

Women in Business

Sudden hair loss prompts tough choices for women

Appearance Dress codes and disruption to identity add to difficulties, says Sarah Murray

In 2021, on being diagnosed with breast cancer, Jessica Neville, a communications executive, did something she often did in her professional work: she made an announcement. "I decided to be upfront with my colleagues and share what was going to be happening," explains Neville. Going public about her diagnosis and likely hair loss boosted her confidence, she says. "And I got an outpouring of support."

Given the close links between hair and personal identity, its sudden loss – whether because of cancer treatment or alopecia, a medical term for different kinds of hair loss – can prompt everything from fear to grief.

The psychological toll is not to be underestimated. In one recent academic study, 78 per cent of women reported feelings of shame, anxiety or depression as a result of hair loss. In another, 63 per cent said it had led to career-related problems.

"It disrupts your identity," says Catherine Horgan, a US-based executive style consultant whose clients include women with hair loss. "And the identity piece is tough – that takes some time to work through."

That is not to say sudden hair loss is less traumatic for men, though there have been fewer studies of the effect on men of the resultant stigmatisation and acceptance of potential remedies.

While head coverings, including wigs, are part of everyday life for many women including Black women and those from certain cultural or religious backgrounds, including Judaism and Islam, problems arise when women have to navigate an unforeseen, drastic and abrupt change in their appearance.

There are rules to navigate at both societal and corporate level for how women manage their appearance.

For example, some countries dictate that women's heads should be covered, but even in more laissez-faire jurisdic-

tions, companies often set dress codes and grooming standards (and in certain industries, insist hair is tied up for safety reasons).

The topic is so fraught that in some locations, for example in the US, there are laws that prevent companies being discriminatory when it comes to enforcing dress codes.

The way women in business look – including what is on their heads – is far more closely scrutinised than it is for men, according to Alison Bruhn, co-founder of The Style That Binds Us, an image advisory with high-profile female clients, including in finance and global leadership. "With men it doesn't matter that much. For women everything matters," she says.

There have been multiple studies on unconscious bias and how it might be among the reasons fewer women secure senior positions than men.

"Hair is part of the power dynamic," explains Bruhn. "It's less about being

chic and coiffed. It's about not being a distraction. If you're presenting in a boardroom and it's a distraction, the moment you have to get your point across is lost."

It is for this reason that many professional women experiencing hair loss wear wigs, rather than other headcoverings, at work.

'Hair is part of the power dynamic... It's less about being chic and coiffed. It's not being a distraction'

Yet even these can prove a distraction if they do not match a person's personality and style, argues Horgan. "The most successful wigs reinforce who people are, rather than creating someone new," she says.

Not everyone wants to wear a wig,

however. As Neville's cancer treatment began, she decided against a wig. "It didn't feel like the right choice for me," she says. "So I tried lots of different types of caps. I wanted to wear natural fabrics, and it was summertime, so I wanted them to be breathable."

Concern for comfort was part of the reason Manchester-based Ali Nowroozi founded Masumi Headwear, a company that produces specialised headwear for people with alopecia or who are undergoing cancer treatment.

Nowroozi had been working as a general manager for a distributor of wigs and hair systems. As he visited clinics and hospitals, he learned that many women experiencing hair loss did not want to wear a wig. "They found it too itchy and were worried that it might fall off," he says.

Yet other options were both visually dull and uncomfortable. "My idea was to bring in colour and fashion and use organic materials such as bamboo and

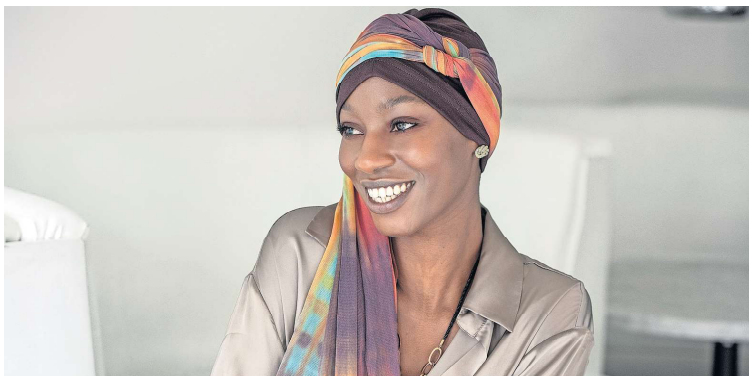
layering so there's no stitching inside," he says.

Since Nowroozi launched his company in 2015, the choice of headwear being marketed to such women from different companies has widened.

Whatever they choose, says Nowroozi, women should find something that is comfortable and fits with their personal style. "It's all about how you feel – whether you feel like wearing a wig, headwear or nothing," he says.

Neville agrees. "You have to do what feels right for you," she says. However, she also stresses how important it was to her to be open with colleagues. "Then I could feel at ease, and we could get back to business."

And while her hair has grown back, she has not discarded the caps. "They really helped me during the most difficult time of my life," she explains. "So I did not throw them out. I put them away with some gratitude at the back of the closet, and that's where they are now."



Masumi Headwear is one of several companies catering to people undergoing cancer treatment

Menstrual leave is more common, but it remains a topic of fierce debate

Welfare

There are concerns that the policy could increase stigmatisation and even lead to poorer healthcare provision, says Alice Kantor

Women are increasingly being offered paid time off work to cope with painful periods, but there is a fierce debate over the value of menstrual leave and fears over unintended consequences.

While advocates say the measures could improve productivity and mental health in the workplace, some say the topic of menstruation is so taboo that women do not take advantage of leave when it exists. Others fear that the policies could lead to more discrimination or to poorer health outcomes.

A growing number of provisions have been put in place in recent years to address menstruation in the workplace, with Spain in 2023 becoming the first country in Europe to introduce a legal right to menstrual leave. There are calls to mandate similar leave nationally in Australia, France and the UK.

"There's been a rapid rise of these policies in recent years," says Elizabeth Hill, a political economy professor at the University of Sydney. "It's been a global movement," she says.

Menstrual leave in itself is not a novel concept. It was introduced in the Soviet Union in 1922 to encourage women to enter the workforce. Japan and Indonesia followed suit with legislation in the 1940s.

The modern movement was given

fresh impetus, according to Hill, in 2017 when the Indian tech company Culture Machine introduced paid period leave.

Set leave days that can be used by working women to deal with painful periods could increase productivity lost to menstruation and improve mental health, research suggests.

The leave might reduce presenteeism, when people are at work but getting very little done.

A 2017 Dutch study estimated that working through severe period pain costs around nine days of lost productivity annually. This could be reduced with targeted menstrual leave, proponents of the reform say, as well as help with talent retention.

While data on productivity is still nascent, Hill believes the long-term benefits will mirror those of maternity leave. "Maternity leave has been a positive contributor to gender equality in the workplace and a boost to women's economic security," she says. "I believe the same will happen with menstrual leave, although it will take time."

Yet hurdles remain.

For one thing, stigma around menstruation means that, for example, in Spain few people actually take advantage of the policy.

In some other countries, the measure has even increased stigmatisation, says Sally King, a visiting fellow at King's College London and author of *Menstrual Myth Busting*.

She has found that the leave can lead to workplace resentment. "These policies can have unintended consequences," says King.

King also says that menstrual leave risks being used as a panacea for



The leave might reduce presenteeism

women's health issues in the workplace resulting, for example, in the failure to provide proper healthcare support for chronic conditions such as endometriosis – a serious medical condition affecting large numbers of women who have tissue similar to the lining of the womb growing elsewhere, causing severe pelvic pain.

"It normalises severe conditions like endometriosis instead of encouraging proper medical attention," says King.

King favours instead gender-neutral solutions such as flexible working, a four-day workweek, and cultural adjustments.

"There are much better options out there," she says.

Lidia de la Iglesia Aza, a labour law professor at the Spain's Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, agrees that there is still a stigma around menstruation. But she says with more policies put in place globally, the prejudice is likely to fade. "The more you talk about it, the more people can be open about what they need," she says.

She also dismisses concerns about discrimination, saying there were similar anxieties around maternity leave in the past. Instead, she says, the debate has encouraged companies to better accommodate women's health.

"These are steps in the right direction. Even little accommodations can make a big change in women's lives," she says.

Networking

Research points to a gender divide in making contacts, but hard work pays off, says Izzy Titherington

When recent graduates are told to build networks in order to advance their careers, the advice masks a bewildering maze of conflicting strategies.

To begin with, academics have noticed a gender divide in network building. A 2020 study published in *The Economic Journal* found that men are more likely to establish "loose" connections, whereas women build "tighter and more interconnected" networks.

Rosabeth Kanter, a prominent sociologist and professor at Harvard Business School, says that it is often those more informal connections that prove most valuable. These "weak ties," she argues, open more doors than close-knit circles.

"The key to successful networking is that you get to know people who are not in your immediate circle, who are distant relationships, and that opens up new connections into new circles," she says.

Allyson McDonald, managing partner of Ellevest Network, a global community of professional women, has a simple rule: stay yes.

She argues that any connection can prove fruitful and cites an example from her personal experience: she agreed to meet a woman who was seeking career advice, but that meeting led to McDonald herself finding a new role after the woman offered to make an introduction in return.

For graduates entering the workforce,

that scenario might feel unattainable. But even with a limited circle of contacts it can still be possible to create opportunities.

Like many international students, Mahima Srikanth had to build a professional network from scratch after moving from India to France in 2022 to pursue a masters in management at ESCP Business School.

During her studies, she completed internships at Danone and L'Oréal, using networking events, career fairs and internal relationship-building to raise her profile. An internship at L'Oréal led to an apprenticeship after she secured the support of senior colleagues, and that apprenticeship ultimately became a full-time role. She is now a consumer insights manager at L'Oréal Paris.

For Chloe Carroll, who graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2019, and is now a director at London gallery Phillida Reid, "networking as a concept

Networking as a concept is... just thought of as the social life of the art world" — Chloe Carroll



is perhaps more blurry... it's just thought of as the social life of the art world."

"Of course, nepotism exists," adds Carroll, but she points out that opportunities can still arise because the industry prioritises in-person interaction.

Annette Male, chief executive for the UK and Ireland at advertising group Dentsu, would agree that networking can sound more complicated than it is.

She suggests asking someone more

senior to make an introduction or bring you to an event.

"Then do the simple – and sometimes uncomfortable – bit. Show up. Start conversations. Be curious," she says, adding that it is important to try to spend time with people who are not at the same stage of their careers as you.

For recent graduates for whom this might sound especially daunting, she also points out that rewards could come long into the future.

"When I returned to the UK after 10 years away, I worried my network had disappeared. I was honest about that with people I trusted and asked for help reconnecting. It worked," she says.

"One thing I've learned throughout my career is that networking is never 'done' – at every stage, you must keep building relationships," she adds.

How you do that remains a moot point. "Women have to be intentional about it," says McDonald, adding that men often take advantage of events such as company golf outings, which can make it feel very natural to network.

This recognition that women might need to try harder has helped spawn a range of networking opportunities for women from WhatsApp groups to coffee clubs.

Kanter, however, cautions against becoming too insular. "I'm actually worried about this trend towards interest groups that cut people off from other people."

But with AI and even remote working practices reshaping the workplace, networks are likely to become even more important.

"When things change... it's the people who can easily connect with other groups and other departments... who are most likely to emerge as leaders," says Kantor.

Job-hopping can pay, but the employment market is changing

Career planning

Data shows switching employers boosts prospects, but harder choices are beginning to emerge, as Marianna Giusti explains

Tanuja Randery has worked for a succession of employers over her career since starting out with consultancy McKinsey in 1995. Now managing director for EMEA at Amazon Web Services, Randery's journey highlights an approach to career advancement which has become a topic of debate online: job hopping.

The practice of changing employer frequently and favouring a string of stints over long-term loyalty can theo-

retically help employees to boost both salary and seniority. But in a sluggish job market it can make sense to stay put. The decisions you make might also change depending on what stage of your career you are at.

Latest data from the UK government shows entry level hiring is weak and, while there was no clear pattern for changes in hiring across seniority, the report concluded that "employers are likely to favour more experienced candidates". The US job market is buoyant, but academics have also expressed concerns around a fall in hiring for entry-level jobs.

"We are no longer in the 'Great Resignation'," says Lauren Thomas, economist at HR software company Deel, referring to the significant numbers of US and UK employees who switched jobs in the pandemic in search of better-

paid or more rewarding work. "We are now in the 'Great Freeze'."

Nonetheless, Bank of America Institute data released in May shows that while US job switching is way below its peak in 2022 of more than 16 per cent, it increased slightly in the first quarter of this year over the same period last year to 13.5 per cent of those with a steady pay cheque. And the practice still pays, but the gap in wage growth with job stayers is decreasing. It also found that, in contrast, loyalty paid off for higher earners.

For women, different dynamics could be at play. Recent academic research suggests that mobility on the whole is strongly correlated with higher pay and that motherhood, in particular, can interfere with job mobility and the kinds of roles that women choose.

Women are particularly loyal as they

tend to shoulder more caring responsibilities and prioritise family and favour job security – but this immobility also often holds them back, says Kate Grussing, founder of executive headhunter Sapphire Partners. "[Due to their loyalty], women can be sometimes taken

Tanuja Randery has worked for multiple employers since starting out with McKinsey in 1995



for granted, not promoted or not paid [appropriately]," she says.

Victoria McLean, chief executive of recruitment group CityCV, says the rate of job-hopping generally has slowed down since its peak in 2022 due to a diminishing "wage premium" for shift-

ing jobs, paired with what she describes as "change fatigue".

"People are nervous," she says, explaining that job seekers are worried they might be unable to return to their old jobs. "Is the grass really greener?"

A further factor could be affecting job-switching decisions. The UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey, published in October, shows that 17 per cent of UK employers expected the use of AI to reduce their headcount in the next 12 months.

"Companies are not taking any risks," says career coach Alice Stapleton, citing hefty onboarding and training costs. "They hire people who have done the job for years, and that's what the [recruitment] algorithm is looking for."

As employers trim hiring budgets and vacancies decline, side hustles are emerging as significant income streams

and may be under-reported, according to some economists. In the US, meanwhile, full-time entrepreneurship hit its highest level on record last year, according to the Small Business & Entrepreneurship Council.

But all is not lost for ambitious employees who strive for change even if the job market is looking more uncertain.

"The modern world isn't necessarily a job ladder the way it used to be... think about your career like a... jungle-gym," Thomas says, where "leaping from bar to bar" is required in order to advance.

And Stapleton, whose coaching focuses on career change, warns against defeatism even if it seems that jobs are harder to secure.

"Someone is getting those jobs," she says, "why not you?"