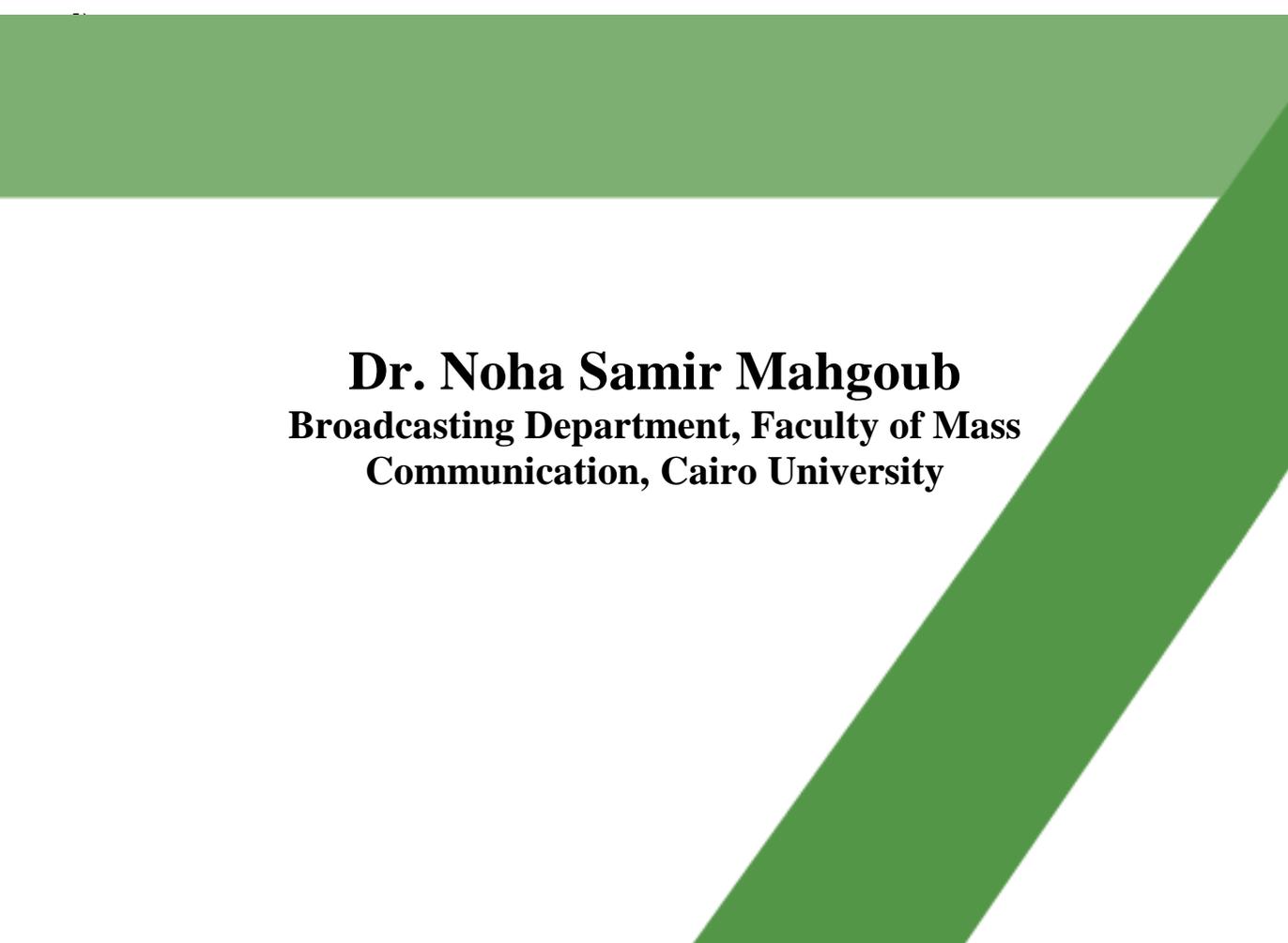




**Bridging the Gap: Health
Communication, Societal Support,
and Empowerment in Midlife
Women's Experiences of
Perimenopause**



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Abstract :

Globally, 657 million women are 45 to 67 years of age, 47% of them participate in the work force during their menopausal years. . *Midlife* is a crucial transition stage in women's lives that begins at the age of 35-40 years and lasts until the age of 60-65 years. Despite the significance of this transitional period, women worldwide don't get enough information about this transitional period of their lives. They also lack adequate healthcare and societal support from family members and workplaces. The current study explores the perception and the misconceptions of middle aged Egyptian women regarding menopause and perimenopause. The research used a mixed-methodology with quantitative and qualitative data collection. An online survey was firstly used in a pilot study with 53 Egyptian women (between 20-60 years). For more elaborated details, eight in depth-interviews with women from different age groups provided more elaborated and detailed information and insights. The study examines the impact of awareness, health communication, and social norms on the adoption of empowering strategies that help women deal with the challenges of this important phase of their lives. Findings indicate that 39.3% of the sample reported noticing early signs of perimenopause between the ages of 41-50. The results reveal a noteworthy knowledge gap about perimenopause, causing wider problems of misinformation and societal negligence. Participants underlined the lack of awareness, both personal and communal, which leads to experiences of isolation, stigma, and insufficient support from family and society. Health consciousness is a key factor in adapting healthy behaviors and seeking empowerment through health communication. A comprehensive approach focusing on improving societal awareness, and media representation is crucial in health communication for empowering women. The results highlight the importance of promoting an inclusive mindset in the society and especially in the workplace which could positively help women share their experiences without fear of judgment or shame, helping promote a culture of empathy and understanding.

Keywords:

Health communication- Menopause- Perimenopause- Health Consciousness- Health Knowledge- Societal Acceptance- Health Belief Model- Social Cognition-Empowering Strategies.

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دور الاتصال الصحي والدعم المجتمعي في تمكين المرأة المصرية في فترة منتصف العمر وسد الفجوة المعرفية في المجتمع

الملخص:

يبلغ عدد السيدات البالغات من العمر ٤٥-٦٧ عاماً حول العالم ٦٥٧ مليون سيدة، ٤٧% منهن ضمن قوة العمل في فترة شديدة الحساسية من حياة السيدات. وقد أثبتت الدراسات أن السيدات على مستوى العالم لا يحظين بمعلومات كافية عن تلك الفترة الانتقالية في حياتهن. كما أنهن لا يحظين برعاية صحية مناسبة ولا بدعم مجتمعي سواء داخل الأسرة أو في بيئة العمل نتيجة نقص المعرفة وعدم تناول هذا الموضوع في الإعلام بالشكل الكافي. أثبتت الأبحاث أن المرأة تواجه تحديات على عدة مستويات خلال هذه الفترة من العمر، وتشير السيدات أن أهم تلك التحديات هي نقص المعلومات بين السيدات أنفسهن وأفراد أسرتهن وحتى عند مقدمي الخدمة الصحية. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استطلاع آراء عينة السيدات المصريات بين سن ٢٠-٦٠ عاماً واتجاهاتهن نحو هذه الفترة في حياتهن والتي قد تمتد عند بعض السيدات لأكثر من ١٠ سنوات. واعتمد منهج الدراسة على استبانة على الإنترنت كدراسة استطلاعية للخروج بمؤشرات عامة عن درجة الوعي بالموضوع والاتجاهات نحو دور المجتمع والإعلام. ونظراً لطبيعة الموضوع وحساسيته تم استخدام المقابلات المتعمقة مع عينة من السيدات لقياس مستوى معرفتهن الصحية عن موضوع الدراسة وشرح تجاربهن الشخصية واتجاهاتهن وتقييمهن لوسائل الإعلام المختلفة في معالجة هذه القضية. وكان الوعي الصحي ودرجة المعرفة الصحية من المتغيرات المؤثرة في تبني السيدات لاستراتيجيات تمكنهن من تخطي هذه المرحلة الصحية والنفسية الصعبة. كما وجد أن السيدات اللاتي لديهن قدرة أكبر على ضبط النفس المرتبط بالأمور الصحية كن أكثر قدرة على تبني إستراتيجيات أفضل للتعامل. كما أن نشر الثقافة والوعي في المجتمع عن أهمية دعم المرأة في الأسرة والعمل سوف تساعد السيدات على الثقة في التعامل مع الحالة الصحية والنفسية في هذه الفترة بشكل أكثر فاعلية.

الكلمات الدالة: الاتصال الصحي- فترة منتصف العمر- الوعي الصحي- المعرفة الصحية- الدعم المجتمعي- نموذج الاعتقادات الصحية- نظرية المعرفة الاجتماعية- استراتيجيات التمكين.

Introduction:

Midlife is a crucial transition stage in women's lives that begins at the age of 35-40 years and lasts until the age of 60-65 years. Midlife has been defined as a noteworthy transition point in the lives of women. It is a time when women face significant psychological anguish and must deal with the changes that accompany this changeover. Women in their forties and fifties have a sense of insecurity as a result of age-related changes, physical decline, and menopause. For women, midlife is a time of social and physiological fluctuations, and judgments such as "wasted youth" can lead to discontent and psychological disturbance. (Dias, J., et al.,2021).

Research indicates that one billion women globally are thought to have gone through menopause (Hoga, L. et Al. 2015). For most women, this occurs between 45-55 years of age. (Worldpopulationreview.com, 2023). The mean age of the menopause in Egypt in a study by (Sallam, H., 2006) was 46.7 years, a lower age than many other countries. A comprehensive review and meta-analysis of 46 research from 24 countries found that the average age of menopause is 48.8 years (95% CI 48.3-49.2). The typical age of menopause, however, varies greatly by nation due to other factors such as genetic inheritance, health history, and lifestyle. For example, in the United States, the average age of menopause is 51 years, while in Egypt, it is 47 years. (Schoenaker, D., et Al, 2014)

Table presenting the mean ages by continent as reported in Figure 2, (Schoenaker, D., et Al, 2014)

Continent	Mean Age (95% CI)
Africa	48.38 (48.12 to 48.65)
Asia	48.75 (48.08 to 49.42)
Australia	51.25 (49.75 to 52.76)
Europe	50.54 (50.04 to 51.05)
Latin America	47.24 (45.88 to 48.60)
Middle East	47.37 (46.91 to 47.84)
USA	49.11 (48.78 to 49.43)

In 2022, female population in Egypt was 54.9 million persons. (World Data Atlas, 2022; Statistica.com, 2022). Based on the estimated population as of January 1, 2022, the number of females in Egypt between 35 and 56 years was 14.61 million (Statistica.com, 2022), this is the age where women experience the symptoms of perimenopause and go through the menopause phase and the first years of post-menopause. When we add the postmenopausal women to the equation, the number of females in Egypt between 35-67 years old is 15.7 million. This is equivalent to 28.6% of the overall female population in Egypt.

Menopause is a normal biological process that occurs between the ages of 45 and 55 and signals the end of a woman's reproductive life (Dennis, N. & Hobson, G., 2023). This shift begins with *perimenopause*, which occurs four to eight years before menopause. Hormonal changes can produce a variety of symptoms at this period, including hot flashes, nocturnal sweats, mood swings, exhaustion, and sleeping problems (Gold, E., 2006). Menopause occurs twelve months after a woman's last menstruation, at which point she is considered post-menopausal (NHS, 2023), but many women continue to have symptoms for several years (Dennis, N. & Hobson, G., 2023). Perimenopausal women are experiencing this critical time of life with inadequate medical treatment and information due to a lack of education among women as well as among the general health practitioners.

Significant changes in hormones and reproduction are linked to perimenopause, also known as the menopausal transition. These alterations have been thoroughly documented, along with accompanying symptoms (Santoro N., 2016).

Moreover, recent studies indicate that women undergoing menopause are significantly more likely to experience major depressive episodes, with a risk up to four times higher during this period, and 13 times higher if there is a prior history of depression. This elevated risk has led researchers to describe the menopausal transition as a "window of vulnerability" for depression. The hormonal fluctuations that occur during menopause, particularly in estrogen, progesterone, and androgen levels, are believed to affect brain regions responsible for mood regulation. Numerous cross-sectional have consistently supported the idea that the menopausal transition represents a critical period of increased susceptibility to depression (Green, S. M., 2017).

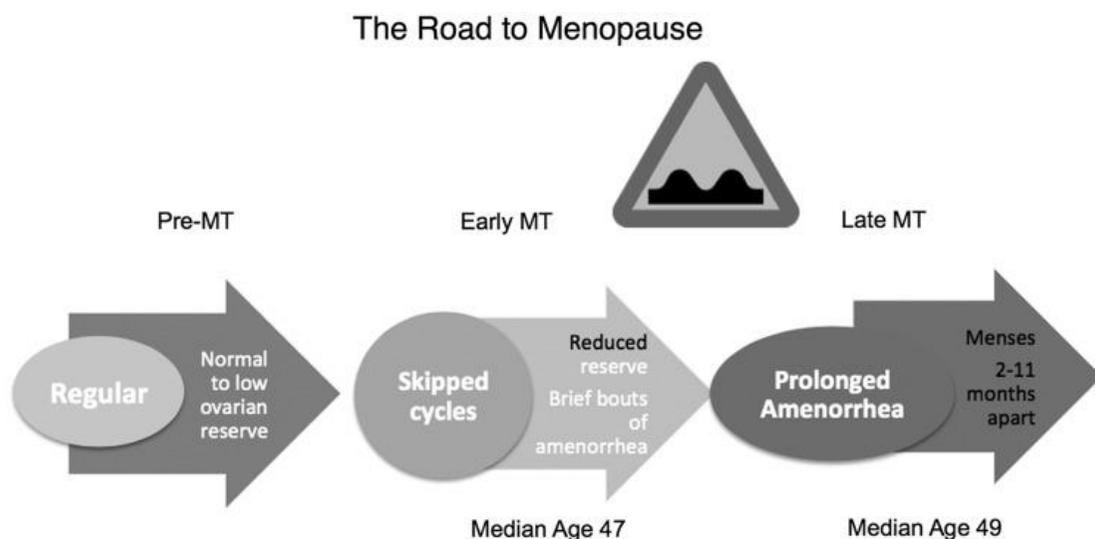


FIG. 1. Santoro N. (2016). *Stages of reproductive aging workshop (STRAW) simplified to show the relevant stages and ages. (FMP) refers to the final menstrual period. MT refers to menopausal transition.*

The sociocultural milieu and the menopausal experience:

The menopausal experience is significantly affected by values and beliefs pervasive in the sociocultural milieu, the women's backgrounds, and how women address challenges in this stage of life. A review of 24 studies involving menopausal women, aged 40 to 65, who underwent the transition from fertile age to menopause and post menopause was conducted by Hago, L. et al., 2015. While providing adequate support to women going through menopause is crucial, no systematic assessments have been conducted that focused on the experience of women worldwide about the process of menopause. His review objective is to find the most trustworthy information about women's menopausal experiences worldwide. The prevailing sociocultural milieu's values and beliefs, and the women's background, and their mindsets to adjustments during this period of life all have an influence on the menopausal experience (Hoga, L. et Al. 2015).

Society and culture play a role in deciding the extent to which menopause is thought to be problematic. Surprisingly, women report little knowledge about menopause. However, they expect this period of their life to be filled with discomfort and health problems (Shoebridge, A., 1999).

Silence can be a way to avoid not only the topic itself but also the emotional and personal costs associated with addressing the issue. (Dimitrov, R., et al.,

2022) Thereby, publicly confronting the issue can have costs especially with a topic that can be looked at as a taboo.

Menopause knowledge and Education:

Munn, C. et al. (2022) state that many women under 40 don't know much about menopause. When it comes to learning about menopause, women under the age of twenty typically have less interest than those over thirty, who tend to be more future thinking. Menopausal education methods need to start in the classroom and work their way outward, from a multifaceted standpoint. The study suggested that menopausal education should happen in the workplace, social media, and health promotion initiatives in the future.

In a study by (Aljumah, R. et al., 2023) exploring the postmenopausal women knowledge and attitudes about the menopause through an online survey, results showed that before experiencing menopause, 18.0% of women were accepting of it, 15.8% feared it, and only 5.1% looked forward to it. When reflecting on their menopausal experience, 38.1% found it challenging, 24.6% considered it very difficult, and 20.7% felt it was manageable. A significant majority, 94.1%, reported that they had never received education about menopause in school, and 49.0% felt completely uninformed about it. Over 60% of women only began seeking information about menopause once they started experiencing symptoms. The qualitative analysis of their responses revealed six key themes: the need for education, understanding symptoms, challenges in accessing treatment, emotions and attitudes towards menopause, the impact of menopause on their lives, and the role of the media in shaping perceptions.

The relationship between attitudes toward aging and menopause is a significant area of study. Women's experiences of menopause can shape their attitudes towards aging, which in turn can influence their well-being. Positive attitudes towards aging are often associated with more favorable experiences of menopause, including fewer symptoms and a better quality of life (Brown, L. et al., 2015).

Understanding menopausal symptoms and strategies for managing them is essential for women to effectively utilize health care during menopause. Without sufficient knowledge about the available treatments, women are less likely to access these health services. Therefore, health education initiatives play a crucial role in enhancing awareness about menopause. Research has shown that women who receive education on menopausal health tend to have an increased understanding of menopause. This study also found that the educational intervention led to a significant improvement in women's knowledge of menopause (Koyuncu, T., et al., 2018).

Empowerment Theory and Research:

Empowerment theory, research and interventions tend to link the individual strengths, competencies and overall well-being with the social and political environment. The concept theoretically links mental health to reciprocal assistance and the battle to build a community that is responsive to those challenges. Interventions that focus on empowerment strive to improve participants' well-being by giving them the opportunity to solve problems, nurture in knowledge and abilities, while using professionals as partners rather than as authoritative figures (Perkins, D. & Zimmerman, M. 1995).

A study conducted in Pematangsiantar City, Indonesia, implemented an empowerment program based on *the health belief model* to enhance physical activity among perimenopausal women, who often face various physical and emotional challenges due to hormonal changes. The program focused on increasing awareness, perceived benefits, and self-efficacy, while addressing barriers and perceived threats. The results indicated that the empowerment model significantly boosted participants' physical activity levels, leading to better management and reduction of perimenopausal symptoms. This suggests that *empowerment strategies* can effectively improve the well-being and quality of life of perimenopausal women, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions during this critical life stage (Simangunsong, D. E., 2017).

Social cognitive theory, originally known as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977a, b, 1982a, b, 1986), has gained significant attention since the 90s, particularly among health professionals focused on patient education and public health initiatives. One of the key strengths of this theory is its ability to not only predict behavior but also to explain in detail the processes through which individuals enact changes in their health-related behaviors. (Clark, N. M., & Zimmerman, B. J., 1990).

The meta-analysis by Bogg and Roberts (2004) examines the link between conscientiousness and health-related behaviors, focusing on behaviors that significantly impact mortality. The study, which synthesized data from 194 studies, found that traits associated with *conscientiousness* were consistently related to lower engagement in risky health behaviors and higher participation in beneficial health behaviors. Conscientiousness, characterized by a tendency to follow socially prescribed norms, exercise impulse control, be goal-oriented, and adhere to rules, plays a crucial role in promoting healthier lifestyle choices, thereby contributing to better health outcomes and longevity. (Bogg, T., & Roberts, B. W., 2004).

According to (Pael, V., 2023) in a previous research of the same researchers, menopausal women frequently report feeling anxious, frustrated, and alone because they believe their friends and family do not understand what they are going through and cannot provide them with the necessary support. *Social support and education* have been shown to reduce negative menopausal experiences and increase women's quality of life during menopause. It has also been shown to lower the risk of mental health disorders in women going through menopause. These findings suggest that social support, including physical and emotional empathy, can be a simple, cost-effective, and long-term way to assist women in managing this transition while minimizing menopausal complications.

Research indicates that family members, particularly male spouses, hold diverse views on menopause, which can significantly influence the well-being of menopausal women. Early studies, like those by Mansfield et al., 2003, highlighted the importance of understanding male spousal experiences to inform healthcare interventions for menopausal women. Recent research further underscores that male *spouses' perceptions of menopause* are crucial in shaping the marital relationship and supporting women during this transition. A systematic review of literature from 1985 to 2017 identified only 10 studies and four questionnaires related to spousal support, underscoring the need for tools like the Menopausal Spousal Support Questionnaire (MSSQ) to assess and improve spousal support during menopause (Idiana, H. I., et al., 2021).

Methodology:

This exploratory study aimed to gather insights into the knowledge and attitudes of Egyptian women regarding the perimenopause transition. A mixed-method approach was utilized to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Initially, a pilot study was conducted through an online survey, which included 30 closed-ended questions and one open-ended question inviting women to share their insights and recommendations for improving the menopausal experience. However, the response rate to the survey was low, with only 53 Egyptian women participating. The reluctance to discuss menopause and report personal feelings likely reflects the ongoing cultural taboo, discomfort and shame surrounding this topic in Egyptian society.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject, it was determined that a more personalized approach would be beneficial. Therefore, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight Egyptian women, categorized

into different age groups to capture a range of perspectives. The participants included:

- 2 girls in their 20s (to provide support to mothers and share thoughts on awareness),
- 2 women in their 30s (who are more forward-thinking),
- 2 women in their 40s (who are in the perimenopause or menopause phase),
- 2 women over 50 (who are in the post-menopause phase).

This approach allowed for a deeper exploration of personal experiences and beliefs, complementing the quantitative data collected through the survey. The combination of these methods provided a better understanding of the perceptions of menopause and perimenopause in the complex context of the Egyptian society.

Research Questions :

- 1) How does the level of health knowledge among middle-aged Egyptian women influence their adoption of health-related behaviors during the perimenopause and menopause transition, according to social cognitive theory?
- 2) What roles do cultural norms in Egypt play in shaping the attitudes and perceptions of women towards perimenopause and menopause?
- 3) In what ways do Egyptian women's perceptions of social support from family and the workplace affect their attitudes towards menopause, and how does this support, or lack thereof, influence their health-related self-regulation strategies?
- 4) How do health consciousness contribute to the empowerment strategies adopted by Egyptian women during perimenopause, and their engagement in health communication and self-care practices?

First: Pilot Study Results

1- Demographics:

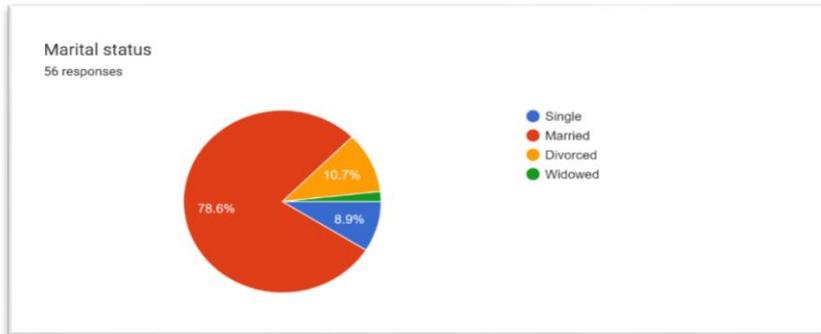


Figure (2)

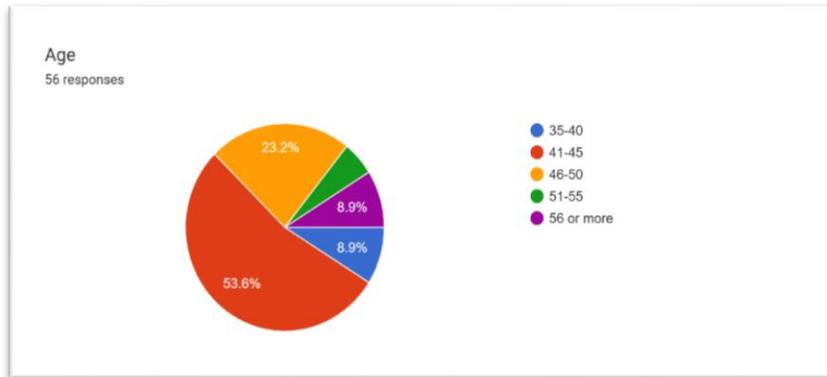


Figure (3)

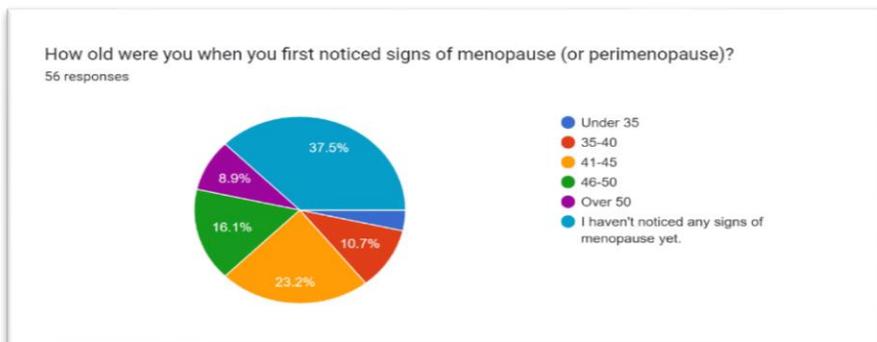
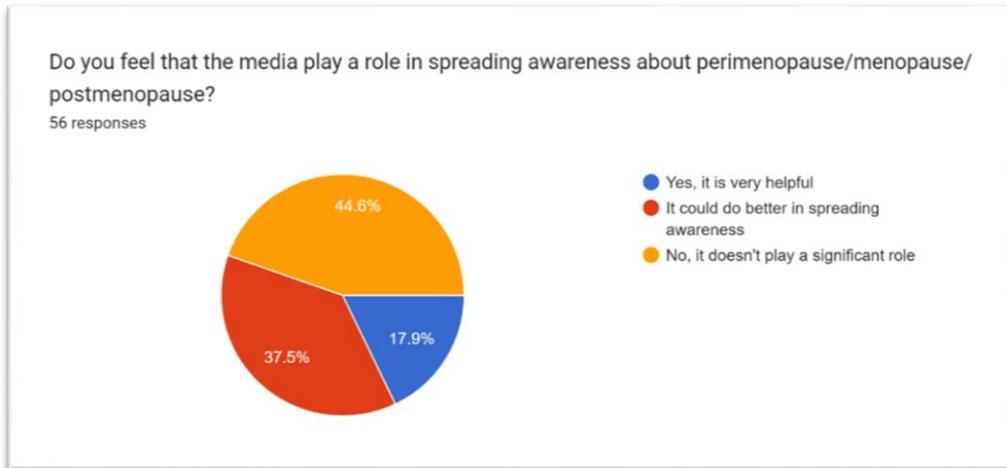


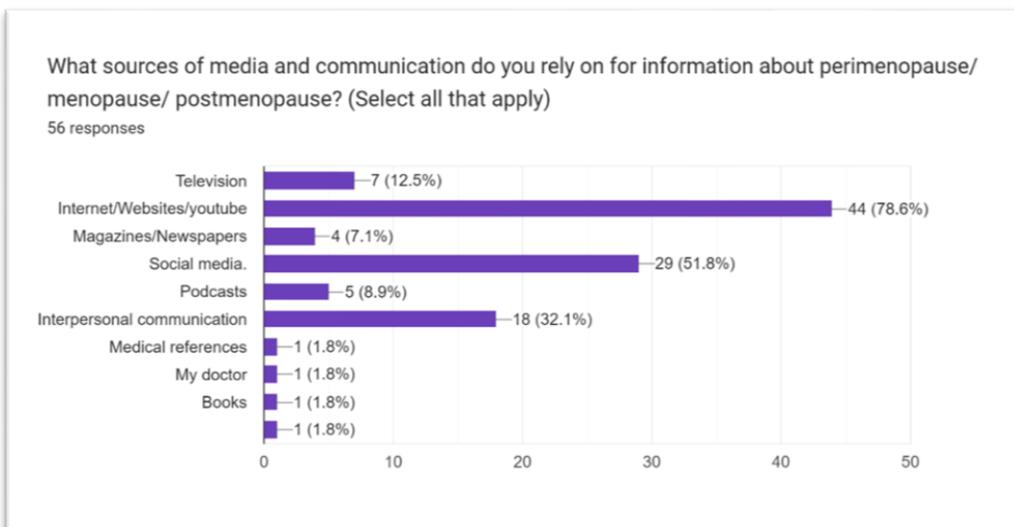
Figure (4)

As shown, the sample of the pilot study consisted of 56 women, 78.6% were married, 10.7% divorced, and 8.9% were single. As for the age categories, 53.6% were between 41-45 years, 23.2% were between 46-50 years, 8.9% less than 40 years, and 8.9% were 56 years or above. Findings indicate that 39.3% of the sample reported noticing early signs of perimenopause between the ages of 41-50.

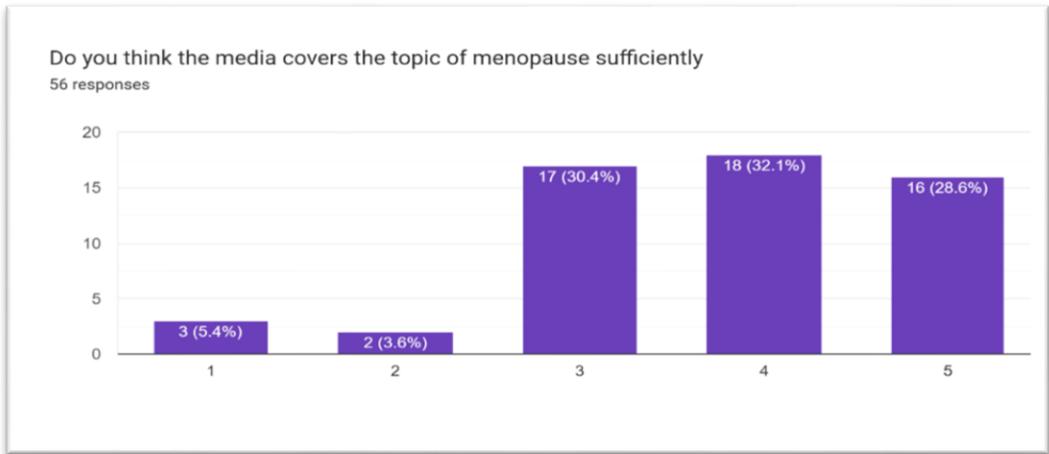
2- Media role in spreading awareness about perimenopause:



Figure(5)

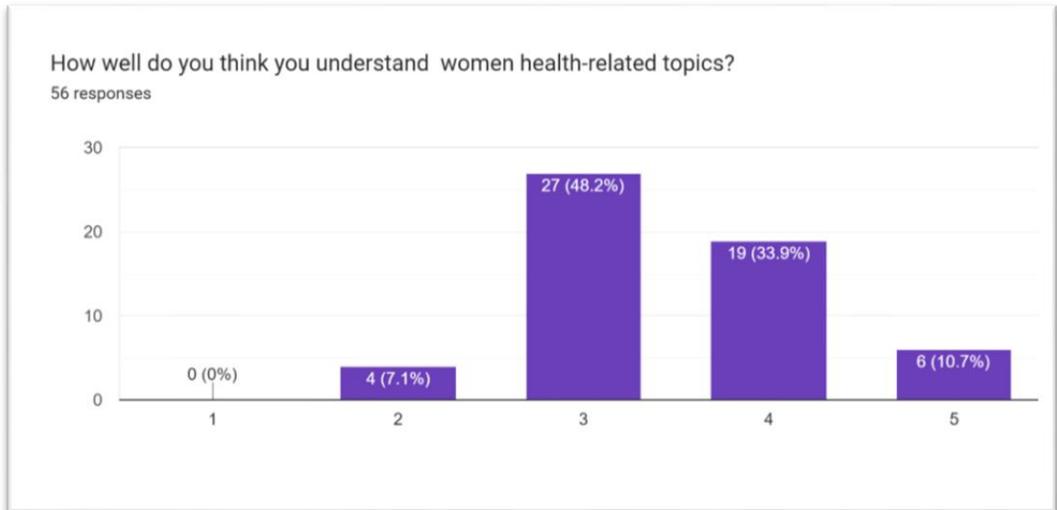


Figure(6)



Figure(7)

3- Health consciousness and health behavior:



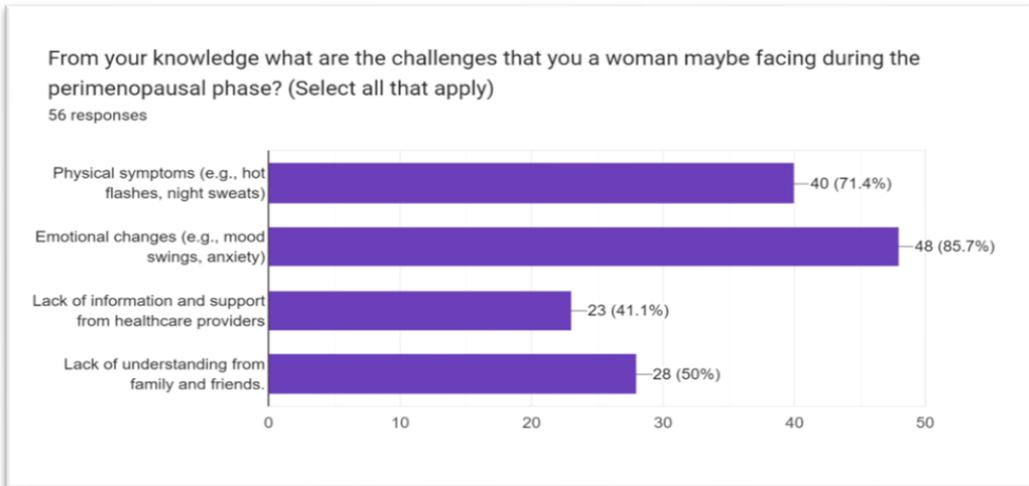
Figure(8)



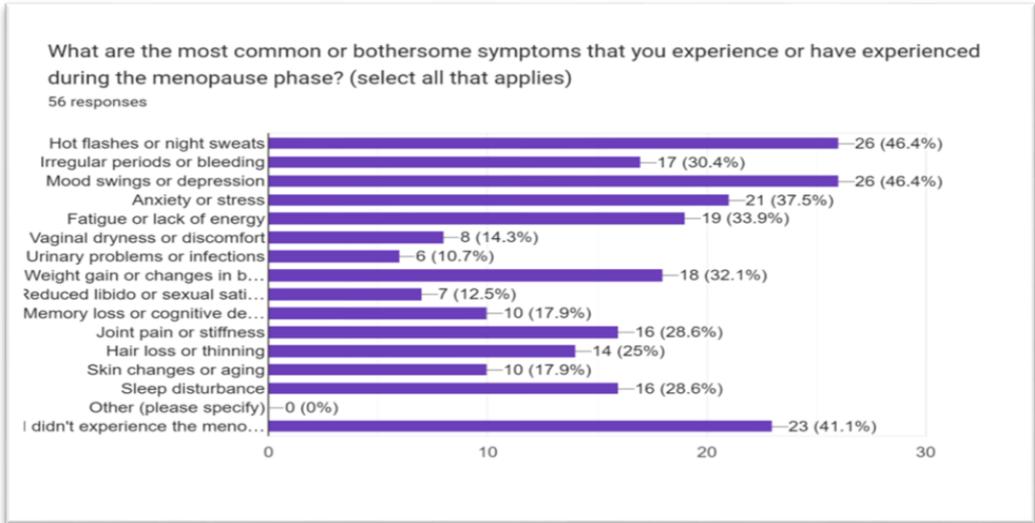
Figure(9)

Results show that 78.6% of the sample acquire their information about menopause from the internet, websites, YouTube, 51.8% from social media, and 32.1% from podcasts. 44.6% of the sample reported that media doesn't play significant role in spreading awareness about this issue and doesn't cover it sufficiently. When asked about their health consciousness related to women health issues, 44.6% reported that they are conscious about it, and 71.4% of them sometimes adjust their behaviors according to health communication related to women health related issues.

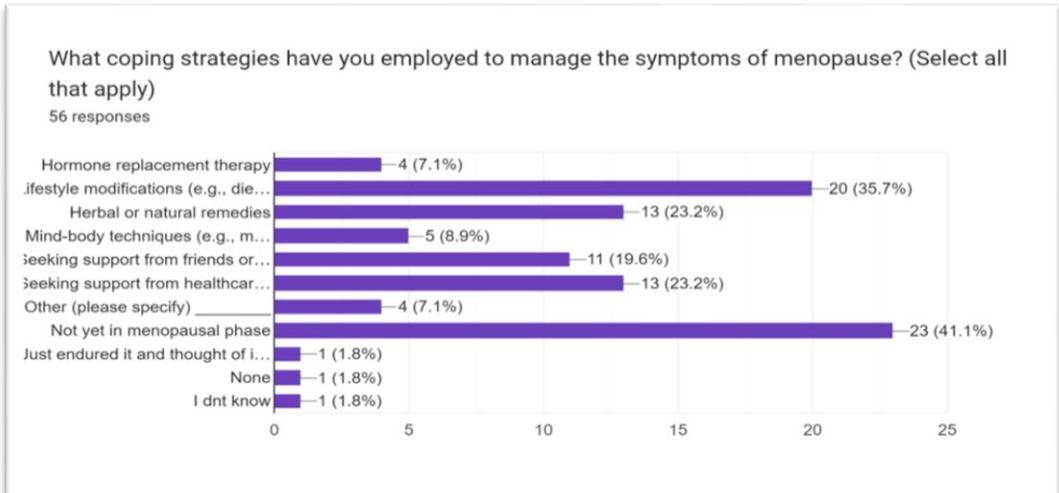
4- Perimenopause symptoms and coping strategies



Figure(10)

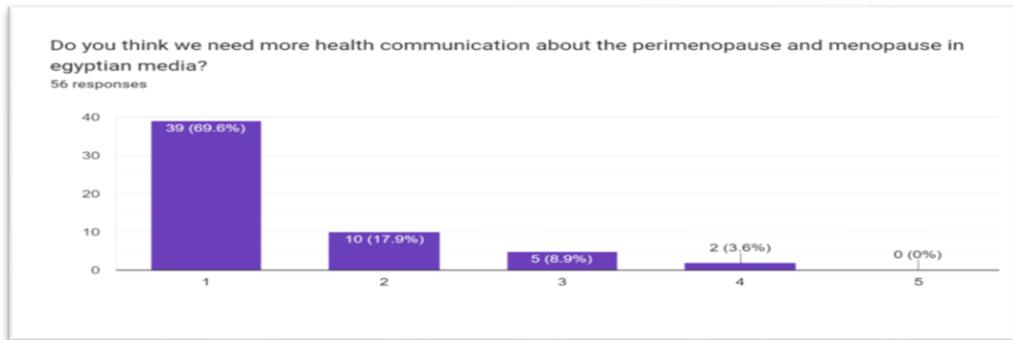


Figure(11)

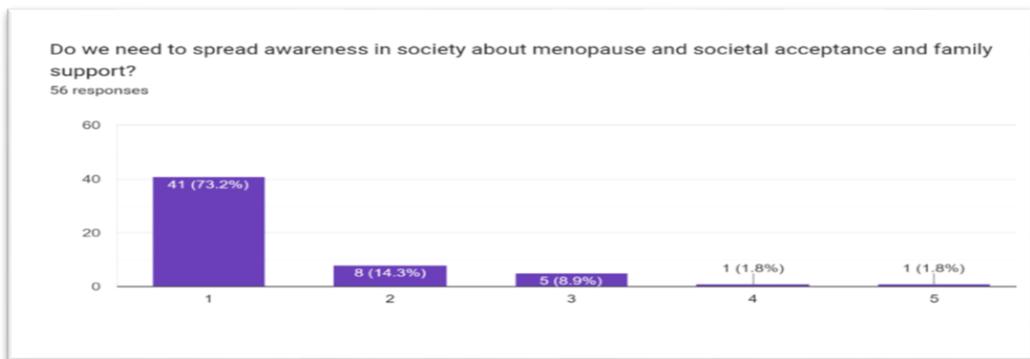


Figure(12)

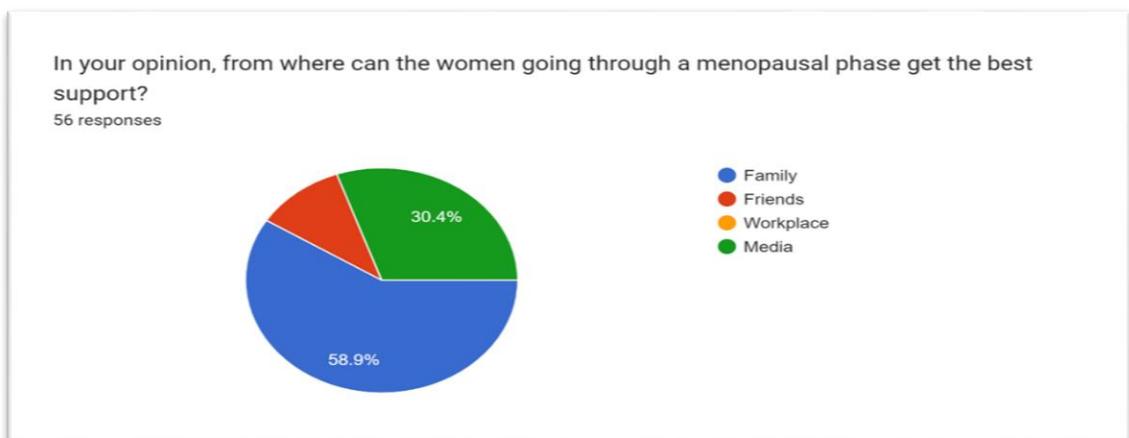
5. Health communication about perimenopause and societal acceptance



Figure(13)



Figure(14)

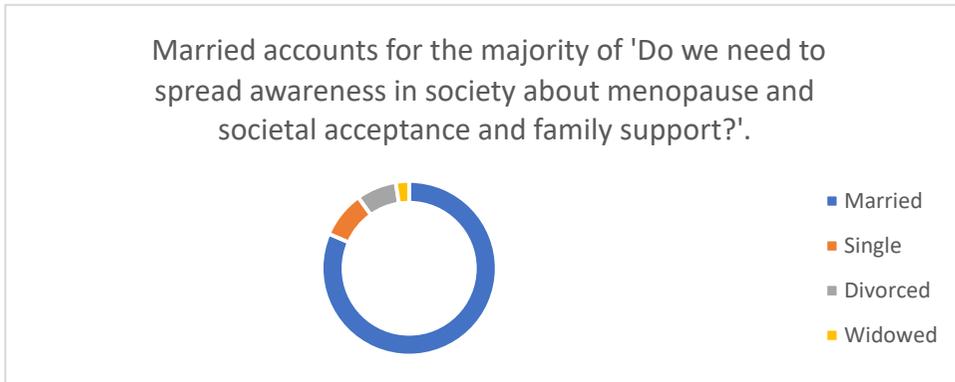


Figure(15)

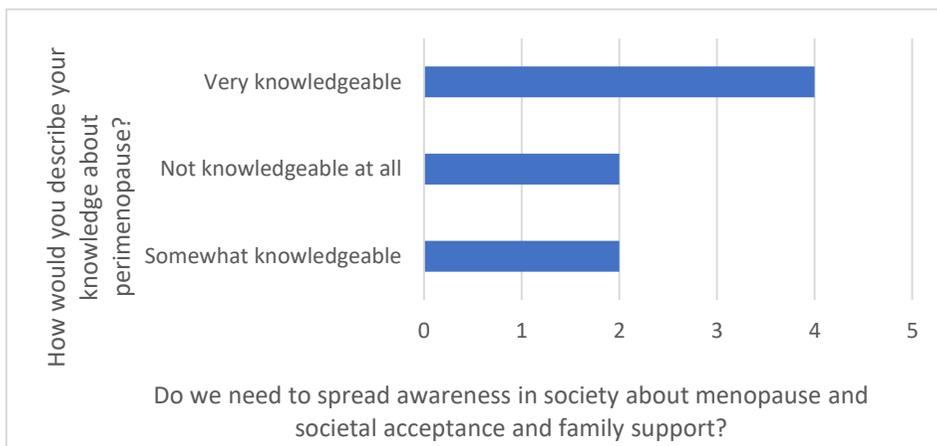
73.2% of the sample reported that we need to spread awareness in the society about perimenopause and menopause so that women can pass this transitional phase positively. Family came the first source of support for women (58.9%), then the media (30.4%).

6.Cross tabulations:

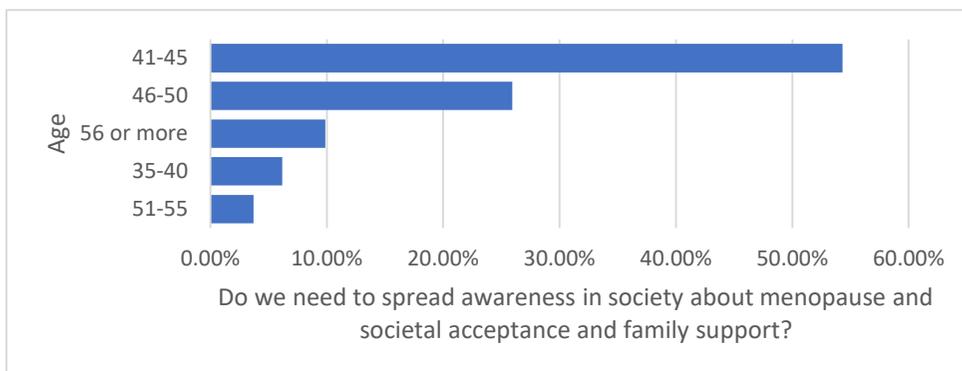
Simple cross tabulations showed that more knowledgeable women think that we need more health communication in the society, the majority of married women and women from 41-45 years (the much concerned category and more susceptible to encounter the perimenopause symptoms) reported that we need to spread awareness in society about menopause and societal acceptance and family support.



Figure(16)



Figure(17)



Figure(18)

Open-ended question analysis:

14 women from the sample answered the question about sharing their insights and recommendations to make a positive change in women's life through the menopause transition. Two responses were incomplete, and 12 answers were analyzed. One of them was written in Arabic and has been translated to English. The responses could be categorized under three main categories:

- **Public awareness campaigns** “We need Public awareness events.”

“To have more awareness in media and in schools about what is this phase and how to support women emotionally and physically at home and in the workplace.”

“Social support and understanding through awareness campaigns.”

“Media have strong impact to help women to get knowledge about menopause.”

- **Professional health care**

“Egyptian women need a specialized health program to have medical support to overcome this difficult phase of their lives.”

“Providing a medical analysis and follow-up center for women at an economical price and high quality to prevent getting treatment protocols that can lead to cancer.” “Asking support from healthcare professionals.”

“Others consider what I'm going through.” “Increase society awareness and support.”

- **Family support**

“Spread awareness between the family members to understand and sympathize with women in this stage.”

“Husband comprehension is the most important thing to help with this phase.”

“Support from family.”

Second: In depth interviews analysis

Overall knowledge about perimenopause

“Even though I went through the menopause almost 10 years ago, I didn’t know anything about the perimenopause term and its meaning. Honestly speaking I always wanted to talk about this topic, let alone searching for some solutions to its symptoms. I’m impressed that we can talk about this topic.” #1

“I didn’t have any reference about this topic, it started at the age of 37, my periods would last for 20 days, with 4-5 days heavy bleeding.” #4

“Not only do we have misinformation, but we have no knowledge or information to begin with.” #1

“The Egyptian women are enduring this period with the least knowledge.” #4

“I just heard about the term menopause when my mother started this transitional cycle, but I don’t know any details about it.” #5

Early symptoms of perimenopause

“If I had more knowledge, I would’ve been able to understand what was happening to me in the past several years, since I started my 40s. The messy periods, brain fog, mood swings, bone stiffness, gut disturbance all were related to the perimenopause and the hormonal imbalance, but I didn’t know.” #3

“The age group could start from 38 years till the mid-50s. I don’t even know when exactly a women should expect this phase to begin, which reflects how much we lack accurate information about such an important topic.” #1

“I encountered several embarrassing situations that I didn’t know how to handle back then, we were raised that this is not tolerated. For example, for the heavy bleeding, stains of blood on the chair at office, at my friend’s sofa, on my car seat and I was leaving the car to the parking man.” #4

Family understanding and support

“When I talked to my mother back then, when I first got the menopause symptoms, she said never mind, so you have to endure.” #1

“Family understanding and support is crucial, if my mother had enough knowledge about the topic, if it was tackled through media, it could’ve made my experience much easier.” #4

“My husband didn’t understand what I’m going through, the males in our society don’t get any knowledge about how critical this stage in the life of their wives, they weren’t supportive to their mothers nor are they to their wives, because they simply don’t know anything about it.” #3

“When I saw how my mother got affected physically and psychologically during this phase, I understood how family support and understanding is

very important, we should learn how to support our mothers during this stage.” #6

Socio-cultural dimensions

“It’s a sociocultural phenomenon, we can see the stigma about this stage in women’s life in Arabic movies like “The second wife”, where the great director Salah Abou Seif presented the wife of the mayor’s brother from a low angle shot, she was on the second floor in a higher position, celebrating her pregnancy, and his old infertile wife, is in the first floor trying superstitions to get pregnant.” #1

“The woman in the Egyptian society is living her pain in solitude, nobody cares about how she feels, and how much suffering she can endure as long as she can continue doing her job.” #3

“The situation of unmarried Egyptian women in their late 30s and 40s is repetitive, they are not individual incidents. We face our own fears of not being fertile anymore, not being able to have kids, ageing, getting all these physiological and psychological changes alone, with no one to listen or to support.” #4

“All we know about menopause is from “word of mouth”, this is how it is in Egypt. As if it’s a taboo, or a stigma, but it’s not. We stigmatize women when they are approaching this phase that they are ageing, and are no longer fertile, so consequently less womanized.” #1

“I can remember how it was a very difficult experience; I remember fainting in the street, we weren’t allowed to talk about it, it’s a women matter that the society enforces her to keep as a secret as it’s not accepted to discuss it publicly.” #7

Emotional challenges

“This is related to the woman feeling that she’s ineffective, she has no value in life, as if her value was only to be able to give birth, and now that she’s no longer able to do that, she lost of her worth.” #1

“All I can remember is that my mother when she passed through this phase-fainted in the street, since then, when I think about this coming phase, I feel so frightened.” #3

“My cousin after menopause, got bleeding, and as society always reflects the infertility association with this phase negatively, she imagined that she still got her menstruation and it wasn’t the case of course, it was cervical cancer. So, she couldn’t cope with the idea that she went through menopause to the extent that she harmed her health.” “So, we can say that different personalities take it differently, the psychology of women should be taken into consideration.” #1

Family and friends are the only main source of information, so if you don't have a family what can you do and from where do you get support? #1

Societal awareness and media interventions

“We should encourage our girls to get married during their twenties, as the percentage of unmarried women in Egypt increased in the past decades, in order to have time to embrace their motherhood phase, before facing the perimenopause at the age of 35.” #1

“We actually need verified information from credible scientific research about how to cope with the symptoms.” #2

“I started following Instagram pages to get more information about the perimenopause like “The Pause life” page. I am in my thirties, and I need to get reassured to be ready for this stage when it starts.” #8

“The national council for women should play a role in spreading awareness among Egyptian women in all the Egyptian governorates through symposiums and events.” #2

“We need media campaigns to tackle this topic, it's not a taboo, women need to be aware about their health, mothers need to know in order to provide their daughter with proper health information.” #2

“This is an extremely important topic that no one dared to approach before, applied communication research could have a positive impact on society.” #2

Medical care experience

“I want to talk about my experience with the gynecologists, it started in 2019 when I started facing the symptoms of “Perimenopause”, I couldn't discover it easily, and I had three years of different doctors' visits until finally one gynecologist referred to perimenopause. As I didn't get married before, the idea of a gynecologist's visit was rejected by my family. But, with the persistence of symptoms and its severity, I had no other option but to consult one. She was a woman gynecologist, she dealt with me in a very cruel way, not considering the impact of telling me that I can't give birth, I can't become a mother and probably it's easier to do a cervical surgery. It was a misery; she didn't have enough knowledge about the stage of perimenopause and that it could take years to end.” “It wasn't until 2021, that I met Dr. Dina, who was aware of the perimenopause symptoms, and explained it to me, and since then I was able to cope with it till now.” #4

Inclusiveness in the workplace

“Workplace could be supportive when women share their experiences and talk about hot flashes, menopausal belly, and weight gain. Having a safe space to talk freely about the symptoms without having body shaming and not being embarrassed, we talk frankly about it and accept getting in this kind of conversations.” #4

“The way my women colleagues and friends dealt with the perimenopause was somehow different. Some of them after starting to talk about it had

some avoidance or denial, they prefer not to think about it, at least for now until they start getting harder and more obvious symptoms that they could no longer deny.” #4

“When my female friends started to experience the symptoms like foggy brain and lack of concentration, it was important for me to convey the message to be self-compassionate.” #4

“After accepting this phase, we as mid-40s, we have a big workload and responsibilities, many of us are in managerial positions, if the workplace is not inclusive, and can't tolerate the suffering of women at this stage of her life, this will lower women self-esteem, self-confidence and the ability to pursue her career in a safe environment that understands her needs.” #4

Empowering and Coping strategies

“When I got my hot flashes in the middle of a business meeting, and my male colleagues telling me why you look so reddish, I became accustomed with that.” #4

“If I can tell what I learned through the past 4 years is acceptance, to be more resilient, I learnt how to manage the symptoms anywhere. But one of the most essential coping mechanisms is having someone that listens to you.” #4

“Maintain your standards of life: when you are aware of the physiological, psychological and cognitive symptoms of the perimenopause, and you believe that you can handle it, you know how to deal with it, you surround yourself with a supportive community, you will feel empowered, and you can cope with it easier.” #3

Discussion:

The findings from the in-depth interviews offer a comprehensive understanding of the complex challenges faced by Egyptian women during perimenopause. The study reveals a significant gap in knowledge about perimenopause among women, contributing to a broader issue of misinformation and societal neglect. Participants highlighted the lack of awareness, both personal and communal, which leads to experiences of isolation, stigma, and insufficient support from family and society. The emotional and psychological toll on women is aggravated by societal norms that enforce silence around this natural phase of life, further deepening the stigma associated with aging and menopause.

The role of family and societal support emerged as critical factors in the experience of perimenopause. Women reported feelings of despair and frustration due to the lack of understanding and empathy from their families, particularly spouses who are often uninformed about menopause. The study underscores the need for enhanced health communication that addresses these gaps, providing accurate and accessible information to both women and their families. Furthermore, the research suggests that societal and cultural contexts play a fundamental role in shaping women's experiences of

perimenopause, especially with the elevated rate of spinsterhood in the Egyptian society, stigmatizing unmarried young ladies going through this phase.

The socio-cultural dimensions discussed by participants highlight the prevalent nature of menopause stigma in Egyptian society, where women's value is often tied to their fertility and youth. The portrayal of menopausal women in media, as referenced by the participants, reflects and reinforces these stigmatizing attitudes, creating a challenging environment for women to traverse this life stage. The study also sheds light on the emotional challenges women face, including feelings of worthlessness, fear not only of the emotional and physiological challenges encountered during this phase, but the non-understanding from their husbands, family, and workplace as well.

The findings suggest that empowering women during midlife requires a multi-faceted approach that includes improving societal awareness, enhancing media representation, and fostering supportive environments both at home and in the workplace. The study highlights the importance of creating inclusive spaces where women can share their experiences without fear of judgment or shame, promoting a culture of empathy and understanding.

Conclusion:

The research examined the experiences of Egyptian women during perimenopause, the emotional, psychological and cognitive challenges they are facing. The study highlighted the urgent need for improved health communication and societal acceptance to discuss about this issue, as spreading awareness is a key factor in adopting adequate coping responses. The stigma surrounding menopause, fueled by misinformation and cultural norms, has a profound impact on women's physical and emotional well-being during this period. To empower midlife women, it is essential to address these challenges through targeted health education, media interventions, and the promotion of supportive networks.

By raising awareness and encouraging open discussions about menopause, society can help eliminate the stigma and create an environment where women feel valued and supported during this significant life transition. This research contributes to the constant interchange on women's health in Egypt and accentuates the importance of communal efforts to help women embrace midlife with assurance and resilience.

Recommendations:

- Interdisciplinary studies should be encouraged in collaboration with the departments of health education and public health in med schools.
- Co-publishing with international institutes in the field of women health and global health communication.
- Digital health and digital medicine need to be used to provide a comprehensive record of women health in Egypt.
- Longitudinal studies and interventions need to be introduced to gather reliable data about the symptoms, coping behavior, and effective treatments to develop a national strategy for midlife women health in Egypt.
- Media agenda should include the late stages of women reproductive life, to spread awareness about the transition to menopause (perimenopause), in both traditional and social media.
- A call for social change needs to be done, as the menopause is still considered as a taboo with sociocultural aspects rooted within the Egyptian society. The national council for women can take the lead to spotlight this topic to ensure the empowerment of women in Egypt in terms of their social and cultural rights.

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