

Women pushed out of work early due to ‘taboo’ menopause issues

Australian women are withdrawing from the labour market years before they planned to and taking a serious hit on their retirement savings, because of a lack of workplace support to address the symptoms of perimenopause and menopause,

The ACTU will today tell a Senate Inquiry examining the issue that a quarter of Australian working women retire before the age of 55, despite women in the 45-54 age group typically reporting they wanted to retire at 64.

Women are retiring seven years before men on average, and 12 years before their desired age of retirement, according to ABS data.

Half of the women who retire under 55 report the reason they left work was due to their own sickness, injury, or disability.

More than 80 per cent of women experiencing menopause say their work was negatively affected and 70 per cent report not being comfortable talking to their manager about ways to support them, according to a study commissioned by the Victorian Women’s Trust.

The Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees estimates that menopause may cost women in the 50-54 age group more than \$15 billion per year in lost earnings and superannuation for every year of early retirement.

This amounts to a combined shortfall of over \$112 billion in lost earnings for Australian women who retire earlier than they had planned.

Australian unions are campaigning for ten days of paid reproductive leave to be included in the National Employment Standards enabling workers to take time off to manage reproductive health issues.

These issues affect women and men and include menstruation, pregnancy, contraception, miscarriage, perimenopause, menopause, chronic conditions such as poly-cystic ovarian syndrome and endometriosis, hormone therapy and fertility issues, as well as vasectomy, hysterectomy and terminations, and breast and prostate cancer screenings.

The ACTU is also calling for reproductive health to be a reason that workers can request flexible work arrangements under the Fair Work Act and a protected attribute to safeguard against discrimination.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President, Michele O’Neil:

“Despite the fact that half the population will go through menopause, it is not well understood, and the taboo nature of the subject often means there is a culture of silence and the impact on workers is hidden.

“As a result, women are retiring far earlier than they might if the workplace offered better support.

“The union movement is bargaining in workplaces across the country for the right to 10 days paid reproductive leave and flexible working arrangements. It will help workers, and especially women, to manage reproductive health issues and remain in work.

“The Queensland Government has recently introduced 10 days paid reproductive leave and we want to see this introduced as a right for all workers across Australia.

“Last month the Liberal Party opposed this right suggesting it will make employers reluctant to hire women.

“They say this every time unions campaign for workplace rights for women. Yet every time unions have won those campaigns – from equal pay to paid parental leave – women’s workforce participation has improved.

“These rights have made it easier for women to balance work and care and to fully and fairly participate in the workforce. That’s exactly what paid reproductive leave would do.”

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