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# Somewhere along the way on the journey to equality, menopausal women have been forgotten

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Written by Mandy Rhodes on 10 February 2019 in Comment

**It's something of a paradox now that on the journey women have travelled towards equality, it is in middle age that we are stalled by a uniquely female condition.**

It's not often my professional life as a political journalist collides with my personal life as a menopausal woman but Brexit, like a panacea for every crisis, has provided that bridge.

Two weeks ago, a pharmacist handed me just half my repeat prescription of HRT because of "distribution issues" caused by the uncertainty of Brexit.

And I unwittingly stumbled across the solution to any EU negotiation impasse – starve menopausal women of their HRT and the Jacob Rees-Moggs of this world truly will be heading for that special place in hell.

We are out of oestrogen and we are armed.

I told this story at a menopause conference organised last week by the Scottish Women's Convention and was overwhelmed with stories from other women about their own experience of 'the change'. It was like a dam had been burst and women needed to spill.

They described how they had been ignored, rejected and humiliated by the medical establishment. Disregarded, overlooked and even dismissed in the workplace and had been left feeling isolated and alone, often by other women.

But amid the horror stories of menstrual flooding, hot flushes, night sweats, vaginal atrophy, aches, pains and general brain fog, there was a real sense of enrichment, that there was empowerment in the retelling of lived experience by and among other women.

It is that sense of sisterly solidarity that, over decades, has powered us to a place where gender inequality is more talked about in the past than in the present.

And there was humour.

There was a beautiful moment of pure irony when a man had to be called in to the conference hall to actually turn the heating up.

And while an old boiler packing in as it revolted against the elements could well be an analogy for how many of the 150 women were feeling inside, I came away from that gathering feeling reignited by the energy in that room.

There was something entirely liberating about being with a group of women all sharing stories about something so natural but that somehow has felt up to now like the final taboo.

And how refreshing to hear the government equalities minister, Christina McKelvie, who has promised to champion the menopause cause, describe her allergic reaction to HRT patches as making her "bum look good for love bites", or to hear a health professional breaking down uncomfortable social mores and describing herself as a 'fanny physio' so she could discuss the surprisingly high prevalence of urinary and faecal incontinence among menopausal women without losing the room.

Women need laughter, and they need to know that what they are experiencing is common. But right now, the menopause feels like it has become a footnote in the push for equalities and that leaves women feeling very alone.

Enormous strides have been made by this Scottish Government in putting gender equality to the fore. The First Minister has been rightly honoured by the UN for her work in promoting parity. Period poverty is just one success on the road to breaking down the obstacles that can scar a woman's progress.

But somewhere along the way, menopausal women, the generation of women who put their foot down and accelerated this equality journey, have been lost. It can feel like one minority has leapfrogged another in a struggle to say who has been treated worse. And that is not how it should be.

Scotland should rightly be proud that it will become the first country in the world to embed the teaching of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex rights in the school curriculum, but where in our schools within the education of puberty, menstruation, and sex, does menopause figure?

This is important because it's not that it's been written out, it simply hasn't been included in. And while time has been spent on redefining who menstruates to reflect the fact that transgender boys and men could still have periods, what thought has been given to young girls who become women whose periods stop and how their bodies and minds may change?

The biological experience of being a woman from menstruation through pregnancy, childbirth and to the menopause is integral to the feminist cause because for so long it was the control over our bodies that was the instrument of our subjugation.

And it's something of a paradox now that on the journey women have travelled towards equality, it is in middle age that we are stalled by a uniquely female condition that has done more to disempower us than any male chauvinist could.

Last week, Scotland's top civil servant, Leslie Evans, was accused of pro-transgender bias for tweeting a poster which urged people who identify as 'cisgender' – the gender into which they were born – to recognise their privilege and entitlement.

Asked to comment on the use of the word 'cisgender', a government spokesperson explained that it used the term to avoid discrimination and instead of "pejorative" terms such as "biological woman or man".

Since when has it been 'pejorative' to call a woman a woman?

There is a fear right now that to question terminology, or the sense in gender neutral toilets, or having a national census that has a 'non-binary' option instead of just 'male' or 'female', is to invite a torrent of abuse.

Feminists who argue that proposed legislation around transgender could lead to an erosion of hard-won women's rights are shouted down, and those who want to interrogate, or talk about exclusively female issues, are silenced by accusations of being reductive.

But if ever there was a reason to champion the cause of women and the differences in their physiology that in later life leaves them open to some of the most invidious forms of discrimination and abuse, then it is the menopause.

And if there is an inherent bias against simply being called a woman, what does that mean in terms of recognising how productive life can be for women who are no longer reproductive?