considered to stifle identity expression through appearance (Richards & Mattioli, 2021). This research brings together discursive constructions of identity through the material experiences of clothing and accessories. Analysis of the data collected further unpacks the entangled nature of identity and appearance for LGBTQIA+ and non-binary creative workers. Although participants discussions of gender seek to move beyond binary expectations of gender, the language utilised was mostly shaped by both masculine and feminine discourses. This further indicates that there is a material-discursive entanglement between gender, sexuality and appearance. Participants frame how creative work enables them the freedom to curate an appearance that is representative of their identity. By having choice over the entanglements that are created between clothing and the body, positive workplace experiences were created for the participants.

Session 2

The potential of Shared Parental Leave for transforming gendered divisions of labour

Katherine Twamley, UCL

In this paper, I discuss how the kind of parental leave taken by first-time parents shapes their understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood. I draw on qualitative longitudinal diary and interview data from 21 mixed-sex couples in England, collected during their parental leave. Half of the sample were sharing leave and the other half were not. In the analysis, I draw on the sociology of everyday life to examine both what participants did and the meanings they attributed to these practices. The accounts demonstrate how women on maternity leave alone become primary carer, through a process of learned expertise and moralised pressures around mothering. Their partners' lives did not radically change and they did not develop similar care expertise. For sharing couples, normative practices could be counteracted by fathers' extended leave alone, but couples taking leave at the same time tended to reinforce gendered normative parenting. I detail why these differences occur, showing how fathers on leave alone were able to foster a sense of themselves as primary carers, even if just for a short time. The study fills a lacuna

University of Reading

in research on parental leave practices and the ways in which they contribute to gendered parenting outcomes.

Approaches to and impact of EDI work in the UK's Higher Education and Research Institutes

Clare Matysova, Health Data Research UK

Many Higher Education (HE) and Research Institutes in the UK incorporate inclusion as a core value or pillar withing their institutional strategy. But how is this articulated, the need evidenced, and approach aligned to an institute's mission and values? Approaches to equality or equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) have evolved considerably over the past 20 years. More recently, greater emphasis has been placed on inclusion and equity standpoints (Gagnon et al., 2022).In practice, HE employers' EDI strategies often focus on recruitment, promotions or progression, career development and underrepresentation at senior roles (Stephenson, 2024). While the impact of EDI has been evident to some extent in the increased diversification of HE (Moreau and Wheeler, 2023), there are mixed views on the effectiveness of EDI work. There has been much discussion in recent months on the so-called "DEI backlash" and the potential impact of this in practice within the UK context (Guyan, 2025). This "backlash" highlights the need for (HE) employers to be clear on what is meant by the terms equality, equity, diversity and inclusion, why these strategies are important (i.e. the evidence base) and how it connects with the values and mission of the organisation. The paper draws on a detailed landscape review of over 100 UK university and research institutes' EDI strategy or policy documents in 2024. It will provide preliminary analysis of how EDI is articulated, on approaches to establishing an evidence-base and how EDI work is linked to an organisation's mission and values.

Session 3

Minority Leadership Paradox? The Role of the Ethnicity of Boss in the Wages of Ethnic Minorities in the UK

Jagriti Tanwar, University of Westminster and Alita Nandi, University of Essex

Using Wave 5 data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study, this article examines the role of the immediate boss's (manager's) ethnicity on the wages of ethnic minority subordinates in the UK. We draw from (binary) theoretical perspectives of Agents-of-Change and Cogs-in-the-Machine in which the former argues that managers are change agents as they reduce inequalities for demographically similar others by practising homophily, mentoring and supporting their careers, while the latter claims that managers maintain or exacerbate inequalities and may not support or foster the career development of demographically similar others. Our findings offer support to the Cogs-in-the-Machine hypothesis. After adjusting for individual, job and workplace characteristics, we find that ethnic minorities earn significantly less under a co-ethnic boss than a White boss, but differences between minorities indicate greater disadvantages endured by Black employees as they earn significantly less under a White boss compared to non-Black employees. Our findings thus complicate the current understanding of the homophily assumption underpinning the Agents-of-Change perspective by arguing that homophily may not be a sufficient condition to address ethnic inequalities in the workplace. Minority leaders face obstacles; even though they

University of Reading

are able to access leadership positions, their token status and powerlessness limit addressing ethnic-based disparities.

Negotiating Identity and Care: Gendered Labour and Religious Expectations in Contemporary Muslim Households

Feranaaz Farista, University of Cape Town

Religion and culture are deeply intertwined, particularly in Islam, where religious beliefs often shape community norms. These norms disproportionately burden working mothers, particularly in contexts where patriarchal interpretations discourage paternal involvement in infant care and breastfeeding. As a result, Muslim mothers face tensions when combining paid work with caregiving responsibilities, navigating tensions between work aspirations and caregiving demands. This study explores how Muslim mothers in South Africa negotiate these intersecting demands, particularly around breastfeeding and employment. Using Holvino's (2010) framework of simultaneity and a longitudinal qualitative approach, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 36 Muslim mothers from Cape Town and Johannesburg. It explores their transition from postpartum to workforce re-entry, shedding light on their strategies for combining caregiving and employment and drawing attention to the cultural, religious and contextual sensitivities that shape their experience. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) reveals how these women engage in pre-and postnatal negotiations regarding domestic labour, childcare, and work adjustments—such as outsourcing household tasks or modifying work hours—to ease their return to the workplace. While generational shifts show a growing willingness among partners to share caregiving and household responsibilities, entrenched norms discouraging paternal involvement in infant care continue to place disproportionate pressure on Muslim mothers.. This study draws attention to both the constraints and possibilities for gender equity within Muslim households. It also offers insights into organisational policies that could better support diverse working mothers navigating the intersections of faith, family, and career.

University of Reading