



# THE COST OF IGNORING WOMEN'S HEALTH AT WORK

Let's be honest, for far too long, women's health has been treated as a private matter. Something to manage "outside of work hours." But the truth is, when we sideline women's health in the workplace, we pay the price in productivity, in talent loss, and in human cost.

Women make up nearly half the workforce, both globally and here in South Africa. They lead, build, nurture, innovate, all while managing health experiences that are often invisible at work. Menstrual pain, fertility treatment, pregnancy loss, perimenopause, postpartum anxiety, these are real, physical and emotional experiences. And yet, in most organisations, there are no policies. No language. No space.

That silence is expensive.

## The Hidden Costs We're Not Talking About

Think about this: if someone shows up to work but is battling chronic pain or hormonal fatigue, what do we really expect from them? Studies from the UK and US have quantified the impact of untreated women's health issues as billions lost to absenteeism and presenteeism.

And while South African data is still emerging, we see the signs. Women requesting unpaid leave. Struggling through back-to-back Teams meetings with migraines. Feeling isolated after miscarriage or IVF. Wondering if it's safe to even mention menopause at work.

These are not "soft issues." They're strategic ones.

# **We Lose Talent We Can't Afford to Lose**

We talk a lot about women in leadership — but do we talk about what it takes to keep them there? Deloitte's 2023 Women @ Work report found that burnout remains a top reason women are leaving organisations. Yet only a fraction feel their wellbeing is actually supported.

Retention is not just about salaries and titles. It's about dignity, support, and relevance.

## **We Need to Meet the Moment**

Most organisations have wellbeing programmes. But here's the problem: they are not designed with women's health in mind.

We need targeted interventions. That might look like:

- Flexible leave for menstruation or fertility treatment
- Menopause awareness sessions for managers
- Access to emotional support after pregnancy loss
- Normalising health conversations during performance reviews

## **This Isn't Just the Right Thing to Do. It is Smart Strategy.**

McKinsey's research is clear: diverse, inclusive, and psychologically safe teams outperform. If we want more women at the table, we have to support them in staying there. That means not just creating space for leadership potential, but also for human experience.

And let's be clear, when we ignore women's health, we are not neutral. We are complicit in a system that makes it harder for women to thrive.

# So Where Do We Start?



1. **Listen.** Run a confidential health experience survey. Ask: what are women navigating in silence?



2. **Educate.** Offer manager training on gender-responsive wellbeing. Make it safe to ask the right questions.



3. **Policy Shift.** Review leave, EAP, and wellness benefits through a women's health lens.



4. **Embed.** Don't make this a once-off campaign. Integrate it into onboarding, leadership development, and everyday rituals.

## Final Thought

We cannot build the future of work on outdated assumptions. Women's health is a workplace issue. And how we respond to it will define not just our culture, but our credibility.

Let's not be the last to get this right.



For more information, support and advice feel free to reach out to us on [transnet\\_ap@mhg.co.za](mailto:transnet_ap@mhg.co.za)

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