

Gender and Career Sustainability: Are Women at a Disadvantage?

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Summary

Although the concept of sustainability has been traditionally applied to protection of the natural environment, it has been extended in recent years to the study of careers. Career sustainability may be defined as the extent to which an individual experiences happiness, health, and productivity (HHP) at work over the course of the career. However, the role of gender in individuals' having a sustainable career has not been systematically examined in the literature on career sustainability to date. In this paper, we review gender differences in selected aspects of career experiences – hours worked, part-time work, virtual work from home, and voluntary employment gaps and parental leaves – and their implications for career sustainability. Our review suggests that women are at a disadvantage in establishing relatively high levels of HHP at work and maintaining these levels over time, thereby restricting their career sustainability. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

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Introduction

Although the concept of sustainability has been traditionally applied to protection of the natural environment, it has been extended in recent years to the study of careers (e.g., De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015; De Vos et al., 2020; Heslin et al., 2020). A variety of conceptualizations of the term *career sustainability* have been offered in the careers literature (e.g., Chin et al., 2019; De Hauw & Greenhaus, 2015; De Vos et al., 2020). Based on a critical review of conceptualizations of career sustainability in 82 articles and book chapters, Callanan et al. (2023) defined career sustainability as *the extent to which an individual experiences happiness, health, and productivity (HHP) at work over the course of the career*. In this definition, happiness refers to individuals' positive affective reactions to their work. Health encompasses individuals' physical and psychological well-being that is derived from work. Productivity refers to individuals' job performance, both task (meeting job responsibilities) and contextual (being a good organizational citizen). If individuals build a career that allows them to establish relatively high levels of HHP and maintain these levels over time, they may be regarded to have a sustainable career (Callanan et al., 2023).

However, the role of gender in individuals' having a sustainable career has not been systematically examined in the scholarly work on career sustainability to date. This is a significant gap in the literature, and the purpose of this paper is to address it.

Issues of gender and career development have received considerable attention in the gender in management literature. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a full review of the literature on gender and careers. However, this literature generally suggests that women's careers are fundamentally different from men's careers due to gendered societal and organizational norms about career and caregiving (e.g., Alvesson & Due Billing, 2009; Broadbridge & Fielden, 2015; Calás et al., 2014; Heilman et al., 2024; Marshall, 1984; Powell, 2024; Powell & Mainiero, 1992; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024; Vinnecombe et al., 2013).

As an example, Powell and Mainiero (1992), upon reviewing the literature on gender and careers at the time, concluded that women's careers transpire in a different manner than men's careers. They argued that, compared to men, women place a much greater emphasis on relationships with family and others outside of work in navigating their careers. As a result, models of careers that were based primarily on observations of men do not come close to capturing the complexities of women's careers.

Gender Differences That Influence Career Sustainability

If women's careers are fundamentally different from men's careers, does career sustainability play out differently for women vis-à-vis men? In this section, we review gender differences in selected aspects of career experiences and their implications for career sustainability.

Hours Worked

Women devote fewer hours to paid work than men (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010; Shockley et al., 2021a). Although this gender difference is due in part to women's greater likelihood to work

part-time (to be discussed below), women work less hours than men even among full-time employees (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023); further, women devote more hours to unpaid domestic labor than men irrespective of their work hours. Gender differences in time allocation between work and home responsibilities, which have been an enduring feature of dual-career, heterosexual households, reflect societal norms about “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009).

Women’s fewer hours devoted to work suggests that they are allocating less time than men to establishing and maintaining HHP at work, thereby limiting their career sustainability. However, this may be due to women’s greater hours devoted to household responsibilities, especially when children are present in the household, which suggests a constraint in women’s available time to devote to having a sustainable career.

Part-Time Work

Women are more likely than men to work part-time, defined as working fewer than 35 hours per week across all jobs combined, with many part-time workers holding multiple jobs (Campion et al., 2020). Women comprise about two-thirds of all part-time workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Although part-time jobs are in the minority in the workplace, their proportion is significant; the proportion of all U.S. jobs that are part time is about 15%.

Working part-time offers people the opportunity for greater work-family balance. However, part-time employees have lower status in organizations than full-time employees doing the same kind of work, their hourly wages are lower, they receive lower health insurance benefits, their employment situations are less secure, and their career prospects are more limited (Booth & van Ours, 2013; Lyonette, 2015).

Because part-time offers less security than full-time work, it may add to individuals’ job-related stress and thereby detract from their health and happiness at work. It also yields less career benefits, including health-enhancing benefits and developmental experiences such as training programs that may enhance productivity. Thus, part-time work, performed primarily by women, may make it less likely that individuals will have a sustainable career.

Virtual Work from Home

The numbers of employees who engage in virtual work, defined as their interacting with other employees via technology rather than face-to-face, has been trending upwards in recent years (Villamor et al., 2023). This trend went into overdrive during the COVID-19 pandemic (Powell, 2020b). Although not as prevalent as during the pandemic, virtual work from home is conducted at much higher levels than before the pandemic.

Women are more negatively affected than men in their work role by working from home. First, because they tend to be under pressure to maintain perceptions of their attractiveness (Nault et al., 2020), heightened emphasis on their grooming, attire, and gaze during virtual meetings on which they are on constant video display can be especially exhausting for women (Shockley et al., 2021b). Second, women, especially mothers, are more likely than men to experience family-related interruptions during work meetings held online when working from home. Due to their

assuming the bulk of family responsibilities including childcare in dual-career, heterosexual households (see above), women face the greater risk of having a child wander into their virtual meetings. Such family-related intrusions can raise concerns about women's professionalism and commitment to their career that are less likely to be raised when men experience the same kind of intrusion (Schmidt & Madjar, 2021).

As a result, women may experience more stress when working virtually from home than men do, which may negatively impact their happiness and health "at work" even if they are not physically at the work site. Working from home may also affect women's productivity if enhanced fatigue from virtual meetings and family interruptions affect the quality of their work. Thus, women who work virtually from home, especially those with children in the household, may find it more difficult to have a sustainable career than men in the equivalent situation.

Voluntary Employment Gaps and Parental Leaves

Employment gaps, or periods of time during which individuals leave and then rejoin the labor force, may be either voluntary or involuntary on the part of the employee. Women are more likely than men to have employment gaps early in their careers, and their employment gaps are more likely to be voluntary for purposes of child-rearing (Reitman & Schneer, 2005; Schneer & Reitman, 1997). Further, because of gendered societal and organizational norms, new mothers are more likely to take parental leaves than new fathers (Gatrell et al., 2022; Parks-Stamm & Tharp, 2023).

Both voluntary employment gaps and parental leaves violate the "ideal worker" norm (Kossek et al., 2020), which is largely based on the experiences of men. An uninterrupted career pattern is assumed to demonstrate stability and commitment to career. When people choose to take time out from their work careers for family-related reasons, their career prospects, especially in organizations that adopt an ideal worker norm, are likely to suffer.

Career interruptions for family-related reasons may take a toll on career sustainability. Being held back in their careers for such an interruption may diminish individuals' happiness at work, even if the interruption increases their short-term happiness at home; it may also increase their work-related stress and negatively impact their health. Further, being held back for such an interruption may result in individuals' having less developmental opportunities that would enhance their productivity. Overall, career interruptions for family reasons, which are more likely for women than men, may contribute to a gender difference in career sustainability.

Discussion

A review of gender differences in selected career experiences – hours worked, part-time work, virtual work from home, and voluntary employment gaps and parental leaves – and their implications for career sustainability suggests that the answer to the question posed in the title is "yes": *Women are at a disadvantage in establishing relatively high levels of health, happiness, and productivity (HHP) at work and maintaining these levels over time, thereby restricting their career sustainability.*

Overall, as our review demonstrates, women are more likely than men to make “family-related work decisions” (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012), or decisions about their work domain that are influenced by factors in their family domain (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). Because of the family-related work decisions they make, women find it more difficult and challenging to have a sustainable career than men do. We recommend future research on gender differences in career sustainability to test these notions.

We also recommend future research on gender differences in the sources of individuals’ HHP at work that influence their career sustainability. For example, Eddleston et al. (2006) found that men regard status-based satisfiers such as earning a high salary and rapidly advancing to higher organizational levels as more important than women, whereas women regard socioemotional satisfiers such as having supportive coworkers and helping others at work as more important than men. These findings were compatible with Powell and Mainiero’s (1992) argument that women place a greater emphasis than men on relationships with family and others outside of work; in Eddleston et al. (2006), women placed a greater emphasis than men on relationships within their work domain. In the same vein, women may be more likely to derive HHP at work from relationships with others, whereas men may be more likely to derive it from status attainment.

Due to space constraints, this developmental paper primarily focuses on the implications for career sustainability of gender differences in career experiences that may be affected by individuals’ experiences in their family domain. Women also face unique barriers, obstacles, and constraints solely within their work domains due to gendered societal and organizational norms (Calás et al., 2014; Heilman et al., 2024; Marshall, 1984; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024) that are likely to restrict their career sustainability. For example, it is well documented that women encounter “glass ceilings” that artificially restrict their access to top management levels (Powell, 2020a; Powell & Butterfield, 1994, 2015). Experiencing or anticipating their bumping against a glass ceiling may suppress female managers’ HHP, thereby restricting their career sustainability. The implications for career sustainability of glass ceilings and other unique career barriers, obstacles, and constraints that women face will be reviewed at length in the full paper.

Organizations need to avoid having a “family-sacrifice” culture (Nsair & Piszczek, 2021) in order to promote career sustainability for all employees. A family-sacrifice organizational culture defines a successful career as an uninterrupted sequence of promotions to higher levels, assumes that requests to take time out from career for family-related reasons reflect a lack of career commitment, and expects key employees to work long hours and be available 24/7. Instead, organizations need to expand their notions of what constitutes career commitment to incorporate concerns for relationships outside of work, which tend to be exhibited more by women than men. They should also encourage employees to take advantage of available “family-friendly” supports, recognizing that employees who do so are likely to be more committed, not less committed, to the organization (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Greenhaus & Powell, 2017). If organizations reconsider their norm of the ideal worker and promote a family-friendly rather than family-sacrifice culture, women may be at less of a disadvantage in having a sustainable career.

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