

Submission to Senate Inquiry into Menopause

from: SheListens Collective

www.shelistens.community

Contacts:

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To the Honorable Members of the Australian Senate Inquiry into Menopause,

We are Libby Chow, Vanessa Chapple and Sarah Miller, directors of the SheListens collective.). We came together in 2020 to make space for women to share their stories and experiences around perimenopause and menopause. We believe listening deeply to the experiences of women has the potential to redefine what it means to move through menstruation into menopause.

Menopause is experienced by one half of the population yet little is spoken of this profound stage in a woman's life when significant physical, psychological and spiritual change occurs. This is causing harm in our culture. As the full experiences of women are denied, knowledge and education is limited and women are left to try and figure out what is happening to them in one of the most profound stages of life. This silence reinforces the shame and stigma of the menstrual taboo with harmful consequences for women and society.

As described in *About Bloody Time*, the dominant cultural narrative on menopause is of deficiency, pathology and loss. Without hearing the rich tapestry of women's diverse voices to counter this narrative, women often view their own experiences through this lens and have to negotiate their needs in their workplaces, educational institutions, and with people in medical and other social systems who also view menopause in this way; the shame and stigma and ignorance is perpetuated.

With the support of The Dugdale Trust for Women & Girls, and the Wood Foundation, in 2020-21 the SheListens team held online circles for diverse women to speak freely about their experience of menopause. Eight of these women were invited to be part of the film we created, which aims to offer a catalyst for more in depth reflection and

sharing of this complex transition. Our film *Giving Voice to Menopause* was released in 2021. It is part of a multilayered wellbeing and health project which aims to bring into public view and conversation the existence and multifaceted experiences of menopause.

Through public and private screenings of our film with facilitated conversational spaces we have heard from many women about the powerful impact of the film, and the opportunity to share their personal stories and experiences. Speaking together surfaces both the shared health and wellbeing issues faced by women in their lives, and resources they use or are missing from services, workplaces, community and home environments. We see the power of this sharing. We believe it is of vital importance that there are many opportunities for the diverse stories of women's menopausal experience to be shared and heard. It is a move to inject the telling of this stage of women's life into the cultural conversation, to expand the field of telling of women's experience, and to counter the harm being done when society does not listen nor learn from wisdom and knowledge of women's physical, psychological and spiritual health and wellbeing.

Following the creation of the film we have worked alongside Jane Bennett of the Chalice Foundation and The Dugdale Trust for Women & Girls, (the harm-prevention entity of the Victorian Women's Trust) to develop, pilot and launch three new programs which exist under the umbrella name, WorkCycle.

They are:

- Menstrual Wellbeing at Work
- Menopause Wellbeing at Work
- Menopause Conversations at Work

The purposes of the WorkCycle programs are to:

- expand awareness of the issues of menstruation and menopause and the needs of those experiencing them

- provide guidance about supporting staff with particular challenges of menstruation and menopause
- present simple and practical steps toward creating a positive menstrual workplace culture
- propose straightforward recommendations for a stand-alone Menstrual and Menopause Wellbeing Policy and/or imbedding menstrual and menopausal wellbeing elements into existing workplace policy.

With this experience we propose the following recommendations:

Key Recommendations

1. Workplace Policies and Programs

Provide programs that support cultural change and a positive menstrual culture in workplaces. to do this provide:

- workplaces with guidance on perimenopause & menopause
- practical and policy supports for women and other people directly experiencing challenges during menopause
- awareness programs which help to create positive menstrual and menopausal culture through open, supported and ongoing conversations

All of these provisions will empower women and gender diverse people and help maintain their workforce engagement and productivity.

2. Workplace Culture

Address stigma in the workplace by providing explicit conversational space that addresses the culture of a workplace to enable employees to feel psychologically safe in acknowledging menopause and the effects to their lives; this also supports the uptake of Menstrual/Menopausal Policy, and other practical accommodations in the workplace.

3. Healthcare Education

Ensure that healthcare providers are educated about menopause as a holistic experience, rather than solely as a medical condition. Educate and support healthcare providers in the value and benefit of social prescribing (such as social networks, conversation spaces, and exercise). Educate healthcare providers about up to date research that demonstrates that women who have a positive framework for menopause experience fewer symptoms. Create opportunities and links to health and educational material regarding menopause which is holistic and widely available in the community.

4. Mental Health Support

Promote non-clinical interventions including conversational spaces for women to speak about their experiences and to grow networks of support. Create community engagement strategies and approaches which support mental and emotional well-being during menopause with an understanding of the vital role of social networks, conversational space and the de-stigmatisation of menopause.

5. Cultural Sensitivity

Foster an inclusive approach that respects the diverse experiences of menopause across different cultures including elevating the stories of the diversity of women and other people who experience menopause. Undertake more research and listening to First Nations experience of menopause and traditional medicine used to support the journey through menopause. Understand and support other cultural frameworks of menopause such as those found in Traditional Chinese Medicine and Ayurveda.

6. Community-Based Support

Create local support networks, including women's circles, conversation spaces and educational workshops, to provide peer support and to inject the telling of

this stage of women's life into the cultural conversation, and to counter the harm being done when society does not listen nor learn from wisdom and knowledge of women's physical, psychological and spiritual health and wellbeing.

7. Awareness Campaigns

Initiate public campaigns to destigmatize menopause and highlight its significance as a natural life stage, building on the community based support, cultural sensitivity and education programs mentioned in previous recommendations.

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SheListens <https://www.shelistens.community>

Who we are:

Vanessa Chapple has been creating and telling the stories of women and community through theatre, art and ritual for over 30 years. She is a theatre director and performing artist passionate about social and environmental justice and committed to the processes which value deep listening and mutual learning. She is coauthor and artistic director of 8 solo theatre works inspired by women's personal stories, has a long history with the Womens' Circus and POW (Performing Older Women) as artistic director and project leader. Her work has been experienced at Arts Centre Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, and many arts festivals of Victoria. She is the president of advocacy group AWDA (Australian Women Directors' Alliance) and on the board of Community Music Victoria. She is an experienced facilitator trained in Warm Data Labs and People Need People Online with Nora Bateson from The International Bateson Institute. She is presently undertaking a doctorate at RMIT at Creative Agency, School of Education focussed upon somatics and creative ecologies in public pedagogy.

Sarah Miller is a Teacher of the Four Seasons Journey and MoonSong (Menstrual Wellness) Workshop for the School of Shamanic Womancraft. She works with women in recreating mytho- poetic and embodied stories of their rites of passage, and teaches the fundamentals of menstrual wellness. In 2010 Sarah founded Embodiments Dance, a somatic movement and dance school for women to explore and enrich their relationships with their moving bodies and the body of the earth. She has worked with community organizations including TreeSisters, EarthSong, Global Water Dances and Save Westernport to create public rituals and dance to celebrate our inherent connection to nature. Sarah has presented stories to and for the community at many events, most

recently at Seven Sisters Festival 2020, Mt Martha on Surgical Rites of Passage for Women, and on Women and the Sacred Drum for the Priestess Podcasts, 2020 (online). She gives regular talks and storytelling sessions including at schools, and community based organizations. Sarah is an emerging playwright, storyteller and a ritual artist.

Libby Chow has been working in media, journalism and video production for over 20 years. After completing a bachelor of Creative Arts from Melbourne University. She began her career at The Age (Fairfax) in 2000 as a pioneering video journalist for their national online news websites. She left her position of senior digital content producer to begin her own business in freelance media production. Her experience as a journalist, set her up to focus on community projects, arts and not for profit organisations. She has worked with independent artists, The Brotherhood of St Laurence, Cultivating Community, CERES Fair Food, Health Issues Centre, VACCHO, Family Safety Victoria and other like minded organisations. Videobee is her one woman video production unit. She works with all stages of the process; Pre production and planning of logistics, scripting, budget, production, shooting, lighting, sound and photography. Also post production, working in the Adobe CC suite, with a focus on Premiere Pro CC. Aside from her video production work, over the 2020 lockdown in Melbourne, she initiated a series of Zoom events on perimenopause, offering sessions with therapists and creating a space for women to share their experiences and concerns surrounding this profound time of change.