

Menstrual and Menopause Research Project Workshop

Welcome!

This report focuses on our **Menstrual and Menopause Research Project Workshop**, which was held virtually on World Menstrual Hygiene Day, May 28th 2021. Thank you to those who attended and presented, it was wonderful to learn more about the exciting work and research that is happening in this field and we look forward to hosting another workshop in the future.

About the Workshop and Menstrual Hygiene Day

Co-convenor of The Body@Work Project, Associate Professor Elizabeth Hill, opened the workshop with an Acknowledgment of Country that acknowledged the tradition of custodianship and law of the Gadigal People, who have cared and continue to care for Country, and on whose land the University of Sydney campus stands.

In welcoming participants, Elizabeth explained the purpose of the workshop was to invite a variety of stakeholders together to share information and update one another on their work as researchers, unionists, employers and consultants in promoting menstrual, menopausal and reproductive wellbeing in all areas of life, but particularly the workplace. Elizabeth discussed the rapid growth in public interest, policy innovation and academic research in this field and that Australia is emerging as a leader in this space. Elizabeth also outlined the controversy in this area, which reflects the contested nature of the body at work.

“For feminists, how we position the body in the workplace is highly contested ... The tension [is] accommodating the reproductive body in the workplace to support inclusive and diverse labour markets in a way that fundamentally challenges the ideal male worker, this includes a number of risks. The risk is that policy design could in fact contribute to stigma or reinforce established gender norms and inequalities ... But equally possible is that well-designed policy can in fact support and extend gender equality and this tension is one of the reasons why policy initiatives for menstrual or menopause leave do attract so much public interest and commentary” – Elizabeth Hill

Elizabeth explained the history and vision of Menstrual Hygiene Day, which is to ‘create a world where no woman or girl is held back because she menstruates’. The mission is to ‘break the silence, raise awareness and change negative social norms’ surrounding menstruation across the world. This includes ensuring access to safe and affordable menstrual products, eradicating period stigma,

promoting menstrual education and ensuring access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. On this important day of global advocacy, the workshop was an opportunity for leading scholars and activists in the fields of political economy, industrial relations, gender studies, law and public health to meet and discuss research findings and policies related to menstruation, menopause and reproductive health and wellbeing.

We explored how our institutions and public policies shape social norms and practices around menstruation and menopause, and opened the conversation about how we can better support reproductive health and wellbeing in all areas of life. Presentations covered a range of workplace initiatives and research projects, including menopause training for managers, paid leave and flexible working arrangements for menstruation and menopause, the relationship between menstruation and the law, and union campaigning for reproductive leave. Connecting these diverse topics is a shared understanding that menstruation, menopause and reproductive health must not act as a source of inequality and barrier to participation in public life, including education and paid work.

Workshop Presentations

Sydney Colussi – University of Sydney

Sydney researches gender equality in the workplace, including policy responses to menstruation, menopause and reproductive health, in collaboration with Professor Marian Baird and Associate Professor Elizabeth Hill. Sydney reported on current research projects at the University of Sydney, including two forthcoming papers on menstrual leave, one paper on union campaigning for reproductive leave, and an edited volume on work and care policies for the Sydney University Press. These projects analyse the risks and opportunities of accommodating the reproductive body at work and Sydney is also interested in exploring reproductive health policies through a human rights lens.

“Reproductive health policy is a new and rapidly evolving space, but I think in certain circumstances [it] could have the capacity to reshape our understanding of workers’ rights and women’s rights” – Sydney Colussi

Kate Marshall – Health and Community Services Union (HACSU)

Kate is the Assistant State Secretary of HACSU and has played a critical leadership role in negotiations for ‘Reproductive Health and Wellbeing Leave’. This ground-breaking claim called for five days paid leave and flexible working arrangements to allow men, women and gender diverse

people time to attend to a range of reproductive health concerns, such as IVF, pregnancy loss, endometriosis, vasectomies and hysterectomies. Kate discussed the personal and political challenges of bargaining for this novel clause and outlined the ways in which it can help to promote gender equality and de-stigmatise reproductive health in the workplace.

“We have members who are standing up ... and telling their stories, which are incredibly moving. You don’t realise how much this clause means to people. And it’s actually, not only will it provide women and men with time to get treatment and to recover from reproductive health and wellbeing conditions, but also it breaks down that stigma, you’re able to have that conversation, and I believe this is the most important thing about this clause, we’re now actually talking about reproductive health ... we’ve all got a reproductive system, we’ve all got reproductive health, and that conversation needs to continue” – Kate Marshall

Tanja Kovac – Gender Equity Victoria

Tanja is the CEO of Gender Equity Victoria and was a key consultant in the development of HACSU’s original claim for Reproductive Health and Wellbeing Leave. Tanja explained how she applied a gender lens to HACSU’s log of claims in order to promote transformational change around gender and ensure the union was representative of its female-dominated workforce. Tanja designed a gender-inclusive clause in order to bring a broader group of people into the conversation around reproductive health and wellbeing, and to challenge the marginalisation of these issues in the mental health sector.

“I reflected on the history of the mental health sector, and its involvement in medicalising menstruation and really, to a large extent, almost demonising what are basically biological health issues for women ... This closes a historic conversation about reproductive health and its connection with mental health and wellbeing” – Tanja Kovac

Beth Goldblatt & Linda Steele – University of Technology Sydney (UTS)

Professor Beth Goldblatt and Dr. Linda Steele research the relationship between menstruation, law and justice at the UTS Faculty of Law. Beth explained that it is important to think about inequality related to menstruation in a multidimensional way that ensures a deep understanding of the nature of the inequality in order to ensure progressive and appropriate policy responses. Linda explained how an intersectional lens is necessary to deepen our understanding of the menstrual experience, which presents unique challenges to different groups of menstruators, including

those with disabilities, those who identify as non-binary and those who are incarcerated.

“[We] used a substantive equality analysis to think about the ways in which menstruation impacts ... and maintains inequality. But it is very important to have a deep understanding of that inequality if we are to develop appropriate equality and legal reform solutions” – Beth Goldblatt

“When we looked at the way in which law relates to menstruation, our starting point was general ideas of gender or sex equality but what we explored ... was intersectionality, or the way in which different groups of menstruators have different experiences of discrimination, disadvantage or violence in relation to menstruation” – Linda Steele

Alana Munro – University of Sydney

Alana is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney Faculty of Medicine and Health and a policy officer at the Australian Department of Health. Alana discussed her thesis research, which explores the menstrual experiences of university students and potential impacts on their education. Alana is particularly interested in the psychosocial aspects of menstrual hygiene management, including confidence to manage menstruation in different settings, which Alana explained is an overlooked issue in this field. Alana’s research found 86.69% of university students felt ‘completely confident’ to manage menstruation at home, but only 16.15% felt completely confident at university.

“We don’t succeed unless all succeed. Menstruators aren’t just women and girls, there are non-binary and trans menstruators, there are those who experience disabilities, there are those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and their experiences not only need to be visible but they need to be understood and respected” – Alana Munro

Casimira Melican, Victorian Women’s Trust & Jane Bennett, The Chalice Foundation

Casimira was the lead policy researcher at the Victorian Women’s Trust (VWT) and Jane is an educator and author in menstrual education and fertility awareness. As co-author of the VWT’s menstrual policy, which provides paid leave and flexible working arrangements for menstruation and menopause, Casimira explained how the policy has helped de-stigmatise these issues and promote menstrual health and wellbeing in the workplace. Casimira also discussed some of the challenges in implementing this type of policy, including challenging gender bias. As a menstrual educator, Jane discussed several ‘calls to action’ including the creation of

a new public health standard and national health education program for menstrual wellbeing.

“One of the top two things people come to me about when they’re interested in the policy, is this idea about – how do we mitigate the policy being abused? And it’s so interesting because I don’t think they realise ... that’s such a gendered question, that women lie about their bodies ... it’s interesting that people’s unconscious bias comes out” – Casimira Melican

“Given how ubiquitous the menstrual cycle is, for over half of our population, it’s astounding that we don’t have a concept of what menstrual wellbeing is, what constitutes menstrual wellbeing” – Jane Bennett

Leigh Dunlop – Future Super

Leigh is the COO of Future Super, an ethical superannuation company that recently introduced a menstrual and menopause leave policy. Leigh discussed the impetus behind the policy, which aimed to improve workplace satisfaction and engagement for workers of all genders and to create a safe and supportive working environment. Leigh reported that the policy was positively received by employees and, since the policy was introduced in January 2021, has been used by 22% of team members (equivalent to just over four days in total) and has normalised and de-stigmatised this topic in the workplace.

“We wanted people to be able to adequately self-care. We wanted to break down the stigma and, as I’ve said before, if we can’t fight for equality from within our workforce, [then] what are we doing?” – Leigh Dunlop

Thea O’Connor – Wellbeing and Productivity Advisor

Thea is a Wellbeing and Productivity Advisor who provides menopause training for managers and has started an e-training program, Menopause@Work. Thea discussed the rationale behind the program, which is to identify the responsibilities of organisations, managers and employees to create menopause-friendly working environments. The purpose of the program, Thea explained, is not to create menopause ‘experts’ but to distribute sufficient information about how this issue affects women in the workplace and to identify simple adjustments to improve working experiences. Through this work, Thea aims to “re-humanise our work ethic”.

“[Menopause@Work is] helping organisations to fulfil their responsibility to create a healthy and safe environment where women don’t get discriminated against” – Thea O’Connor

Workshop Participants

- **Elizabeth Hill (Usyd)** – Elizabeth is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Sydney. Elizabeth’s research focuses on the political economy of gender, work and care in the Asia Pacific, including the implementation and impact of menstrual leave and reproductive health policies. Elizabeth is also co-convenor of the Australian Work + Family Policy Roundtable.
- **Marian Baird AO (Usyd)** – Marian is a Professor of Gender and Employment Relations at the University of Sydney Business School, Head of the Discipline of Work and Organisational Studies and Co-Director of the Women, Work and Leadership Research Group. Marian’s research focus is gender and employment, including collective bargaining for reproductive health policies. Marian is also a Chief Investigator on the Centre of Excellence on Population Ageing research (CEPAR).
- **Sydney Colussi (Usyd)** – Sydney recently completed her Juris Doctor at the University of Sydney Law School and is a Research Assistant in the Discipline of Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney Business School. Sydney’s research focuses on the relationship between reproductive health, gender equality and paid work.
- **Beth Goldblatt (UTS)** – Beth is a Professor at the UTS Faculty of Law. Beth’s research focus is in the areas of feminist legal theory, equality and discrimination law, comparative constitutional law, transitional justice, disability, family law, and human rights with a focus on economic and social rights. Beth has published on the interaction between menstruation and discrimination law.
- **Linda Steele (UTS)** – Linda is an academic and researcher at the UTS Faculty of Law. Linda’s research focuses on the intersections of disability, law and social justice. In collaboration with Dr. Beth Goldblatt, Linda has also written on the complex interface between menstruation and the law.
- **Alana Munro (Usyd)** – Alana is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney and a Policy Officer at the Australian Department of Health. Her research explores the menstrual experiences of university students and impacts on their education.
- **Belinda Smith (Usyd)** – Belinda is an Associate Professor at the University of Sydney Law School. Belinda’s research focuses primarily on anti-discrimination law, gender equity and work-family conflict.
- **Rae Cooper AO (Usyd)** – Rae is Professor of Gender, Work and Employment Relations and is based in the Discipline of Work and

Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney Business School. She is Co-Director of the Women, Work and Leadership Group and a Member of the Executive Committee of the International Labor and Employment Relations Association.

- **Alice Muller (Usyd)** – Alice received her Masters in Gender and Development at the LSE in 2016. After three years working as a consultant and researcher for the private sector and more recently the UK Department for Education, she joined the University of Sydney in May 2021 as Research Officer for the new Gender Equality in Working Life research initiative.
- **Alison Williams (Usyd)** – Alison Williams MCom is a research associate with the Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research (CEPAR), focusing on helping mature workers to successfully care for family and others outside of work.
- **Lisa Gulesserian (Usyd)** – Lisa is a PhD Candidate and Research Assistant at the University of Sydney Business School. Her thesis, 'Uber fathers, flexible work and gender roles' explores how male Uber drivers in Australia balance their paid and unpaid work.
- **Imogen D'Souza (Usyd)** – Imogen is pursuing a Master of Global Health at the University of Sydney. Imogen's honours thesis critically examined the global Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) movement.
- **Tom Hvala (Monash University)** – Tom is a research affiliate with Monash University's School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, and is currently researching the impact of reproductive healthcare and conditions on women's employment.
- **Carla Pascoe Leahy (University of Melbourne)** – Carla is an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellow at the University of Melbourne and a Research Associate at Museum Victoria. Her research focuses on the histories and heritage of childhood, menstruation and motherhood in twentieth-century Australia.
- **Jane Bennett (Chalice Foundation)** – Jane is an educator and author in menstrual education and fertility awareness. In 2017, Jane established the Chalice Foundation, a hub for positive menstrual education advocacy, training and resources. In 2019, in collaboration with the Victorian Women's Trust and Dugdale Trust for Women & Girls, Jane authored *About Bloody Time: The Menstrual Revolution We Have to Have* (co-authored with Karen Pickering).
- **Casimira Melican (Victorian Women's Trust)** – Casimira was the lead policy researcher at the Victorian Women's Trust and has co-written submissions to the Victorian and Federal Governments on diverse topics such as women's superannuation, paid parental leave and women's leadership. Casimira played a critical role in designing and implementing the VWT's menstrual policy template.

- **Kate Marshall (Health & Community Services Union)** – Kate is the Assistant State Secretary of the Health & Community Services Union (HACSU) and has played a critical role in bargaining for the first claim for Reproductive Health and Wellbeing Leave in Australia.
- **Tanja Kovac (Gender Equity Victoria)** – Tanja is the CEO of Gender Equity Victoria and Director of her own communication, leadership and justice consultancy firm, Kovac & Co. Tanja worked with HACSU in the development of its Reproductive Health and Wellbeing clause.
- **Leigh Dunlop (Future Super)** – Leigh is the Chief Operating Officer at Future Super. Leigh played a critical role in the implementation of paid menstrual and menopause leave at Future Super, which provides employees up to six paid days leave per year.
- **Thea O'Connor (Wellbeing and Productivity Advisor)** – Thea is a Wellbeing and Productivity Advisor who provides menopause training for managers. Thea's e-training program, *Menopause@Work*, frames menopause as a workplace issue and helps to create menopause friendly working environments.

The Body@Work Project and newsletter is convened by Sydney Colussi, A/Prof Elizabeth Hill and Prof Marian Baird, The University of Sydney.