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“A part of being a woman, really”: Menopause at work as “dirty” femininity

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Abstract
This research extends understandings of women’s lived experiences of menopause at work, as embodied complex gendered aging. Menopause as a type of “dirty” femininity and femme performance is theorized to elucidate both the stigmatizing effects of menopause at work and the opportunity to reclaim femininity in-and-for itself. This theory is illustrated through the accounts of women experiencing menopause at work. Menopause at work is problematized, pathologized, and “dirty” as an embodied experience that is physically, emotionally, morally, and socially tainted. As “dirty” femininity, menopause represents both material “dirt” (leaky bodies) and symbolic “dirt” (no longer leaky and no longer fertile), thereby eroding women’s ability to perform patriarchal hegemonic femininity. Small pockets of resistance are also observed as some of these women engage in femme performances in defiance of hegemonic masculinity. The article offers avenues for future research in shame, taint management, women in leadership, and intersectionality to extend the conceptual and empirical contributions on menopause at work.

KEYWORDS
critical femininities, dirt, dirty femininity, femme theory, femme-phobia, interpretative phenomenological analysis, menopause, stigma

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The experience of menopause is and will remain undescribed, because menopause is a non-event. It doesn’t happen on a day or in a place. It is not announced, or applauded or deplored

Germaine Greer (2020).

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is nascent interest in management and organization studies (MOS) to better understand the experience and impact of menopause at work (see for example, Atkinson, Beck et al., 2021; Atkinson, Carmichael et al., 2021; Beck et al., 2018, 2021; Brewis et al., 2020; Butler, 2020; Steffan, 2021; Steffan & Potočnik, 2022). As increasingly more women over 45 are engaged in labor market participation (Verdonk et al., 2022), policy attention is also increasingly being directed toward menopause at work (e.g., Brewis et al., 2017). Atkinson, Carmichael et al. (2021) contend, however, that menopause at work “remains under-theorized and poorly understood in work and employment literature” (p. 658). Further research is required on how menopause plays out in gendered organizations where hegemonic masculinity prevails and the abjected feminine body is out of place. Feminine bodies are othered and can be perceived as a source of disgust in organizations (Gatrell, 2014). Gatrell et al. (2017), as well as Atkinson, Beck et al. (2021), contend that this othering of the feminine body can extend beyond pregnancy to “menstruation and menopause, [where] women’s mere capacity for reproduction” (p. 241) “can render them abject and out of place” (Mavin & Grandy, 2016a, p. 1100). As such, menopause can expose women at work as (uncomfortably) visible through their leaky bodies (e.g., excessive menstrual bleeding or sweating) and yet invisible through their diminished femininity (e.g., no longer fertile, weight gain). This research extends understandings of women’s lived experiences of menopause at work, as embodied complex “gendered aging” (Riach et al., 2015, p. 437).

The overarching research question that initially guided this exploratory study was, “How do women experience menopause at work?” Through an iterative process of data collection, analysis, and re-readings of various streams of interdisciplinary literature (e.g., MOS, sociology, gender studies), menopause as a type of “dirty” femininity and femme performance is theorized to elucidate both the stigmatizing effects of menopause at work and the opportunity to reclaim femininity in-and-for itself. The contribution of this research is threefold. First, it contributes to the literature on gendered ageism (e.g., Atkinson, Carmichael et al., 2021; Duncan & Loretto, 2004) and gendered aging (Riach et al., 2015). This is accomplished in conceptual and empirical ways by teasing out the complexities of how age and gender intersect as part of women’s embodied identity during (and post) menopause, rendering women vulnerable, shamed, exposed, and disadvantaged in work settings where patriarchy reigns. Second, the research builds upon the emerging research on menopause at work, such as that of Beck et al. (2018, 2021), Butler (2020), Steffan (2021), Atkinson, Carmichael et al. (2021), and Gatrell et al. (2017) to illuminate, in new ways, how menopause at work and the women who experience it are stigmatized. To do this, several streams of literature are fused including abjection of women’s bodies (e.g., Butler, 2020; Mavin & Grandy, 2016a, 2016b), stigma (e.g., Ragins, 2008), sociological “dirt” (Douglas, 1966), “dirty” work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Rivera, 2015), and shame (e.g., Dar & Ibrahim, 2019; Friedman, 2022). Third, the research contributes to the nascent field of critical feminities (Hoskin & Blair, 2022), in particular, literature on femme theory (Hoskin, 2017, 2021) and femmephobia (2019), and extends Whiley et al.’s (2022) conceptualization of “dirty” femininity, leveraging it to theorize that “dirty” femininity accounts for the stigmatized yet femme performative nature of menopause at work as gendered ageism.

In what follows, an overview of the limited research on menopause at work is discussed first. A discussion of menopause and the maternal body as stigmatized and “dirty”, and how femmephobia contains menopause is also covered. The literature review concludes with a theory of menopause as “dirty” femininity. Following a description of the research design, we then illustrate our theory of menopause at work as “dirty” femininity through the accounts of our participants. In the discussion and conclusion, the unique contribution of our work is highlighted and offer novel avenues for future research, avenues that bring together gendered aging, menopause at work, and the literature on shame, taint management, intersectionality, and women in leadership.
1.1 | Menopause at work

Menopause is experienced by most women and is a process of aging, which involves the end of menstruation. The average age of menopause is 51 and the symptoms experienced are diverse (Beck et al., 2018). The most commonly cited symptoms include “heavy/irregular periods, hot flushes, night sweats, sleep problems, fatigue and reduced concentration” (Atkinson, Carmichael et al., 2021, p. 661). The broad literature on menopause (outside of MOS) mostly adopts a biomedical lens where menopause (and by extension menopausal women) is akin to disease and deficiency (Atkinson, Beck et al., 2021). For example, menopause is defined as ovarian dysfunction (Perlman et al., 2018) or estrogenic deficiency (Marsden et al., 2019). It is almost always framed as something that needs to be managed, cured, and relieved (Krajewski, 2019). Menopause narratives allude to living with decay (Perz & Ussher, 2008), being in despair (Usher et al., 2019), being out of control (Whittaker, 1998), and being undesirable (Dillaway, 2005b).

In the limited literature on menopause at work in MOS, this biomedical lens is problematized and menopause is more likely to be recognized as gendered ageism (see e.g., Atkinson, Beck et al., 2021; Beck et al., 2021; Butler, 2020; Steffan, 2021). Atkinson, Carmichael et al. (2021) characterize menopause as a type of double jeopardy where gender and age intersect. We too feel uncomfortable with the biomedical explanation and representation of menopause, not least because menopause is a lengthy process that can occur anytime between 45 and 55 years of age—a span of 10 years, and these sorts of othering stances can have powerful effects on how women perceive and experience menopause (Coupland & Williams, 2002; Hyde et al., 2010).

The extant literature in MOS on menopause draws attention to how menopause at work is a taboo. In addition to experiencing a diverse range of potential negative physical symptoms (e.g., exhaustion, excessive bleeding, and/or sweating), women experiencing menopause at work are humiliated, marginalized, stigmatized, and subject to questions of self-worth and shame. For example, menopausal women report being “teased, harassed or bullied for having hot flushes and other symptoms as well as threatened with negative ratings in performance reviews” (Beck et al., 2021, p. 517). In their work on women’s experiences of menopause in the United Kingdom (UK) police force, Atkinson, Carmichael et al. (2021) also share accounts by women who describe their felt embarrassment in “explaining that you are sweating—or flooded with a period… it’s like being back at school, when it is quite an embarrassing situation” (p. 667). They also highlight how men (and women) talking about menopause at work “is another reason to ridicule, embarrass and talk down to the females” (p. 670). Steffan (2021) suggests that women engage in conflicting behaviors to make sense of their menopausal bodies at work and, in doing so, “menopause talk was emotive, fearful, negative, and self-deprecating” (p. 207) where the menopausal feminine body becomes of “precarious value within the world of work” (p. 207).

Butler (2020) takes that implied notion of menopause as stigmatizing in Steffan (2021), Beck et al. (2021), and Atkinson, Carmichael et al. (2021) further, by theorizing menopause at work as “abjection work”. In doing so, she extends Mavin and Grandy’s (2016a) work on abject appearance, to surface the simultaneous intrigue and disgust of women’s menopausal bodies at work, bodies subject to embarrassment, and bodies that are out of place. Beck et al. (2018, 2021) also draw attention to menopause at work as gendered ageism, where menopause and women experiencing it are stigmatized.

These works highlight, albeit in different ways and often subtly, how menopause positions women at work as flawed and subject to questions of self-worth and discrimination, yet they also suggest potentialities for agency. Our research builds upon this body of literature to more vividly surface the stigma of menopause at work and theorize that hegemonic masculinity serves to contain the feminine (aging) body (and women) through menopause as abjected, “dirty”, and out of place.

1.2 | Menopause and the maternal body as stigmatized and “dirty”

According to Mavin and Grandy (2016b), “the normatively defined male body has neither sexuality nor gender, while the female body introduces gender and sexuality into the workplace (Acker, 1990; Sinclair, 2011) and, as such, “women come to stand for the Body itself” (Twigg, 2006, p. 148, in Brunner & Dever, 2014)” (p. 382). We theorize
here that the maternal body at work is stigmatized and abjected because it is “leaky” (pre and during menopause) and then it is stigmatized again when it is no longer “leaky” (post menopause). Women are, therefore, as Tavris said, in a double bind where “the only thing worse for women than menstruating is not menstruating” (as cited in Chrisler, 2011, p. 204).

While Ragins (2008) described stigma as individuals that are viewed as flawed within a social context, more recent theorizing on stigma claims that stigma is not an attribute but rather a socially constructed process by which one is marked as different and then devalued (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). Stigma imparts “social disapproval”; it is “discrediting” (Bos et al., 2013, p. 3). Although stigmatization is experienced by the individual (woman), we suggest that the stigma of the maternal body marks all women suspect and subject to scrutiny and “questions of self-worth, stereotyping, discrimination, and bias” (Thomson & Grandy, 2018, p. 2). Stigmatization of female (or feminine) bodies thus serves to discredit and devalue women thereby marking them as out of place and “dirty”, and this is not restricted to menopausal bodies. Pregnant and post pregnant body are also considered sources of disgust (Gatrell, 2014); premenstrual experiences are considered to be weird, gross, and embarrassing (Ryan et al., 2022), and pregnancy can be secret and shameful (Gatrell, 2014).

Like stigma, sociological “dirt” is a social construction; it is a “matter out of place” which “offends against order” (Douglas, 1966, p. 2). The maternal body carries with it the threat of material (e.g., leaky) and symbolic (e.g., at odds with the ideal re: masculine body at work) “dirt”; bodies which pose a risk to unsettling the rational masculine order in organizations (Boyer, 2012). Perceiving something—or someone, as “dirty” implies that they have transgressed the ordered relations of ideal society (Dick, 2005)—they are “other”, stigmatized because they breach social norms. Women have, indeed, shared that they are reluctant to talk about their menopausal symptoms for fear of “being stereotyped, judged, or criticized due to gendered ageism” (Beck et al., 2018, p. 249). They have also reported negative perceptions of their competence (Griffiths et al., 2010; Hardy et al., 2019; Steffan, 2021).

Hegemonic masculinity, in and outside of the workplace, informs embedded standards of embodied femininity, whereby women “need to be able-bodied, youthful, slim, light-skinned, smooth, hairless, and sweet smelling... lest they be ‘gross’ [...]” (Whiley et al., 2022, p. 4), and, by our extension, it is argued, “dirty”. Interestingly, even in conforming to such strict (impossible) standards, women are always at risk of being stigmatized and out of place (“dirty”) in organizations, because of their leaky and unstable bodies, through pregnancy, menstruation, and menopause. Menopause is considered especially unpredictable. Although not all women experience menopause as negative, those who do often find themselves in a vulnerable position, suspect to uncontrollable and erratic bodies, emotions, and job performance.

Further, if women are not feminine in precisely the right embodied kind of way “to establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship with hegemonic masculinity”, then they threaten “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). Hegemonic femininity is femininity that is equated with attractiveness to the male gaze and sexual availability (Whiley et al., 2022), and, by extension, fertility—that is, the feminine body is positioned as a “material object, to be observed, judged, valued, appreciated, rejected, modified and essentially commodified” (Ponterotto, 2016, p. 134). Aging, especially as a woman, is stigmatizing (Chirsler, 2007; de Salis et al., 2018). Men, who also age, do so in a so-called “sexy” way and retain their status (Chambers, 2012). Women, on the other hand, become pariah (Schippers, 2007), “hags” (Henneberg, 2010, p. 130); “no one is looking at them anyone” and they are rendered invisible (Chirsler, 2007, p. 6). By daring to age, menopausal women are threatening with their “leaks, lumps, and lines”, their signs of “aging writ on the body” (Chirsler, 2011, p. 204) for all to see. They are doing what good patriarchal women are never supposed to do by flushing, sweating, and leaking, taking up more space with their “dirty” aging bodies than hegemonic femininity permits them to do. Indeed, Greer (2020) notes how the “idea of eliminating menopause came not from women but from men who thought that the cessation of ovulation was a premature death, a tragedy” (p. 1). We theorize that menopausal women at work threaten hegemonic masculinity because their “dirty” bodies—leaky or no longer leaky, too fertile, or not fertile enough—render them unable to perform hegemonic femininity. In effect, they perform a type of “dirty” femininity and are subject to femmephobia.
1.3 | Femmephobia and containing menopause

Hoskin (2019) defines femmephobia as anti-femininity that polices the transgressions of patriarchal femininity. Feminine and feminized bodies that threaten the patriarchal order are subjected to femmephobia. For example, Whiteley et al. (2022) theorized breastfeeding as a “dirty” performance of embodied femininity because these women were (shamelessly) breastfeeding in public and seemed to enjoy this performance of femininity in-and-for- itself without being subjected to the male gaze or offered up for male consumption. They proposed that those women were performing femme, thereby out of place and offending the so-called natural order of patriarchal society. Femme refers to feminine lesbians, and more recently, it has also been used as defiant theory. Hoskin (2017, 2019) puts forward that femme refers to “deviations from the rules of patriarchal femininity” (p. 687); it offers “a way out, out of heteronormative assumptions, oppressive rules governing femininity, and the limitations imposed” (Hoskin, 2021, p. 4). Femme theory is “challenging and renouncing the (socially constructed) idea that femininity is for men and that masculine right of access is woven in its very fabric” (Whiteley et al., 2022, p. 3 [emphasis in original]).

Feminine bodies who dare breach hegemonic norms and deviate from permissible gender performances are punished (Butler, 1999). Hoskin (2019) shows how women who transgress are subject to femmephobia—anti-femininity that polices their violations of patriarchal femininity. Hoskin (2019, p. 687) further identifies that femmephobia consists of “containment strategies” that reinforce and protect patriarchal gender norms as to maintain and reinforce “femininity's subordinated status” and “gender hegemony”. Earlier work by Schippers (2007) showed how so-called pariah femininities were contained lest they contaminated patriarchal social order, and Grandy (2008) also showed how performances of femininity were policed specifically in the workplace—also by other women. In these ways, and more, femininity is policed and regulated; only hegemonic (patriarchal) femininity is permitted and those who transgress are othered, stigmatized, and punished. Here, we extend these works to theorize menopause at work as subject to femmephobia and needing to be contained, otherwise serving as a threat to patriarchal femininity.

Hyde et al. (2010) observe how menopause is framed as a medical condition instead of a life event. We put forward that this is a form of normalized femmephobia whereby society constructs menopause (and other feminine experiences such as menstruation) as deviant and in need of interventions to manage and treat. Indeed, attitudes toward menopause are overwhelmingly negative (Erbil, 2018) and often focused on unpleasant bodily sensations such as hot flushes and sleep disturbances. Menopause as a lived experience is pathologized, with hormone replacement therapy as a good example of how the pariah femininity of menopausal women is contained. Certainly, representations in the media are abound with grotesque menopausal women who need to urgently replace their hormones—so that they can re-perform the socially permitted version of femininity (Whittaker, 1998).

Menopause at work is theorized as “dirty” femininity subject to femmephobia. Menopause stands in defiance of, and as a threat to, the order prescribed by masculine hegemony in organizations. Menopause needs to be contained (read: femmephobia) and those women experiencing it at work ought to be cast out, shamed, and stigmatized in order to regain order. The pervasive hold of patriarchy is particularly vivid in the ambivalence and conflicting behaviors of women experiencing menopause at work (see e.g., Atkinson, Beck et al., 2021; Butler, 2020; Steffan, 2021). In theorizing menopause as “dirty” femininity, we position it as representing both material “dirt” (leaky bodies in contrast to the idealized masculine clean and contained body) and symbolic “dirt” (no longer leaky and unable to perform hegemonic femininity through youthful and fertile bodies). Further, menopause at work is theorized as surfacing potentialities for agency, that is, when menopause is talked about openly and celebrated, it is a type of femme performance, illuminating further its threat to hegemonic masculinity and thus “dirty” femininity. In the next section, the research design for our work is discussed, followed by an illustration of the theory through the accounts of six women’s stories.
2 | RESEARCH DESIGN

To explore the lived experiences of menopause, we adopted a qualitative design, fitting for stigma-related research (Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021), and applied Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is guided by phenomenology (i.e., how events are felt and understood by individuals) (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is especially suitable for exploring "complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden" phenomena (Smith & Osborn, 2014, p. 41)—such as menopause. It is grounded in embodied principles with the objectives to understand what participants think, feel, and sense. These principles align well with the physiological and psychosocial considerations of menopause.

Small and homogenous purposively selected samples are the most appropriate for IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). For example, a sample of 13 participants would be considered "large"; (Wagstaff et al., 2014) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) recommend between six and 10 participants. This is because IPA places an emphasis on each individual participant and values their unique lived experience before moving on to the shared points of the phenomena. To this end, in this study, six women with lived experience of menopause were recruited to participate through recommendations and snowballing techniques: Alice, Becky, Claire, Diana, Erica, and Fiona (all pseudonyms). The participants all identified as cisgender women who regarded themselves as professional women working in an office or service-based industry. They were all mothers, would be classified as White-British, and all lived within the same social and economic area of the UK.

Each participant was advised on the aims of the study and given background information about the project ahead of formal data gathering. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person with the second author. Informed consent was obtained, and interviews were securely recorded and transcribed verbatim. An interview guide with exploratory prompts was created, but it was not a prescriptive list of questions. The aim was to be faithful to the principles of IPA and let the women guide the interview and talk about the menopause in their own terms, focusing on the things that were important to them and their journey (e.g., Smith, 2011). The participants were provided with introductory briefing and control over the location, timing, pace, and direction of the conversation, so as to reduce the pressures and anxieties commonly associated with participating in research interviews. It is important to note that the questions were framed around the work environment; however, as the women explored their experiences, their descriptions encapsulated impacts and connections with other aspects of their lives.

Data was analyzed in accordance with the guidance set out in Smith et al. (2022) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012). The transcripts were read several times to create familiarity with the data. The first read-through was undertaken while listening to the original recordings so that the tone of the emotional content was well understood, and important inflections were noted. Each transcript was first considered in isolation. Initial comments and observations were made in a far-right hand column about events and personal impacts, and significant words, phrases, and emotions were noted in a near-right-hand column. The emergent themes were then written out and grouped together on separate pieces of paper and categories were formed. These were then transferred to a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel. Cross transcript analysis was then undertaken looking for connections and meeting points between participants' accounts (e.g., how all participants experienced "uncontrollable" emotions and felt inadequate at work especially with younger co-workers). This to-ing and fro-ing between transcripts led to the clustering of higher superordinate level themes (e.g., loss of dignity and ageism in the workplace). The research team then discussed the themes; it was an iterative fluid process with several returns to the transcripts to source additional examples (e.g., who else referred to dignity and shame?) or to review the context of a statement (e.g., what did they mean by "taboo"?) Various streams of literature were reviewed to help make sense of the women's stories and the emergent themes, as is common in more exploratory research. The transcripts were reconsidered meticulously, and the superordinate theme classifications were fine-tuned to construct a theoretical map that presented both participants' accounts (at the descriptive level) and our interpretation thereof (at the interpretative level).

In what follows, two superordinate themes are presented that illustrate our theory of menopause at work as "dirty" femininity: the first, problematized, pathologized, and "dirty"; was loudly audible in each participant's account and across the sample; the second, pockets of resistance: performing femme, was a quieter murmur, tentative but nevertheless echoing dissidence against patriarchal hegemonic femininity.
3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Problematized, pathologized, and “dirty”

This theme illustrates how menopause at work can be understood as physically, emotionally, morally, and socially “dirty” and of both material and symbolic “dirt”. For example, the “dirty” materiality of menopause related to bodily phenomena such as sweating or hot flushes whereas the symbolic taint alluded to expressions of socially unacceptable emotional expressions, defect of character (morally), or social contagion (socially).

3.1.1 | Menopause as physically “dirty”: Making leaky “dirty” bodies visible

Participants experienced menopause via performances of physical embodied “dirt”. These were most notably the notorious hot flushes and sweats (“literally, my hair was dripping”, Claire)—all of which thrust women into the uncomfortable (and shameful) position where their heretofore hidden leaky (“dirty”) bodies were suddenly made visible to the public. Despite having developed tremendous skills at covering up their monthly cycles for decades, participants suddenly found their feminine “dirt” exposed (“I could feel it leaking everywhere…I think what am I doing, I can’t cope like that”, Diana). The intensity and unpredictability of these enforced and shameful revelations left participants feeling “a little bit dirty” (Claire) and always “a bit on edge” (Fiona) because they were not controllable or even predictable. Menopause peeled off participants’ protection and exposed them: “it makes me feel that I’m generally more vulnerable” (Claire).

There was little that they could do to prevent or mask these unacceptable exhibitions of the feminine self; it was a “nightmare” (Becky):

> It’s happening to my body and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. So, if you had a cold you might take some paracetamol, or a cough you take some cough mixture. When this happens, it’s without warning and there’s nothing you can do to see it off.

(Claire)

Although participants also recognized that menopause was “something that’s so basic for a woman” (Claire), it was nevertheless commonly problematized and perceived as something undesirable (“oh Christ, I’m here already, I don’t want to be here”, Becky). Menopause was also pathologized as a state of deficit where “things are starting to deteriorate” (Claire), “your levels are diminishing a bit” (Becky), and “everything just disappears” (Diana).

Participants felt unable to cope with all the physical “dirty” symptoms of menopause and these women shared embodied lived experiences of menopause (e.g., intense and unpredictable menses, sweat). We interpret this as representative of physical “dirt” because they are associated with bodily fluids (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999 on physical “dirty” work). These unwelcome symptoms were especially “dirty” and shameful for these women because, as we interpret it, they were used to cover up and mask the “dirt” in order to perform a more socially acceptable version of womanhood where neither sweat nor menstrual blood is seen “leaking everywhere” (Diana). These women experiencing menopause at work described feeling “a little bit dirty and grubby” (Claire), and on guard, because of the unpredictability of these embodied performances.

3.1.2 | Menopause as emotionally “dirty”: Experiences of “uncontrollable” emotions

Participants also experienced menopause via performances of emotional “dirt”. They had irritability in common and all felt intense emotions, but menopausal emotions were especially extraordinary, even beyond what these women...
were used to fielding when they were menstruating: "normally you’re just extremely sad and a little tear[y], but this is proper blabbing stuff" (Becky). Furthermore, participants shared the helpless awareness that these "dirty" emotions were happening to them; they were unable to control their emotional performances, and this eroded their dignity: "your body actually takes over and turns you into that gibbering wreck whether you want to or not" (Becky); "just like something has come into your body, it has to do its stuff", "I can’t control it. It’s happening to my body and there’s nothing I can do to stop it" (Claire).

Fiona spoke about the multiplying emotional burdens faced by women, the difficulty of keeping emotions in check, and the efforts made to control the uncontrollable emotions (mixed with the physical effects of not sleeping). Some women "had elderly dependents, so they’d be trying to cope with that, as well as not sleeping, being irritable" explained Fiona. To mitigate these uncontrollable emotional and physical effects, the women engaged in various medical interventions: “take your supplements and stuff like that”, to “balance out” and to “override this” (Becky). Some participants took recourse from hormone therapy to "dampen down some of those symptoms" (Erica) and to "put hormones back in your body that your body’s naturally trying to lose" (Diana). Indeed, menopause was almost exclusively perceived as a state of deficit where "things are starting to deteriorate" (Claire), "your levels are diminishing a bit" (Becky), and "everything just disappears" (Diana).

At times, the emotions were so fierce that it felt "like your blood is boiling and boiling and boiling" (Fiona). Becky likened it to transforming into "the Hulk":

I exploded. That was the whole day where he [spouse] literally missed me stabbing him or hitting him with a frying pan by that much. Because I wanted to get that frying pan, I’m not going to lie. I wanted to bash his head in and not stop because he’d made me so angry.

((Becky)

Similarly, Fiona used the metaphor of a boiling kettle to describe the intensity of these emotions and also her felt limited agency to control her emotions:

It's like it spreads up and then it's like about to go, like a kettle goes off. It's like a boiling kettle but then it clicks off when it reaches a certain thing.

(Fiona)

These uncontrollable emotions were perceived to be out of place, making women experiencing menopause at work vulnerable, and at risk of being stigmatized. Participants were especially cognizant that these extraordinary outbursts debilitated them from performing the appropriate hegemonic version of femininity, and they felt aggrieved at this perceived faux pas. Becky, for example, notes how she had to "reign" in the non-feminine aggression that she experienced, and instead, performed the role of a superwoman who was "coping" as to present herself in a more hegemonically permissible way:

my first instinct is to retaliate back aggression...then reign myself in.

(Becky)

I just wanted to be Superwoman, that just wanted to be at work every day, deal with the house, keep everything cool in line, keep it in check and nothing is going to faze me.

(Becky)

I saw women of my age really working hard, balancing their lives and dealing with what I was possibly dealing with, as well and coping with everything.

(Becky)
Participants’ engagement with what we interpret as emotional “dirt” were also non-feminine emotions such as aggression and uncontrollable outbursts that metamorphose them into the Hulk (a rather masculine metaphor we would add). Participants felt frustrated that were unable to control these intense emotions as well as they would have wished to, and also expressed defeat: “there’s nothing I can do to stop it” (Claire). We interpret a sense of shame and a loss of dignity intertwined in their engagement with these “dirty” emotions—shame that they were unable to be superwoman, “cope” (Becky), and perform perfunctory femininity, and also an affront to their dignity by behaving like a “gibbering wreck” who is “blab bing stuff” (Becky).

3.1.3 | Menopause as morally “dirty”: Becoming less of a woman

Menopause was also a marker for aging, and more importantly, it was associated with feminine aging: “because it’s part of the aging process for a woman” (Diana). Menopause also signified the end of youth and the beginning of aging, and of being an “old” woman—which meant, no longer performing hegemonic femininity (e.g., “you are no longer, you know, a young woman”, Diana; “lost that thing of being a woman”, Fiona). Youth was associated with (hegemonic) femininity, and was therefore, desirable, but menopause was tainted by its association with (feminine) aging, which brought with it a loss of fertility and fading of sexual availability to the patriarchal male gaze. We interpret this as a type of moral stigma where age and gender intersect to mark a woman’s character in some way as less of a woman, less feminine. For some of the women interviewed, menopause was the start of losing their fertility, alongside a felt loss of dignity of becoming less than a woman. We interpret that this femmephobic stigmatization arises where age and gender intersect to mark a woman’s character in some way less of a woman, less feminine because her performance of femininity is in-and-for-itself instead of being offered up to the male gaze and consumption.

Menopause represented entering a stage in womanhood where having children was no longer a possibility and it was framed as a “loss”:

We have phases, don’t we? We start our periods; we have that phase when we’re fertile and we can produce. I think what throws stuff out is that women are having children a lot later than they used to, because we’re trying to have everything.

(Diana)

...the menopause is linked with loss of fertility and ageing.

(Diana)

There was a sense of grief associated with this loss of femininity, even though having more children may not have been a part of participants’ goals. This loss was expressed as a loss of autonomy and, by our extension, dignity. For example, Fiona sensemade it as a “choice” being “taken away” from her:

The fact that you’ve lost it, it’s taken away ... I don’t know because I never ever wanted more children.

I just think the choice of it has been taken, of not being able to make that choice.

Now, with my girls, I don’t know if envy is the word, but you think they can still go on if they want and have children. And you think, that’s over for me.

You know losing that thing. You’ve had it, you’ve had it taken away from you, the choice, haven’t you?

For the participants, menopause was associated with loss. It was not a decision that participants were making; they did not consent; it was happening to them. Their feminine fertility was being “taken away” (Fiona) and they were helpless to stop it, in much the same way that menopausal intense emotions were happening to them, and they had limited control to “reign” (Becky) them in. Participants echoed a sense of grief entwined with the finality of this loss:
it was over for them, it “took away” (Fiona) their fertility, which was evidently important to their identity as a woman even if they no longer, practically, wanted (more) children.

It is theorized that this felt loss (of femininity, of autonomy) rendered women experiencing menopause as morally "dirty" because society connects it with aging and vividly illustrates menopause as gendered ageism. Old femininity did not sit well with the patriarchal hegemonic femininity that these women were expected to perform. For example, Diana sensemade that:

It’s very difficult to deal with it as a woman, to deal with ageing full stop, not just the menopause. I think, in today’s society, that’s a dirty word. So, we’re not allowed to age as women. We’ve got to look like our daughters….We’re not allowed to get old.

Diana’s comments were not framed as exclusive to her experiences of menopause at work, but they do transfer into her workplace experiences. Participants were mindful that they were expected to always be youthful at work (“because you’ve not got to get old, because you know, you’ve got to look young”, Diana), especially in the workplace where youth was associated with capability (“if you want to be part of the vibrant work force, you’ve got to stay young”, Erica). Even while aging, participants felt social pressure to emulate youth:

All this shit that we buy trying to make ourselves look younger – anti-aging and all that. It’s all bollocks, all of it, but we keep buying it in the hope that we’ll hit on something that actually works because we don’t want to get old.

(Diana)

So, you’ve got to stay looking slim, attractive, and all that rubbish. For example, on Tuesday, when I have to be in at six, I get up and put makeup on at [half] past five in the morning. What’s that about?

(Diana)

Diana was “in on the joke” as she described it; she knew that she was performing hegemonic femininity because of internalized patriarchal norms: “What’s that about?”, she expressed. Despite acknowledging this, she continued to perform a particular notion of femininity to hide her age (and thus menopause). She described that she woke up early in the mornings to put on makeup so that she could play to, “all that rubbish” because those were the norms that women were ushered into performing: “you’ve got to”, “not allowed to”. Here, similarities can be seen between participants’ cognizance of hegemonic norms vis-à-vis looking young, and participants’ accounts of having to be vigilant about performing hegemonically permitted feminine emotions. Even when women were aware of the misogynistic game, the pressures to conform and the expectations to participate were simply too powerful—women are mandated to perform hegemonic femininity and perform it they must lest they commit a moral transgression. When age and gender intersect for women experiencing menopause, they are exposed and vulnerable because they may be perceived as less than a woman, immoral, and deviant.

### 3.1.4 Menopause as socially “dirty”: Social contagion

Participants also described menopause at work as a social taboo, something unspoken and hidden, and something to distance oneself from. In effect, the distancing from others experiencing it at work, as well as efforts to hide menopause, serve to protect women from a social contagion of sorts. In this way, menopause as “dirty” femininity is contained. Participants talked about menopause as a socially taboo topic to discuss at work (e.g., “a taboo subject”, Diana; as “one of those things quite taboo”, Claire). Indeed, it was “unspoken” (Diana), especially in the workplace: “it’s not something that’s talked about very often, you could experience symptoms of menopause [and] not know what was going on” (Diana)—even amongst other women.
Women made efforts to conceal their menopause and were concerned that they would be discovered, and that menopause would be attributed to them to the extent that it was “easier to make something up rather than say” (Diana) they were experiencing menopause:

I think that if I was to verbalise my feelings to people where I was feeling quite negative against them [...] I think it’s, “Oh, it’s her age [read menopause] that’s making her be like this.

(Fiona)

I feel like people are watching me and judging me, even though they’re probably not.

(Becky)

I hope everybody doesn’t know.

(Alice)

I don’t want to have that label on me.

(Becky)

The association with feminine hormones was especially stigmatizing because women’s lived experiences, particularly those deemed as breaching hegemonic patriarchal gender norms, can be undermined and trivialized because of their inherent femininity:

I didn’t want people to treat me any differently or think I needed any special attention or time or anything.

(Alice)

I think, “What do you mean? Why? Do I have to be on a period or something, because I’ve actually said something that you don’t like?” That’s the thing, it’s blamed for why women are like they are sometimes.

(Fiona)

Certainly, menopause was something that could be mocked in the workplace, especially by male co-workers: “I think it’s just because they want to make a silly joke. They’re just being boys” (Alice), but there was an undercurrent of misogyny:

Because I don’t think it is humour with men when they say that. I think it’s their way of getting back because you’ve said something they don’t like.

(Fiona)

Menopause was especially socially “dirty” and stigmatizing in the workplace for women who worked with men: “I think it’s more of a reticence. If you have a male boss, I don’t think you necessarily want to discuss the menopause” (Erica); or in younger teams: “I don’t think they’d discuss it with any of the younger people in the team” (Alice). For example, Claire recounted how her male co-worker was “completely shocked” when she mentioned that she was going through menopause:

**Claire:** “I feel I can’t share that [...]”

**Interviewer:** Can’t share because?
Claire: “Well because I work with men.”
Claire: “Has your wife had the menopause?” and he said “yes.” He looked completely shocked .... He did look very shocked when I first said it.”

Erica felt a similar reticence with her younger co-workers:

I was in a young environment, so I didn't want to highlight the fact that I was having the menopause necessarily, because I think there is a bit of a stigma around it and I think middle aged women do get stigmatised and they do get rejected.

(Erica)

Menopause was constructed as unprofessional, something to be hidden lest it would make others feel uncomfortable or even make woman visible as less able and less competent: “But when you're trying to portray a professional person, I think that's when it's quite embarrassing” (Erica); or weak: “And they don't want to talk about it to anybody because it's almost seen as a weakness” (Diana). There was an assumption that menopause represented a decline in competence, in performance, and in inadequacy for the workplace: "I don't feel adequate" (Becky); “I think people look at me and think—you used to be able to remember the finer details, what's the matter?” (Claire). Participants reported belittling emotions at work, such as feeling stupid (“it makes me feel stupid because I'm beneath the benchmark I've set myself”, Diana) and useless (“oh God, people will think I'm useless because I can't do my job properly”, Alice).

3.2 | Pockets of resistance: Performing femme

The accounts were plentiful in stigmatizing examples of how menopause was “dirty” femininity shrouded in shame and vulnerability. Some emerging pockets of resistance in participants' accounts, however, were observed, albeit much less frequent. Sometimes, participants tried to push back against patriarchal expectations and hegemonic norms of femininity. They were indeed cognizant of the pressures and expectations that were placed upon them as women. For example, Diana emphasized the “rough deal” that she believed was inherent in being a woman—it was built-in: “I think women get a rough deal anyway from an evolution, bio view”. Claire elaborated on this line of thinking and expressed that these alleged biological pressures were further crushed by societal expectations, which were glaringly absent from men's lives:

I think a lot of men come to work and have got themselves out of bed, put on a shirt their wife has ironed, and bought breakfast on the way in and thought about nothing else. I always think working women are magnificent because you do so much more than just hold down a job.

(Claire)

On occasion, participants tried to reframe menopause as natural, and refute its pathologizing associations. For instance, Claire asserted that menopause was “just part of life, isn’t it?” Alice reiterated a similar sensemaking by linking menopause with aging but, importantly, maintained that it was not an “affliction”:

I actually don't see it as being any kind of affliction. I just see it as being something that you go through when you get to a certain age.

(Alice)

For some, the discomfort surrounding menopause was more about its uncertainty and how it was an unfamiliar for many: “It's just unknown because it's different for everybody” (Claire). There were also a few comments that went as far
as framing both menopause and aging as positive. For example, Diana expressed how, “in a way, becoming older is quite liberating” and that, “we should be celebrating that and not dreading it”. Similarly, Alice joked that, “it’s a shame it couldn’t be sooner really”.

These reframed pockets of resistance gave hope, and reiterated the need to reclaim femininity. In contrast to the more dominant perception of menopause as erasing femininity, there was some (small) hope that perhaps, 1 day (“when we find some commonality that’s when we can talk to other women about it”, Diana), there would be acceptance that menopause was a fundamental aspect of femininity—a “part of being a woman, really” (Erica). Put differently, a type of femme femininity perhaps.

4 | DISCUSSION

In theorizing menopause as “dirty” femininity and femme performance, both the stigmatizing effects of menopause at work and the opportunity to reclaim femininity in-and-for-itself are elucidated. In doing so, we contribute to Atkinson, Carmichael et al. (2021), Atkinson, Beck et al. (2021), Duncan and Loretto (2004), and Riach et al. (2015) on gendered ageism and gendered aging by showing how menopausal women at work are rendered vulnerable—simultaneously exposed and invisible. Many women felt that they were not allowed to age; instead, they had to labor to mask the signs of “dirty” aging to present themselves as continuously youthful. Even when women were self-aware of this gender policing (e.g., Diana’s acknowledgment “what’s that about?”), the shame was simply too powerful. Women thus attempted to protect themselves (e.g., Dar & Ibrahim, 2019) by engaging in what Clarke and Griffin (2008) call “beauty work” to maintain their “social value” (p. 653) by, for example, waking up early to put on makeup and “all that rubbish” (Diana). Along similar lines, Steffan’s (2021) recent MOS research revealed how women manage menopause in the workplace by investing heavily in their appearance as a means of “self-preservation” to present their bodies “as fit for purpose” (p. 204). Women felt the need to “prevent/mask” their bodily changes so as to remain “attractive, visibly feminine, and desirable in the eyes of men” (Dillaway, 2005b, p. 53). In other words, they had to perform hegemonic patriarchal femininity, gender policed violations, and labored to mask. It is expected that these bodywork expectations are in part a reaction to the disciplining of maternal bodies at work. We cannot help but think about Gatrell et al.’s (2017) argument to explain the continued underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles. They argue that the “more subtle, visceral (and possibly unconscious) hostile reactions to maternal bodies […] position senior-level women as incompetent and out of place, to the point of “deviancy” […]” (p. 240). We are left wondering about how women in leadership who are menopausal navigate these complexities. This would be a fruitful area for future research.

Second, conceptually and empirically, it is argued that menopause at work (and women experiencing it) represents both material and symbolic “dirt”, thereby stigmatizing women. Women experiencing menopause at work felt “a little bit dirty and grubby” (Claire); their leaky feminine bodies abject at work (Mavin & Grandy, 2016a, 2016b). As to meet the demands of the (clean, orderly, masculine) neoliberal workplace (Steffan, 2021), women’s feminine aging bodies needed to be kept “under control” and “minimized” (p. 205), but menopause rendered them uncontrollable, falling short of expectations. For example, our research illuminates how expressions of menopause, many of which included feminine bodily fluids such as sweat or heavy menstrual blood, were akin to the materiality of physical “dirt”, neither of which are permitted to be seen “leaking everywhere” (Diana). Women participants also questioned their self-worth and acceptability in organizations. It was perceived that menopause added women’s capabilities at work; it marked the end of their “productive life” (Grandey et al., 2020, p. 18), and brought down the façade of being able to perform as “superwoman” (Becky).

The materiality of “dirty” menopause was further aggrandized by its symbolic “dirtiness”, represented by social, moral (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), and emotional “dirt” (Rivera, 2015). Menopause was socially taboo and unspeakable at the workplace (e.g., Hardy et al., 2019), especially with male colleagues or younger co-workers. Those who were brazen enough to transgress these social norms and dare to speak openly about these “dirty” feminine experiences
were met with shock and disbelief—like Claire who had the audacity to ask a colleague about his wife’s menopause. Further, the experiences of participants illustrate how menopause can be understood as morally “dirty”. In this context, motherhood is constructed as a fundamental aspect of being a woman (Turnbull et al., 2017), and menopause is perceived as a loss for women who could no longer perform hegemonic femininity vis-à-vis fertility. Furthermore, this identity loss is felt as shameful (de Salis et al., 2018). Indeed, (post)menopausal women embodied a “defect of feminine character” (Oshana, 2006, p. 356 [inclusion ours]) that diminished their worth—in other words, moral “dirty”, for they were no longer the “perfect wife, the perfect mother, the perfect worker” (Diana). Our participants expressed grief at this loss. Menopause was also interpreted as emotionally “dirty”, represented by emotional outbursts that transformed these “good” women into “gibberish wrecks” who were “blabbing stuff” (Becky). These “dirty” emotions tainted their professionalism and evoked “strong feelings of shame and embarrassment [...] if revealed... would leave them vulnerable to negative judgment” (Friedman, 2022, p. 513). Again, women had to safeguard themselves from this shame (e.g., Dar & Ibrahim, 2019) and “reigned in” (Becky) these “dirty” emotions in order to maintain the appearance of competence in front of others for emotionality at work is associated with inexperience (Sandager, 2021)—it is perceived as “not behaving ‘right’” (p. 1314). Feminine emotions, in particular, are often used against women as a means of undermining their capabilities (de Salis et al., 2018). For example, references to that “time of the month” overwhelmingly construct women as hormonal, irrational, and moody (Thornton, 2013)—as being other to the (masculine) “unspoken order of the organization” (Jack et al., 2019, p. 126), which is controlled, reliable, and unemotional (Acker, 1990).

These women feel and are shamed at work. Scheff (2002) describes shame as a family of emotions including “embarrassment, humiliation, and related feelings such as shyness, that involve reactions to rejection of feelings of failure or inadequacy” and these emotions all involve the “feeling of threat to the social bond” (pp. 96–97). As argued by Daniels and Robinson (2019) in their review of shame in organizational life, shame can lead to withdrawing behaviors thereby potentially leading to further negative outcomes for women experiencing menopause at work. Dar and Ibrahim (2019) draw from Bjerg and Staunæs (2011) to describe shame as an “ambivalent experience because it makes us look down and turn away in order to protect ourselves from the confrontation with the surrounding that triggered the shameful feeling” (p. 1248). At the same time, they highlight how individuals still desire to maintain the social bond or relation so as to “access the positive affect” (Bjerg & Staunæs, 2011, p. 146). In the accounts of the women interviewed, such ambivalence comes through as they talked about not sharing their experiences and trying to hide it from those more youthful in the organization, yet some of them also talked about menopause should be celebrated. This ambivalence is also evident in the extant literature on menopause at work. For example, the women in Atkinson, Carmichael et al.’s (2021) research expressed an ambivalence about the perceived benefit of organizations having a menopause policy because “it is becoming the new ‘flavor of the day’” and if it went “too far it will be detrimental to women...people will start to think [older] women... are less able to do their work, and a group apart” (p. 670). This threat to the social bond, or shame, and how it informs stigma for women experiencing menopause at work is worthy of future study. In a related vein, future research should explore how the taint management strategies employed by “dirty” workers (e.g., refocusing, reframing—see Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) intersect with shame for women experiencing menopause at work.

Third, our research contributes to the emerging field of critical femininities within gender studies, in particular, it is inspired by Hoskin’s (2017, 2019, 2021) work on femme theory and femmephobia, and extends Whiley et al.’s (2022) theorizing on “dirty” femininity. Hoskin (2019) explains that femmephobia is the fear of femininity, and we apply this lens to women’s experiences of menopause at work to theorize how transgressions of hegemonic femininity via gendered aging and expressions of menopause as physical, social, moral, and emotional “dirt” can be understood as performances of “dirty” femininity—a “dirtiness” grounded in femininity. For example, how we note menopause is subject to femmephobia via excessive pathologizing, and reveal how women engage in containment strategies (e.g., Hoskin, 2019) by reeling in their “dirty” emotions and masking their aging feminine bodies. Moreover, Hoskin (2021) puts forward femme theory as theory that defies “heteronormative assumptions, oppressive rules governing femininity” (p. 4), and Whiley et al. (2022) proposed that women performing “dirty” femininity in-and-for-itself are
performing femme. So too, we observed examples of this in participants’ accounts, albeit much more tentatively than the normative pressures to conform. Some participants, for example, acknowledged that women received a “rough deal” (Diana), and there were some attempts to normalize their lived experiences as “just” age or “just” a part of life; in particular, as *a part of being a woman*. Indeed, there was even a slight sense of relief that came from no longer having to conform to society’s expectations of femininity: “it’s a shame it couldn’t be sooner really” (Alice). These quieter, but nevertheless present, undercurrents might be spaces where women unashamedly perform “dirty” femininity as proud Femme. There is indeed emerging menopause literature that alludes to the more positive aspects of menopause. For example, participants in Hvas (2001) described menopause as a relief and in Ussher et al. (2019) as a new beginning.

Menopause could also be perceived as sexual freedom whereby women are liberated from pregnancy worries (Ussher et al., 2015), even as a good old (Dillaway, 2005a). Some women also note how positive values associated with aging, such as wisdom, self-awareness, and self-worth, lack biomedical perspectives on menopause (Perz & Ussher, 2008). Yet, this acknowledgment of menopause as normal and natural, even good, is overshadowed by cultural expectations of patriarchal hegemonic femininity in a society where older women are expected to “naturally withdraw from their social roles so as to make their ultimate disappearance—death—less difficult for the smooth functioning of society” (Woodward, 2003, p. 63). Future research that looks specifically at resistance strategies and femme performances of women experiencing menopause at work would undoubtedly surface additional new insights.

We are mindful that our theorizing is based on and limited by our own cultural frames and data, which was collected from a homogenous sample of White middle-class professional women in England at a time when menopause at work was receiving some media coverage (e.g., BBC, 2022). Certainly, the analysis is aimed at and speaks to western perspectives, which are both embedded in biomedical frameworks and play to specific standards of white, slim, and youthful performances of femininity. There are several matriarchal societies where women and older women are revered, where aging is associated with wisdom and elevates a woman’s status in the community (e.g., the Bribri of Costa Rica, the Minangkabau in Indonesia, the Khasi of India). Further, despite their “dirt” vis-à-vis gender and menopause, participants nevertheless enjoyed the privileges that came with their standing in society as white, professional, middle-class, cisgender women. There are several “intersecting sources of oppression” (Hoskin, 2017, p. 96) that subjugate women (e.g., ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexuality etc.) and participants were privileged in only having to battle the intersection of these identities. Women from minority ethnic groups, women in lower socio-economic positions, and women with other intersecting stigmatized identities, as well as transgender and non-binary folk, may have altogether different experiences of menopause at work, and this is proposed as a crucial area for future research in femmephobia (Hoskin, 2019) and “dirty” femininity (Whiley et al., 2022).

5 | CONCLUSION

In this research, understandings of women’s lived experiences of menopause at work as embodied complex gendered aging were extended (Atkinson, Carmichael et al., 2021; Beck et al., 2018, 2021; Riach et al., 2015). Women experiencing menopause at work are abjected and out of place. This research builds upon the nascent body of work in MOS on menopause at work and extends the extant literature on femme theory (Hoskin, 2017, 2021), femmephobia (Hoskin, 2019), and breastfeeding as “dirty” femininity (Whiley et al., 2022) to theorize menopause as a type of “dirty” femininity and femme performance. In doing this, both the stigmatizing effects of menopause at work and the opportunity to reclaim femininity in-and-for itself are illuminated. This theory is illustrated through the accounts of women experiencing menopause at work. Menopause at work is problematized, pathologized, and “dirty” as an embodied experience, which is physically, emotionally, morally, and socially tainted. As “dirty” femininity, menopause represents both material “dirt” (leaky bodies) and symbolic “dirt” (no longer leaky and no longer fertile), thereby eroding women’s ability to perform patriarchal hegemonic femininity. Our finding have also shown small pockets of resistance as some of these women engage in femme performances in defiance of hegemonic masculininity. Despite these new insights, there is still much to explore about menopause at work and, here, we offer avenues for future research in shame,
taint management, women in leadership, and intersectionality to extend our conceptual and empirical contributions on menopause at work.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTE
1 Greer (2020) specifically identifies interventions by men (doctors) that occurred prior to the more recent hormone replacement treatment including hysterectomy, castration, electrified rod treatment, etc.

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