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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Feminist Frontiers

The dialectic of (menopause) zest: Breaking the mold of organizational irrelevance

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Abstract

Drawing from women's testimonials in *The Guardian* and from contributions of feminist writers, Virginia Woolf, Julia Kristeva, and Margaret Mead, we start a conversation on the positive and energizing aspects of menopause in the workplace. We propose a social interpretation of menopause that challenges a pervasive perspective of medical decline: A theorization of "the dialectic of zest," as inspired by the writings of Margaret Mead. By problematizing the experiences of women going through this transition in the workplace, we reveal how well-intentioned awareness campaigns can lead to further stigmatization. We thus encourage organizations to not only favor an approach of "education for all" but also extend their social imaginaries beyond medicalized perspectives and coping views. Organizations can then embrace the potential of "zest," a positive side of menopause that remains largely unknown. We argue that organizations, inspired by a holistic view of menopause in the workplace, can creatively support the professional progressions and ambitions of not only women but also all employees.

KEYWORDS

feminist writers, menopause, stigmatization, workplace, zest

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The most powerful force in the world is a menopausal woman with zest.

Margaret Mead, 1950 (Brody, 1981, p. 17)

Menopause has been normatively constructed as a taboo subject, unsuitable for polite conversation in Western societies. In the series *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge, 2019), a conversation between Kristin Scott Thomas's character, Belinda, and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's character, Fleabag (not named in the series), exposes one forthright expression of the menopausal experience:

Belinda: Menopause comes and it's the most...wonderful f*** thing in the world. And yes, your entire pelvic floor crumbles, and you are f*** hot and no one cares, but then...you are free. No longer a slave, no longer a machine with parts, you are just a person in business.

Fleabag: I was told it was horrendous.

Belinda: It is horrendous, but then it's magnificent, something to look forward to.

In the last decade, menopause has become a “hot” topic not only in general society but also in the academic domain. We have witnessed an increasing incidence of “menopause cafés,” organizational awareness campaigns, conversations within the realms of art and business, exchanges and groups within social media, and academic articles and conferences, notably in organization studies.

Although raising menopause awareness is vital, the debate must also address what kinds of awareness are most effective to counter negative perceptions. We thus argue that further education about this phenomenon is needed, since simply raising awareness can also have the unintended effect of further stigmatizing women in the workplace.¹ In North America and Western Europe, menopause is still typically viewed in a negative light, a tendency that has intensified in the past few decades (Utz, 2011). Yet current research on menopause in the workplace continues to be scarce (Beck et al., 2022; Owen, 2018).

To address this gap in the Organization and Management Studies literature, our focus is twofold. On the one hand, we draw from feminist writers, such as Margaret Mead, Virginia Woolf, and Julia Kristeva, to not only destigmatize menopause—long seen as a disease or a disability in Western societies—but also to start a conversation regarding the positive aspects of menopause in the workplace. We propose a social interpretation of menopause that contrasts and challenges a perspective of medical decline and that offers a novel theorization of menopause based on “the dialectic of zest,” following the menopausal “zest” suggested by Margaret Mead.

On the other hand, we problematize recent social and organizational developments by not only addressing the risks of stigmatization for women going through this transition but also offering better ways to approach this phenomenon in the workplace. We believe further debate is necessary to create better menopause policies and campaigns, as well as to design new data collection practices that account for the challenges of women, as well as the potential risks of stigmatization, prejudice, and discrimination.

Our work is especially animated by the exhortation of anthropologist Margaret Mead during the 1950s: “The most powerful force in the world is a menopausal woman with zest” (Brody, 1981, p. 17). Seventy years later, we can perceive Mead's menopausal “zest” in Kristin Scott Thomas' character who proclaimed the “magnificent” experience of menopause. However, positive aspects of menopause remain relatively unknown and thus overlooked in the literature.

To address this gap, we first highlight how the lived experience of menopause varies greatly depending on cultural and social contexts. We then review recent research on the phenomenon of menopause, focusing on contributions in organization studies and acknowledging their importance in destigmatizing the bodily transition of menopause. We emphasize how the Western cultural discourse of decline contributes to women's vulnerability in organizations, and consequently, the urgent need to change this trend. Utilizing a feminist literary criticism approach (Fowler et al., 2022),

we interpret women's testimonies of menopause from *The Guardian* through a dialog with three feminist writings of Woolf, Kristeva, and Mead and highlight salient contemporary issues of the energizing experience of menopause. Finally, we discuss our theorization of “the dialectic of zest,” an oscillation between conformity and liberation for women, and invite organizations to extend their social imaginaries beyond medicalized perspectives and coping views. We offer potential avenues for organizations to not only address menopause but also avoid stigmatizing women in the workplace.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Definitions, meanings and interpretations of menopause

The medical term, “menopause,” is defined as the permanent cessation of menstruation due to age-related changes in ovarian activity (Gold & Greendale, 2000). Although it can be surgically induced through a hysterectomy, menopause occurs naturally in midlife, typically between the ages of 45 and 55 (Natchgill & Heilman, 2000). Menopause not only marks the physical end of the ability to procreate but also the symbolic beginning of a period when women have the opportunity to adopt non-reproductive social roles (Mead, 1974; Sheehy, 1974). While we employ the term, “menopause,” as we investigate the *phenomenon* of this stage of life, we do acknowledge that it is typically used in medicine and organization studies to simply signify the cessation of menses. However, other relevant terms do exist in the medical domain, such as “climacteric,” which refers to gradual changes in ovarian function that starts before menopause and continues thereafter for some time (Blümel et al., 2014).

Cultural norms associated with the meanings of menopause have undergone radical transformations during the latter half of the 20th century (Bell, 1990). What was once defined as a natural, developmental transition to midlife is now considered an unpleasant marker of old age requiring medical attention (Meyer, 2003; Utz, 2011). In the past few decades—especially in Western contexts, the meaning of menopause has shifted to an increasingly medicalized state characterized by the biological deficits of an aging female body (Utz, 2011). Menopause—the mark of the end of fertility—is thus referred to as a decline, the entry to an undesirable aging process (Erol, 2009). We argue that this perspective fundamentally impacts the social construction of menopause: It is a problem that must be fixed.

Sensitive to the impact of medicalized discourses, the feminist essayist and novelist, Susan Sontag, argued that femininity is still largely associated with fertility and a particular concept of beauty (Sontag, 1972). Medicalized vocabularies not only emphasize the loss of fertility but also present menopause in a non-neutral manner, constructing specific representations of aging that devalue women. As a consequence, women entering menopause become socially invisible, with the positive side of the menopausal experience largely overlooked. For example, Lee and Hopkins (2004) argued that menopause is “a transition between one's childbearing years and the large segment of life that follows when one no longer needs to be concerned with monthly menstrual bleeding and the possible responsibilities of pregnancy” (p.5). Sontag (1972) also highlighted the “double standard” inherent in these perceptions of aging, whereby women seem to age not only earlier than men but also are at a disadvantage.

While past research has found that the physical experience of menopause is largely similar across temporal and spatial boundaries (Post, 1971), the lived experience of menopause greatly varies, depending on personal characteristics, as well as social, cultural, and historical contexts (Bowles, 1990). For example, Brewis et al. (2017) found that women have variable menopausal experiences, implying that women experience a variety of “menopauses.” In her book, *La fabrique de la ménopause* (2015), sociologist Cécile Charlap argued that menopause is not a universal experience but a social construction. Depending on the social context, the cessation of menstruation may either garner increased opportunities and power—and a sexuality finally freed from fertility—or be viewed as a non-event, a time when women no longer receive special attention. In some cultures, there are no words that describe this life process. In others, the term, “menopause,” is difficult to translate or has varying meanings.

Furthermore, different cultures hold varying notions regarding the definition, interpretation, and treatment of the symptoms of menopause. Women of a particular culture (i.e., race or ethnicity) are thus either more or less likely to

report menopausal symptoms, employing discourses that follow the norms of their primary social groups to describe their menopausal experiences (Lorber, 1997). In this perspective, non-Western cultural contexts reveal alternative framings of the phenomenon of menopause. For example, the anthropological literature highlights how some African tribes perceive menopause as a period of increased spirituality (Shostak, 1981) and how the traditional Egyptian culture recognizes menopause as a period of enhanced wisdom (Inhorn, 1994). The end of menstruation also tends to be a more welcome experience in China and Japan than it is in the West. Women in China and Japan have a lower prevalence of hot flashes than women in the US and Canada, and they rarely associate these hot flashes with embarrassment like their Western counterparts (Shea, 2020). The terms, “second spring” or “rebirth,” are frequently associated with menopause in the literature of traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture (Wolfe, 1990) and suggest a positive transition (Erol, 2009; Faumenbaum, 2014).

These studies conducted in non-Western contexts demonstrate that attitudes toward menopause play a pivotal role in how women experience this transition. The impact of attitudes is perceived not only on reported psychological states but also on reported physical symptoms. For example, the China Study of Midlife Women revealed that symptom reporting of Chinese women is more strongly associated with their attitudes toward menopause and aging than their menopausal status or chronological age (Shea, 2006). Employing a sample drawn from the general population and including 399 Chinese women living in two communities in northern China, this research established a link between negative attitudes and symptom reporting.

What do we learn from these non-Western references? First, cultural discourses of menopause impact how the transition of menopause is perceived, both by women experiencing it and by individuals who are directly or indirectly related to these women. Second, alternative framings of menopause suggest a fluid concept. It can encompass more than an end of menstruation and be associated with spirituality and wisdom. We thus adopt a perspective that embraces multiple experiences of menopause.

2.2 | Menopause in the workplace

While menopause is a significant and gendered bodily event, the voices and work experiences of menopausal women have been rarely addressed in Management and Organization Studies (MOS). Still considered a taboo in the workplace, the experience of menopause is not typically discussed, since individuals—including women going through this change—are often too embarrassed to engage in—or initiate—dialog. However, a significant proportion of the working population will experience this phenomenon (Jack et al., 2016), especially since workers are now encouraged to remain in paid employment for longer periods of time. As a result, we argue that the debate about menopause must no longer be silenced in the workplace.

Over the last decade, a few studies that address menopause in the workplace have begun to appear (Brewis et al., 2017; Jack et al., 2019). Menopause has only been addressed in a few specialized journals, such as *Climacteric*, the official journal of the International Menopause Society (Fenton & Panay, 2014; Kopenhager & Guidozzi, 2015), and in a few notable exceptions in the business literature (Atkinson et al., 2021; Steffan, 2021). Finally, in contrast to menstruation and maternity (Grandey et al., 2020), menopause is an intersectional experience, often tied to concurrent experiences of ageism and racism.

In addition to the better-understood social impact of menopause, we argue that menopause also has a significant business impact from diminished organizational outcomes to lost organizational talent. The “business case” for menopause thus includes the belief that valuing and retaining women in their 40, 50, and 60s is good for business. These women often have expertise and an institutional memory that make them valuable employees who should not be overlooked. Losing these women due to issues associated with menopause is a waste of talent and potential.

Women in the workplace who are going through—or have already gone through—menopause are often the first to advocate for a shift in social mindset. As a result, organizations—notably those in the UK—are slowly beginning to implement initiatives that address menopause. For example, Channel 4 (Channel Four Television Corporation, 2022),

a publicly-owned, British television network, and streaming platform, launched its first menopause policy in an effort to normalize the taboo of menopause ("Channel 4 launches," 2019). However, organizational efforts, such as those of Channel 4, remain scarce.

In addition to emerging organizational efforts, views on menopause are quickly evolving in other contexts, including the arts. For example, some celebrities, such as British actress Naomi Watts, have joined the movement to deconstruct the taboo of menopause. In a recent post on Instagram, Watts shared feelings of isolation as she began experiencing symptoms of menopause, exclaiming: "How could I figure this out when no one was talking?" (Watts, 2022, p. 2). The (Menopause Charity n.d.), created to support, educate and campaign for women experiencing menopause, also recently launched a set of five striking posters that highlight a wide range of menopause symptoms and the importance of asking for help. According to Emma Wilkinson, CEO of The Menopause Charity:

Women need to know that they no longer need to keep calm and carry on during the perimenopause and menopause and that they can come to The Menopause Charity for expert advice on talking to their doctor and workplace about symptoms.

(Thorpe, 2021, p. 7)

The Menopause Charity poster campaign was clearly intended to raise awareness with "provocative" images (e.g., addressing topics such as brain fog, vaginal dryness and low libido) and to "smash the taboo around the menopause" (Thorpe, 2021, p. 4) by inviting supporters to take a selfie next to a poster and then post it online. Nevertheless, this type of campaign also carries the risk of further stigmatization, positioning women as the ones who need help. Other individuals, who may also be concerned with these questions, may also be left out of these conversations, a missed opportunity for a more balanced and holistic approach.

Although some well-known celebrities seem comfortable to publicly discuss menopause-related issues, most professional women are still reluctant to do so, especially those who have demanding jobs (Osborne, 2021). Many women refrain from discussing menopause in the workplace, fearing that these conversations are detrimental to career advancement. Many also consider menopause a private matter, unrelated to work environments (Griffiths et al., 2013). In many cases, menopausal symptoms do not fit the image that women wish to portray in the workplace as they advance their careers. Thus, our investigation has two objectives: to question our cultural understanding of menopause and its implications in the workplace and also to further our understanding of how women can be supported in the workplace without creating unintended obstacles for their career progressions.

Following extant research and the assertion of Mead, women do not emerge from the bodily transition of menopause unscathed, but they can—and do—thrive. A recent study monitoring optimism throughout adulthood revealed that the emotional states of both men and women can increase through early and middle age until age 55 (Schwaba et al., 2019). Studies have also shown that creativity increases a second time as individuals enter their 50s (BBC, 2019).

While there is a recent and growing willingness to attend to the needs of women going through menopause in organizational settings, most women confirm that they are still not adequately supported. As a result, many women "at midlife" are prematurely quitting their jobs (Hill, 2022). Further research is thus required to better understand the needs of menopausal women and how organizations can help women to not only remain but also flourish at work.

While there is little mention in extant research of positive aspects of menopause in the workplace, rare exceptions do exist. A survey of 200 women in the United Kingdom was conducted by the Social Issues Research Centre, which found that the work capabilities and career development of women improved during the menopause transition (O'Connor, 2019). An Australian qualitative study by Kafanelis et al. (2009) also revealed that some women felt that they had become more self-aware and assertive because of the experience of menopause.

Extant studies also confirm that menopause should be considered as natural and destigmatized in the workplace and that women experiencing menopause could—and should—offer suggestions to contribute to these processes. For example, some employers have created support groups and "menopause cafés" where women can exchange openly

about different issues and have provided rest areas with natural light (Brewis et al., 2017). Organizations, such as the UK-based Tesco, have also created menopause awareness projects. In the case of Tesco, uniforms were adapted to increase the comfort of middle-aged female employees as part of their #makemenopausematter campaign (Menopause Support, 2019).

In addition to furthering our understanding of menopause in varying contexts, these pioneering studies on menopause in the workplace have also been successful in creating a community of women who feel confident in talking about and sharing their experiences. This first wave of research has thus given voice to women and pushed menopause in the workplace to the top of policy maker agendas.

Recently, a second wave of research on menopause has emerged to maintain and develop menopause discourses. For example, studies have confirmed that HRM scholars and practitioners should be more attentive to the two-way relationship between menopause and the workplace—how menopausal symptoms can impact work experiences and how workplaces can exacerbate menopausal symptoms (Atkinson et al., 2021). These studies have also called attention to not only the urgency of conducting more research and engaging in concerted practice but also the salience of adopting an intersectional approach to develop a better understanding of how menopausal women experience the workplace (Steffan, 2021).

In an exploration of how women experience and manage menopause in the workplace, Steffan (2021) argued that, amidst a diverse array of symptoms, many women internalize a duty of self-help that they believe will shield their careers from the effects of stereotypical views of aging women. These women project the image of an employee who does not bring problems to work but rather is capable of resolving and overcoming the challenges of menopause. These women use what Kafanelis et al. (2009) termed “coping strategies.”

Even with coping strategies and the best of intentions, menopausal symptoms still create several obstacles for women and reduce their well-being in the workplace. These symptoms can have a negative impact on their work, including poor concentration, fatigue, poor memory, depression, and low self-confidence. For many women, one of the major sources of distress at work are hot flashes (Fenton & Panay, 2014), which affect women not only because of the physical and emotional impact of these symptoms but also because of being considered less able and less available. As a result, women typically consider that menopausal symptoms are obstacles to their careers and general enjoyment in the workplace.

For some women, the visibility of menopause that is curated by some awareness initiatives creates further anxiety and can be the source of further prejudice. For example, Riach and Jack (2021) employed an intersectional perspective and open-text survey to illustrate how “there is a complex balance facing organizations in terms of ensuring that menopause is supported while not exposing women to further prejudice or inequality in their workplace” (Riach & Jack, 2021, p. 13). Even the medical field has acknowledged that prejudice women may suffer at work. As a result, efforts have been made to incorporate caring policies that not only cater to the needs of women but also to avoid hyper-visibility and casting menopause as a tragic disability affecting all middle-aged women (Carter et al., 2021).

Due to the various ways in which each woman will experience menopause and express herself (or not) in the workplace, a uniform human resource policy addressing this phenomenon is thus a challenging organizational goal. However, we contend that a supportive human resource policy should, at the very least, include menopause education for all management and employees and avoid creating obstacles for the career progressions of women. We thus propose an educational approach that accounts for a “menopause renaissance” and that acknowledges multiple lived experiences during this transformation. Educational approaches should balance (1) support for women who have multiple, shifting needs over the trajectories of their lives; and (2) mitigate the risk of adopting approaches that unintentionally stigmatize and detrimentally impact the career progressions and well-being of women. At a time when women may feel particularly vulnerable, we argue that workplaces can positively frame menopause, to allow women to exert their power and to offer the means to help women thrive. We thus focus on two main questions: What would a positive and destigmatized framing of menopause look like? What avenues of change could this shift bring to the workplace?

We propose the theorization of the dialectic of (menopause) zest as an answer to these questions. Our theorization results from our analysis of women's testimonies and the words of feminist writers like Virginia Woolf, Julia

Kristeva and Margaret Mead, as detailed in the methodology. We develop these authors' ideas through a dialog with our fieldwork data in the findings section.

3 | METHODOLOGY

In this study, we focus on creating alternative understandings to the mainstream medical discourse of menopause associated with decline within the Western cultural context. We employ a feminist literary criticism approach (Fowler et al., 2022) to interpret the narratives of women's experiences of menopause and unravel multiple threads of meaning. Feminist literary criticism has been used in advertising and consumer research by scholars such as Barbara Stern (1989, 1992). It consists of a close reading of a text to reveal its meaning, followed by deconstruction to explore both hidden assumptions and other non-hegemonic cultural influences (Fowler et al., 2022).

Since menopause is still taboo in the workplace, very few testimonials of women are available. However, recent feminist movements have gained momentum (i.e., especially in the UK), putting the topic forward for political and organizational debate (Atkinson et al., 2021; Brewis et al., 2017). *The Guardian*, a UK-based media organization, has recently been participating in menopause debates, garnering attention from the UK government, employers, and social researchers. Alongside women activists, *The Guardian* has emerged as a leader in promoting social debate and improving the quality of life and fair treatment of women in the workplace. For example, *The Guardian* initiated a debate in 2018 concerning the unfortunate comment of the Deputy Bank governor, Ben Broadbent, who claimed a "menopausal" UK economy (Atkinson et al., 2021, p. 1).

The Guardian, a free, widely-read news source, has not only adopted an open-minded perspective but also provoked debate and influenced policy making. It has been consistently praised for its investigative journalism, dispassionate discussion of issues, literary and artistic coverage and criticism, and foreign correspondence. Since the editorial stance of *The Guardian* is considered less conservative than its main competitors, and its reporting is marked by independence, the newspaper has been coined "Britain's non-conformist conscience" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021, p. 3). *The Guardian* is also recognized as one of the "top end" British daily newspapers (Lewis et al., 2008) and a leading media outlet in the UK and internationally. It offers narratives in the form of testimonies, open to readers' comments and reactions, which was particularly well-suited for our study.

We collected all articles on the topic of menopause published by *The Guardian* over a period of 15 years (i.e., between 2005 and 2020), producing 1000 articles in total. The vast majority (i.e., 850) addressed menopause from an expert perspective, a medical problem to fix or a disability to overcome, which is in line with our literature review. Only 150 articles were testimonials written by women experiencing menopause in their personal and professional lives (i.e., female journalists, artists, managers, and regular readers). These testimonials were written by educated women, some holding a leadership position. While these testimonials thus give voice to some women, they are not representative of multiple menopause experiences. However, these voices reveal alternative interpretations and lived experiences of menopause, which allow us to introduce new ideas for public debate and provide a counterpoint to dominant interpretations and practices concerning menopause in the workplace. These testimonials offer valuable perspectives from which alternative frameworks of menopause can be formed.

We organized the 150 testimonials into two thematic categories: (1) positive experiences of menopause (i.e., 17 articles); and (2) problems associated with menopause (i.e., 133 articles). Following earlier studies (Erol, 2009; Utz, 2011), negative testimonials included descriptions of aging, which was cast as a force working against health and beauty. Our analysis revealed two main themes: (1) physical decline, mainly in terms of symptomatology; and (2) feelings of loss, associated with the end of fertility and the loss of beauty. What caught our attention was that in the positive testimonials, these two themes were associated with an experience of liberation. This led us to raise new questions (Cunliffe, 2022): Can a transition generally associated with "decline" or "loss" be liberating? What are women being liberated from, and how can the experience of menopause prompt liberation? We thus focus on the interpretation of liberation within the context of the experience of menopause in the workplace.

Through content analysis of the selected testimonials from *The Guardian*, we first identified that women's feelings of liberation were associated with three emergent themes: (1) the end of the "motherhood mandate"; (2) invisible bodies; and (3) zest. We then drew from feminist literature to interpret these three themes, finding meaning within these testimonials that could generate new ways of thinking about menopause in the workplace (Cunliffe, 2022). We identified three provocative feminist metaphors—echoing the three emergent themes—that not only helped "rend[er] visible another set of meanings" (Stern, 1992, p. 10) in our data but also invoked new frameworks of interpretation (Cunliffe, 2022). These three metaphors, drawn from the writings of Virginia Woolf, Julia Kristeva, and Margaret Mead, included: (1) "killing the angel in the house"; (2) discovering the "foreigner" within; and (3) the [menopause] "zest." By presenting the liberation process through a dialog between the three themes and three feminist metaphors, we capture and interpret meanings that contrast and transcend mainstream medicalized perspectives of menopause and that offer alternative sources of social imaginaries of menopause. Like novels in organization studies (Beyes et al., 2019), these literary metaphors allowed us to not only *see different things* but also *see things differently*.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Virginia Woolf: "Killing the angel in the house"

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room.

Virginia Woolf (1995, p. 3)

In her essay, *Killing the angel in the house*, written in the 1930s, Virginia Woolf (1995) described in vivid language the grace of a woman, through the eyes of a self-effacing, sacrificing member of the family. Her language bared the purity associated with devotion, as well as the conciliatory and tender charm that a woman ascribes to her maternal role.

Although Woolf was addressing an audience of women who were willing to embrace a profession during the 1930s, her words are applicable in contemporary work environments. Mothers who embrace a professional career are still impacted by social pressure related to the "motherhood mandate," often feeling guilty for deciding to work and have a family (DeVault, 1991; Rojas-Gaviria et al., 2019). While Woolf hoped that younger, women writers would never encounter this "phantom," most women today can attest that they are still dealing with this "angel" and feel the pressure to conform to the ideals of motherhood, in both personal and professional settings. Some of *The Guardian* testimonials, including that of *Guardian* journalist Joanna Moorhead (2011), echoed Woolf's description of a devoted and self-effacing mother:

So the menopause is a very dangerous moment in a family's existence. Because if society is built on the family unit, then that family unit is itself built on a mother's oestrogen. Her role as nest-builder, as tear-wiper, as meal-maker, as diary-keeper, as school liaison officer, as strategist, as trouble-shooter, as Jackie-of-all-trades and even (I hesitate to say it, but I believe that for most of us it's true at least some of the time) as doormat, is one of the cornerstones on which the nuclear family is constructed; and oestrogen, the hormone that courses through our veins throughout our childbearing years, is the lifeblood of our willingness to perform our tasks so selflessly. (p. 7)

The end of women's reproductive years is a moment when women can open a door to other ideals that are in sharp contrast to “angelical” characteristics demanded by society. Even Woolf (1995) expounded upon her own process of “killing the angel in the house,” which allowed a pure and perfect representation of a devoted, traditional woman to then develop into a writer and a woman “with a mind or a wish of her own”:

Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had dispatched her. Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe. (pp. 4–5)

Woolf highlights a traditional archetype available to women, one that represents the well-studied calling of “devotional motherhood” and the demanding role where “children are sovereign subjects to be cherished and protected at any cost” (Cappellini et al., 2019, p. 486). Pressures to conform to the “motherhood mandate” is even extended to childless working women since it promotes a negative stereotype of these women in the workplace as well (Verniers, 2020). For example, Verniers (2020) argued that negative stereotyping is associated with how a “pronatalist ideology embodies the belief that a woman's value is linked to procreation” (Verniers, 2020, p. 119). Even when women voluntarily or involuntarily adopt childless lives, they still suffer from pressures—embedded within social imaginaries—to perform maternal-inspired roles. As described by Cutcher (2021), this role is also observed in the attitudes of others: Women are expected to have a “mothering” management style. Thus, a woman—with or without children—is expected to not only be “the angel in the house” but also “the angel in the workplace.”

The celebratory enthusiasm and social enhancement associated with motherhood is in stark contrast with the experience of menopause. Even if the 3 Ms (i.e., menstruation, maternity, and menopause) are all cast as burdens that women must deal with in the workplace, menopause—with the loss of fertility—is often viewed as the most undesirable. However, menopause does mark the end of “the angel in the house” era, an often-overlooked opportunity for liberation from gendered social expectations. Like Woolf, some feminist writers do not cast midlife—when women “no longer serve as baby machines and their role as maternal caregivers have ended” (Gergen, 1990, p. 479)—as the end of social existence but the beginning. For example, upon “killing the angel in the house” (i.e., the embedded, sacrificing mother role), a woman is liberated from “the angel” in her social relationships. The testimonial of *Guardian* journalist, Eva Wiseman, reiterates the impact of “biological” liberation: “When biology no longer defines a body by its potential to reproduce, a woman will find further equality in her relationships, a chance to explore her person-ness” (Wiseman, 2019, p. 6).

With the onset of menopause, women are freed to be more themselves and to voice—sometimes for the first time—a conscious: “I am not available.” This sentiment of unavailability was articulated by *Guardian* journalist Joanna Moorhead (2011):

But as your babies grow older, you yourself are growing older too. And the bonds that bind you are, at least partly, hormonal: and at the perimenopause (which, at 48, I must surely be well into), those hormones weaken and the bonds loosen, and a mother like me suddenly thinks: hold on a minute! I am a person! I still have a life! And what she also thinks is: I'm not going to be always available any more. (p. 6)

Liberation from motherhood and day-to-day care often emerges as eureka or “aha” moments, in which women may find windows of opportunity for recuperating personal space, reflecting on life, reassessing professional trajectories and realizing a new life. Lynne Sanders, CEO of A La Carte London, recounted that her eureka moment occurred during a shift in her living situation: “When my daughter went to university, I realized I really wanted to do more with it [my job]” (Minter, 2015, p. 5).

Our data demonstrate that menopausal women can recycle and recompose care and work competencies—developed as part of the “motherhood mandate” (Gilbert & Thompson, 1996)—in the context of the workplace and

within their professional activities. According to Parker (2016), women can thus make a difference through balanced competences:

Our ability to multitask does not diminish with age and it is the transferable skills of balancing family, friends, and professional life which are invaluable in the workplace. We often care more, are less self-centered, and have more energy and creativity post menopause than we did when we were juggling work and young families. (p. 6)

Since current discourses and workplace practices concerning menopause have either been silent or have adopted palliative approaches, dominant perspectives of decline and deterioration must be contested, and menopause cast as a time for a personal renaissance. Further, women must be viewed from more than a maternal standpoint. If menopause represents not only the end of “the angel in the house” but also a time for “killing the angel in the house,” women are now able to fully reveal themselves in professional contexts. For example, in some non-Western settings, menopause is perceived as an opportunity for women to perform roles that have previously been reserved for men—a symbolic shift that occurs for all women, both mothers and childfree.

While “killing the angel in the house” was a very provocative stance in the 1930s, our findings show that women have not yet been liberated: The duties of motherhood, as well as a lack of solidarity and collective action, remain latent obstacles for some women in the workplace (Güney-Frahm, 2020; Hennekam et al., 2019). However, for others, menopause might represent a fresh start. These women have better control over pregnancy and the affirmed choice to not have children. Menopause is also a time to build a renescent symbolic identity, shine through insightful contributions, and avoid obstacles that stem from unpaid “angelical” duties and expected mothering management styles (Cutcher, 2021). We do not contend that a “menopause renaissance” means the end of care but rather follow Woolf who claimed that “killing the angel in the house” involves repetitive efforts that oscillate between caring and a new-found creativity.

4.2 | Julia Kristeva: Invisible bodies and discovering the “foreigner” within

After a five-decade gestation, I've given birth to a darling little bundle of self-esteem.

Cally Beaton, artist (Beaton, 2019, p. 7)

...you will feel like you again, but a better you.

Cari Rosen, *Guardian* journalist (Rosen, 2016, p. 11)

Menopause, like puberty, is a powerful rite of passage. Amid the exhausting hormonal flux a chaotic, liberating energy bubbles and fizzes.

Barney Bardsley, writer and *Guardian* journalist (Bardsley, 2008, p. 7)

The female body is charged with symbolic expectations and pressures connected to ideals of youth and beauty (Liechty & Yarnal, 2010; Sontag, 1972). On the one hand, a youthful body is often considered a woman's most precious capital: “In the hyper-visible landscape of popular culture the body is recognized as the object of the labor of women: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy” (Winch, 2015, p. 6). On the other, an aging body is frequently viewed as revolting, symbolizing an escalating loss of a precious, youthful asset, and representing the end of the “beauty mandate.” We find that many testimonials in the media, literature, and art associate feelings of disgust with the aging body of a woman.

Following the philosophical analysis of the “foreigner” offered by Kristeva (1991), we propose an alternative reading of the aging female body. Kristeva (1991) proposed that the “foreigner” is an image of hatred—the other face

of our identity, a hidden tormenter that enters us when we become conscious of our differences. Kristeva (1991) developed a theory of the “speaking subject” (Kristeva, 1991, p. 184), a being capable of understanding and articulating language and constituted by a social subject bound by the laws of language. For Kristeva (1991), the speaking subject was paradoxically not only the agent of coherent, cohesive discourse but also the site for transgressive rupturing and for transforming systems of meaning and representation. However, Kristeva (1991) also claimed that the West was incapable of accepting its dependence on a fragmented, chaotic, bodily, and libidinal feminine energy. In this context, the feminine and semiotic foundations of social functioning, must remain disavowed, unspoken, and unrepresented for social units to function (Gross, 1986).

Fotaki (2019) instigated the under-utilized theorization of Kristeva (1984) in management and organization studies. According to Fotaki (2019), the semiological investigation of human subjectivity by Kristeva (1984) shifted a functional, homogenic, and homological account of the symbolic order to an unstable yet indissoluble relationship between the heterogeneous domains of the symbolic and the semiotic. Fotaki (2019) thus asserted that the ideas of Kristeva (1984) concerning the female body and the abjection of the maternal have had a profound influence on feminist thought. For example, menopause research has demonstrated how women in the workplace may engage in “abjection work,” an act of resistance by capitalizing on “foreign” menopausal bodies (Butler, 2020).

In *The Guardian* testimonials, women questioned bodies that had lost fertility and now varied from culturally-accepted images. These women felt like they no longer conformed to the “beauty mandate”: they met a “foreigner” within. For example, *Guardian* journalist Libby Brooks stated: “Who am I if I’m not fertile or don’t look like a stereotypical sexy woman?” (Brooks, 2018).

While Kristeva (1991) affirmed that every native feels like a foreigner in her own space, *The Guardian* testimonials revealed doubt, as women sensed their gendered identity being put into question. As a younger body disappeared, it was replaced by a new bodily configuration: A new, yet older body, the “foreigner.” However, Kristeva (1991) also highlighted the metaphorical value of the “foreigner,” a being who first points at feelings of threat and fear evoked by the experience of being struck by a foreign, peculiar body: “those eyes, those lips, those cheek bones, that skin unlike others” (p. 3). Kristeva (1991) also highlighted the experience of the “foreigner,” which not only reveals a non-existent banality in human beings but also an invitation to consider whether the “foreigner” body could also become the “unique” body. Could such a bodily transformation help women embody connections that reveal the “hidden face of their identity”?

Further, Kristeva (1991) revealed that, while the foreigner can be viewed as an enemy to be destroyed, the foreigner can also be viewed as a being that can be assimilated into the “wise” and the “just.” While changing tone and focus can help women view themselves differently, Kristeva (1991) affirmed that this shift can be tinged with melancholic regard for the lost, younger self, a parallel experience to the melancholia of the foreigner:

[The foreigner] who survives with a tearful face turned toward the lost homeland. Melancholy lover of a vanished space, he cannot, in fact, get over his having abandoned a period of time. The lost paradise is a mirage of the past that he will never be able to recover. (pp. 9–10)

Some of *The Guardian* testimonials addressed the passage from the youthful self to the aging female body and how it was a process of discovery and adopting poetic projections (Rojas-Gaviria, 2021). According to writer and *Guardian* journalist Barney Bardsley (2008), “I feel like a snake, shedding its own skin’, I told a friend recently. On the surface I may look more or less the same. Inside, nothing is at it was” (p. 7). *The Guardian* testimonials also revealed that accepting the “foreigner” requires patience—taking time to settle into the new self and comprehend the transformations and possibilities that emerge. In a recent interview with *The Guardian*, American singer, Tori Amos, related her experience with the “foreigner,” or “stranger”:

Those 18-hour-long ayahuasca trips could be heavy going, says Amos, but nothing tested her creativity quite like the menopause. “That’s the harshest teacher I’ve met; harsher than fame. I was in the

thick of it during *Unrepentant Geraldines* [her 2014 album]. But I'm on the other side of it now," she smiles. "I can see possibilities again." The "muses" saved her, but they took an age to show up. "And when they weren't there, I was a stranger to myself."

(Andrews, 2017, p. 4)

Another parallel between the analysis of Kristeva (1991) and the testimonial of Amos is the interpretation that the "foreigner" reveals additional, unexpected freedoms. While the absence of the constraints of motherhood liberates creative time and energy, the menopausal body becomes a stranger that transforms the former self into the unexpected other, blessed by the muse of aging. Kristeva (1991) contended that the foreigner thus feels completely free—freed from everything, having nothing and being nothing. However, women who lose their fertility can also become foreigners who are invisible in social spaces (Segal, 2013), no longer men's objects of seduction, rendered "useless" amidst freedom.

Other feminist writers have attested to the liberating process of becoming invisible. For example, novelist Doris Lessing explained that she felt "much more free": "I mean, it's a great deprivation to cease to be a sexual being, but not as bad as you think it is" (Segal, 2013, p. 111). *The Guardian* testimonials, including one from *Guardian* journalist Eva Wiseman (2019), also echoed unexpected processes of discovery that revealed freedoms and transformed working styles:

I can feel the rumbling of not caring whether strangers think I'm pretty, the realization that there is no correct jeans style, the awareness that I can say no to emails asking me to explain myself, that my career will not turn into a pumpkin at midnight. (p. 8)

We contend that the process of liberation not only helps women accept bodily changes but also motivates them to view their professional lives differently, accepting a more assertive and self-confident self. However, liberatory success within organizations depends on how and whether workplaces create a space for women to shine and express their new selves. While some women do eventually feel at peace with their aging bodies—welcoming and discovering many bodily advantages, they may also feel that, in the professional environment, their aging bodies suffer from misunderstanding and a lack of valorization (Fenton & Panay, 2014).

Female professionals, however, are uniquely positioned to bring about societal and organizational transformation through means that deviate from traditional managerial routines—routines which have productivity and competition at their core. For example, the experience of menopause helps women decolonize time, teaching them that resting and listening to their transformed bodies is compatible with creative, insightful contributions in the workplace (Shahjahan, 2015).

Following *The Guardian* testimonials—accounts of the power of female aging to revolutionize our understanding of women—we argue that menopause does signal a renaissance whereby women begin their journey to meet the "foreigner" within. By adopting a non-medicalized perspective on menopause, we view menopause as a journey with its own rhythm—though varying in times, phases, and experiences and energized by the intertwined forces of biology and culture. We thus join Kristeva et al. (1981) in their call for a better understanding of transformative groups of confident women with zest: "women are writing, and the air is heavy with expectation: What will they write that is new?" (p. 32).

4.3 | Margaret Mead: The "zest" of menopause

The most powerful force in the world is a menopausal woman with zest.

Margaret Mead, 1950 (Brody, 1981, p. 17)

The words of anthropologist, Margaret Mead (Lutkehaus, 2008, p. 72), confirm that she was a pioneer in modern thought on sex and gender theory. Seventy years later, Mead's exhortation might well be viewed as being particularly

radical for the 1950s. However, even today, it is still considered headline news when a woman over 50 starts a business, seizes a cultural moment or takes a leadership position. Menopause still carries negative connotations like failure, decline, and deficiency. When Mead attributed her prodigious productivity in the 1960s to post-menopausal “zest”—later perpetuated as a classic “Meadism” (Angier, 2000), she contradicted the prevailing stereotype of menopausal women as “over the hill,” valiantly offering her “self” as a model for other women (Lutkehaus, 2008).

Our analysis reveals that women do experience a new creative energy when they bravely embark on the process of meeting the “foreigner” within. Menopausal “zest” is not a myth, and it is not exclusively applied to hardworking overachievers like Margaret Mead. According to Lutkehaus (2008), “[Mead] was ‘an energetic 58, working 15 hours a day’ who needed only six hours of sleep at night and who got up at five in the morning ‘to write, answer correspondence, or read student papers’” (p. 73). While menopausal “zest” is an intense phenomenon, it is experienced uniquely by each woman. In her book, *The Middlepause* (2016), Marina Benjamin (2018) emphasized an “individual” experience:

Every woman is an individual, of course, and will experience menopause differently. But in my experience, most feel a surge of creative energy in midlife that is directly at odds with the physical and psychological debilitations of menopause. Multitasking like dynamos from dawn to dusk, they are receptive, inventive, and curious while bringing a depth of knowledge to whatever problems work throws their way. It is a shortsighted employer indeed who does not capitalize on this energy surge (what the anthropologist Margaret Mead termed “zest”) that their silverback staff are riding high on—into their 60s and beyond. (p. 11)

In 2018, passionate debates arose in the UK, later spreading in social media, when Ben Broadbent, Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, used the metaphor “menopausal economy” to refer to the declining UK economy. While he later apologized, the debate that he initiated was an opportunity for menopausal “zest” to appear in the public sphere. According to Ros Altmann (2018), a business champion of older yet “dynamic” workers in the UK government:

To be clear the idea that menopause signals that a woman has just passed her peak productivity must be rebutted in the strongest terms [referring to the comment, “menopausal economy”, made by the deputy governor]. They are not past their peak at all—they are just moving into a new phase of their life, which can often be more dynamic. They have more wisdom, maturity, and life experience, which can make them more productive and energetic. Each woman experiences menopause differently, but the idea that it signals some kind of female slowdown is simply not true. (p. 7)

Following assertions of freedom voiced by Kristeva (1991) and feminist writers like Doris Lessing (Segal, 2013), women sharing experiences of menopausal “zest” also confirm feeling freer in their jobs. *The Guardian* testimonials included references to freedom, with women feeling better, having more wisdom and being more productive:

I like myself better in this phase of my life. I am less self-centered and build better working environments. And they deliver better results as a consequence. So I like to think that our economy will benefit from this phase of its development too. And become more inclusive, more positive, more open and more productive.

(Jayne-Anne Gadhia, CEO of Virgin Money UK; Gadhia, 2018, p. 10)

Post-menopause, she is discovering a “different kind of fertility” in her work. She is honouring Gaia.

(Interview with American singer Tori Amos; Andrews, 2017, p. 10)

If organizations choose to account for menopausal “zest,” we then require a better understanding of the organizational contexts that privilege creative collaboration and provide participation opportunities for women experiencing renewed energies, emboldened personalities, and heightened wisdom.

In the psychoanalytic literature, Meyers (2018) stated that the main challenge for women is to deal with the developmental phase of menopause in an adaptive, productive, and positive way. The challenge is thus to develop a new, better integrated, and better functioning whole self, enlivened by a strengthened self-esteem, renewed capacity for pleasure, and sense of freedom. Liberation from low self-esteem, (dis)integration, regression, depression, loss, and injury are then possible.

To further reveal the experience of menopausal “zest,” we turn to the work of Australian feminist writer, Germaine Greer (1991). In her book, *The change: Women, aging and the menopause* (1991), Greer brilliantly explored menopause as a “non-event.” Since menopause arrives unannounced, Greer (1991) preferred the term, “climacteric,” arguing that, after the spring of fertility, we enter a “long, golden” autumn of menopause. Greer (1991) underscored that efforts to eliminate menopause do not come from women, but from men who view the cessation of ovulation as a premature death, a tragedy. Greer (1991) also called attention to a phenomenon that she coined “anophobia,” the irrational fear of older women, another perspective held by men:

These are the men whose names continue to appear on hundreds of learned papers every year, elaborating the possibilities of eliminating menopause and keeping all women both appetizing and responsive to male demand from puberty to the grave, driving the dreaded old women off the face of the earth forever. (p. 10)

As coined by Greer (1991), these “Masters in Menopause” are “male professionals who with the willing assistance of the pharmaceutical multinationals have made a lucrative career out of an experience they will never undergo” (p. 13).

In sum, we find a vast literature on menopause, but, surprisingly, little of it has been written by women, and most of these writings have appeared only very recently (Greer, 1991). Even the pioneering Virginia Woolf attempted to incorporate the experience of menopause into earlier versions of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925); however, references to menopause and menstruation were eventually edited out. We thus take this opportunity to interrogate the experience of menopause in the workplace—as related by women—to open a door to an alternative view: Menopause is not only a time of possibility and discovery but also a time for inspiration and rethinking organizational spaces and rhythms so that organizations can cater to the multiple, embodied needs of women. Following Jayne-Anne Gadhia (2018), CEO of Virgin Money UK, this alternative view instigates a creative exploration of how workspaces “become more inclusive, more positive, more open and more productive” (p. 10).

5 | MENOPAUSE IN THE WORKPLACE—FROM AWARENESS TO EDUCATION

5.1 | The dialectic of zest

In conversation with feminist writers and the women providing *The Guardian* testimonials, we advance our understanding of menopause as a transformational phase that should not be exclusively viewed through the lens of deterioration and decline (Erol, 2009). Medicalized perspectives and vocabularies have long played a dominant role in our interpretation and representation of female processes of aging. While these interpretations are fundamental to the treatment of multiple health conditions that may develop in middle age and older age for women, we argue their prevalence overshadows the multiple lived experiences of aging women. We offer a theorization of a less-visited interpretation, based on what we coin “the dialectic zest,” as inspired by the writings of Margaret Mead. Turning from a medicalized view of the aging process, we embrace social interpretations of menopause that contrast and challenge a perspective of decline. We do develop these interpretations based on the testimonials of women in the West; however, these perspectives do resonate with less medicalized and more holistic views on aging available in traditional non-Western cultures, where aging is a period when women are able to expand their power in society (Shea, 2020; Shostak, 1981).

In harmony with this approach, we contend that the lived experience of menopause cannot be structured as a sequence of distinct periods of symptomatology. The taxonomy of menopause—including perimenopause,

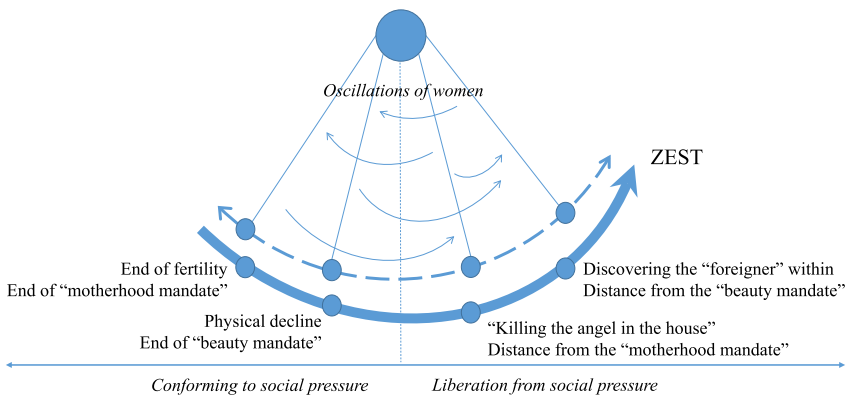


FIGURE 1 The dialectic of zest.

menopause, and post-menopause—is an effective tool in the medical field; women benefit from classifications as they search for medical treatments and recommendations. However, a taxonomy offers limited insights into the experiences of women in the workplace. Though research is scarce in non-Western contexts as well, there are some studies demonstrating that symptom reporting by women is more strongly associated with their attitudes concerning menopause and aging than their menopausal classification or chronological age (Chen et al., 2007).

We thus propose a holistic approach that accounts for often overlooked phenomena—such as Mead’s “zest,” which has not been explicitly theorized within management and organization studies. A holistic approach is well-positioned to help inform organizational policies and agendas that support women, as they build influential careers in environments well-adapted to their needs and ambitions. Figure 1 illustrates our interpretation: A dialectic of zest.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the lived experience of women can be cast as an oscillating pendulum that swings between spaces of social conformity and spaces of personal liberation. This dialectic—a single reality with double, sometimes conflicting sides—advances our understanding of menopause, the multiple experiences of menopause in the workplace and the zest.

We highlight two key steps that women experience in the process of liberation: (1) “killing the angel in the house,” and (2) discovering the “foreigner” within. Even though these metaphors employ forceful, evocative words, such as “killing” and “discovering,” we argue that liberation is a progressive, step-by-step process whereby women cast off the limitations they have embodied for years.

Women oscillate between being devoted to others (i.e., Woolf’s metaphor, “the angel in the house”) and devoted to their projects, their dreams, and their authenticity, liberated from traditional social pressures. Virginia Woolf shared how she too had to (re)enter the process of “killing the angel in the house,” following the constant return of her “angel.” Our data sources, including both the profound testimonials of women published in *The Guardian* and the powerful, evocative words of feminist writers, demonstrate that conformity and liberation co-exist in the experience of womanhood. We propose oscillation rather than a static life position on either side of the pendulum swing. Women choosing to distance themselves from the limitations of the “motherhood mandate” and the “beauty mandate” are able to experience a new energy, explore new life paths and dare to rebel. And above all, they are now able to express their zest. Since women are often enculturated to care and cater intensively to the needs of others (Butler, 2020), a liberated space is also a compensatory context where women are able to find new paths for powerful expression. In this sense, zest is naturally amplified or diminished according to the context in which women live their menapauses. Capacity for generative expression is, therefore, not an individual choice but rather a product of a complex combination of contextual opportunities that support women as they define new paths, new adventures. In the workplace, organizational policies and practices either nourish or obstruct women’s experiences and expressions of zest.

We offer “the dialectic of zest” as a useful tool for organizations as they pursue a better understanding of women in the workplace, addressing not only their needs but also their individual ambitions. We argue that women’s ambitions

are multiple and thus do not follow a single path. Some women halt their professional careers early to dedicate themselves to other projects and desires. Moreover, at certain ages and after undergoing certain life experiences, other women may be presented with multiple, new paths—with zest developing in different directions and along varying dimensions. We thus argue that the opportunities inherent in the reflections and hard-won wisdom of women at midlife—alongside the end of fertility and the pause from “being an objectified body”—are also moments when organizations have the choice to either join and amplify, or deny and overlook.

5.2 | Menopause in the workplace and the risk of stigmatization

Alongside other broader practices of equality and inclusivity, we argue that organizations have the opportunity to approach menopause as a symbolic life moment when women can more fully occupy leadership roles and decision making. However, we also caution organizations to carefully weigh their chosen approaches to not only promulgate progress but also circumvent inadvertent harm.

Multiplicity in menopause experiences demand a delicate, nuanced approach in the workplace since visible support can quickly become harmful hyper-visibility. For example, following cabinet approval of a bill in May 2022, Spain became the first European country to legislate paid medical leave for women (and anyone with a uterus) who suffer from severe menstruation pain. However, some raised concerns that approval of “menstrual leave” might inadvertently constitute a setback for women who had fought long and hard for equality in the workplace. This new legislation could simply become another excuse not to hire and not to promote (Elsesser, 2022). In addition to policy change at the government level, menopause awareness campaigns at the organizational level also have the potential to either help or hinder the personal and professional experiences of women in the workplace. We thus argue that organizations must not only address the needs of women but also mitigate potential risks in specific organizational solutions and how these solutions are implemented.

Organizations adopting approaches that induce a hyper-awareness—and use—of medicalized discourses may also inadvertently stigmatize women by creating distractions that obscure other important issues, such as the gender pay gap and a lack of leadership opportunities. As tensions can arise from both excessive organizational visibility and ignoring menopause entirely, we propose that organizations adopt a dialectic of zest, a holistic understanding of the life experiences of women that transcends mainstream medicalized views. Following Mead's assertion that “The most powerful force in the world is a menopausal woman with zest” (Brody, 1981, p. 17), we contend that education agendas should focus on the positive and energizing aspects of menopause.

In an original approach to managing menopause through “abjection work,” Butler (2020) demonstrated that women's unconventional responses to menopausal symptoms could be a powerful means of managing transformation. Employing a feminist-sociocultural lens, Butler (2020) positioned menopause as a transition best managed through sociality and by being part of a community of women who “got each other,” refusing to become disembodied subjects, or victims of “ridiculous” workplace policies (Duncan & Loretto, 2004) and the “menopause business” (Estes, 1993). In these types of spaces, women can attain transformation over conformity. As a result, we argue that the challenge for organizations is to create collective spaces for the realization of feminine power. Here, women can focus on and (re)discover their personal desires and career ambitions.

In sum, organizational approaches that address menopause in the workplace should ideally normalize and present the phenomenon as natural without further stigmatization. Managers should adopt approaches that delicately balance visible support and tempered hyper-visibility to provide women with real support, for real issues, as they answer the call of their zest.

5.3 | Education for all about menopause in the workplace

To address menopause in the workplace, we argue that “education for all,” one of the key pillars of the organizational mission of *Menopause Mandate* (2022, p. 1), offers a powerful path to real change. An inclusive stance was recently

highlighted in a statement by Sir Lindsay Hoyle at the UK House of Commons, “After all, we men are the husbands, partners, brothers, sons and colleagues of those facing the menopause, so it is particularly important that we are on board as allies to offer our support and understanding” (Skopeliti, 2022, p. 4). We contend that the needs of all not only includes women experiencing multiple menauses but also every manager and employee who knows (or will know) a woman experiencing this bodily phenomenon.

A recent podcast on the BBC “Women’s Hour” presented an exchange between a younger manager in her 20s and an older woman in her 50s. Their exchange is a stark reminder that everyone can benefit from education: While the younger manager claims, “I don’t need this” (referring to a menopause event), the older woman responds, “It is to manage us” (BBC, 2022).

One tangible step toward menopause friendly workplaces has been the introduction of the “Menopause Workplace Pledge” by the UK-based organization, “Wellbeing of Women.” By signing this pledge, organizations “commit to making [...] a supportive and understanding place for employees going through the menopause” (Wellbeing of Women, 2022, p. 2). However, we argue that its commitments—including education—have yet to be broadly put into action.

Finally, we contend that Mead’s “zest”—the creative, energizing, and liberating aspects of menopause—is an insightful and promising social construction of menopause that creates space for the related concept of menopausal equity:

Menopausal equity could then be treated as one critical component in ensuring that involuntary biological process like menstruation (as well as its absence) do not impair full participation in all aspects of public and private life. Or, menopausal equity might instead result in separate, albeit overlapping advocacy, part of the growing movement to reclaim “older age” as a positive time of growth and creativity, rewriting the narrative to eradicate stigma. Ultimately, any movement for menopausal equity will need to be part of a larger agenda that also includes changing cultural attitudes of stigma and shame.

(Cahn, 2021, p. 38)

While *The Guardian* testimonials show that contemporary women artists, journalists, and managers have begun to sow seeds of menopausal equity, only a broad educational agenda—that “includes all”—can create space for women to thrive while countering pervasive, negative cultural perceptions. We argue that organizations have an important role to play in this dynamic process.

6 | LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We offer a theorization of a bodily process whereby women experience a renaissance that enables and enacts a process—“the dialectic of zest”—in the workplace. While we do not offer an exhaustive understanding of zest, we do lay the groundwork for future research and extend an open invitation for debate. For example, future research on organizational policies should further analyze the lived experiences of women experiencing menopause in varying contexts and time periods.

Our approach is informed by the feminist writings of Woolf, Kristeva, and Mead, which crystalize our argument that women experiencing menopause have not only the opportunity for “killing the angel in the house” but also discovering the “foreigner” within—all in the name of finally grasping the “zest” of menopause. However, other feminist writings could prove useful in interrogating the experience of menopause in the workplace. We thus encourage others to examine the individuation philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), which prioritizes becoming over being, a perspective that could inform organizations as they address menopause in the workplace.

Since we primarily draw upon the experiences of Western, privileged women who are accustomed to expressing their views, future research should focus on the experiences of menopause by other, less-privileged groups of

women. One area of promise includes the investigation of how other groups of women might experience zest, if at all. For example, how can employees live a form of liberation in the workplace? How do childfree women and transgender women “kill the angel” and experience zest? How do women whose bodies transcend standardized categorizations of desirability, such as women with disabilities, “discover the foreigner within” and experience liberation during menopause?

Future research should also compare women's experiences of zest from Western and non-Western contexts, addressing variation in the ways in which organizational policies are enacted and how multiple voices of women can inform organizational processes. Extant research in non-Western contexts, such as China, already demonstrates that attitudes toward menopause do impact symptoms. We therefore encourage others to investigate how attitudes concerning menopause can be shifted or changed at the individual, organizational, and societal levels, in both Western and non-Western contexts.

Finally, we also call for future research to analyze the experience of menopause at work attending to multiple intersectional vulnerabilities, including age, race, and social class.

7 | CONCLUSION

Our objective is to open alternative perspectives of not only the experience of menopause in the workplace but also the inherent opportunities for both women and organizations during this time of transition. We draw from the testimonials in *The Guardian* and contributions of feminist writers to interpret the meanings of voices now emerging from the menopause experience—ones that meet this time as a welcome and enriching experience. By adopting this approach, we move beyond mainstream medical discourses of menopause to initiate a conversation about what Margaret Mead coined the “zest” of menopause.

We argue that organizations have an opportunity to initiate a process of deconstructing discourses of decline around the bodily transition of menopause in the workplace. In addition to supporting women and educating all, organizations can choose to encourage and enable midlife women to flourish during menopause by allowing these women to pursue their ambitions and access other career opportunities. However, as organizations focus on visible support for women experiencing this bodily transition, they must also address potential risks of stigmatization that can hinder career progressions through overlooked promotions, undervalued work, and lost opportunities.

If women are freed from Woolf's “angel in the house” and discover Kristeva's “foreigner” within, women experiencing menopause in the workplace are now well-placed to thrive. We argue that organizations wishing to benefit from these enthusiastic women—in Mead's words, “the most powerful force in the world”—must also create opportunities for “education for all,” a compelling avenue to create the kinds of context where women experiencing menopause can contribute, advance, and thrive.

By starting a conversation that not only problematizes and re-examines current organizational interventions but also encourages organizations to address the largely unexplored and underutilized positive, creative and energizing aspects of menopause, we shift discourses from a negative, reparatory mind-set to a positive, creative vision of menopause in the workplace. Overall, our aim is not to adhere to the neoliberal discourse of productivity but rather to envision the kind of organization and society that allows and encourages women to make use of all their talents and creativity as part of the menopause experience. A holistic approach to organizational care, whereby the full range of concerns of women experiencing menopause are considered, is a powerful perspective that can inspire care not only for women but also for all individuals who may struggle with challenges in the workplace.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTE

¹ We employ the term, “women,” following current literature. However, we investigate menopausal issues that are also associated with the experiences of transgender women (Mohamed & Hunter, 2019).

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