

Women's Career Development Throughout the Lifespan

An international exploration

Edited by
Jenny Bimrose, Mary McMahon and
Mark Watson



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Women's careers have been a topic of research and discussion in many disciplines including sociology, business, industrial, organisational and vocational psychology, and career guidance. Despite the introduction of equal employment legislation in many countries, women's patterns of career development continue to reflect structural labour market disadvantage.

This unique book brings together expert contributions from academic researchers, as well as representing the voices of older women who participated in an international research investigation. Grounded in multidisciplinary empirical studies, the book provides:

- a variety of perspectives on women's careers in the twenty-first century;
- an international exploration of the voice of the older woman;
- an understanding of both the challenges and responses to women as they construct their careers.

Offering a comprehensive understanding of women's career development throughout the lifespan, this book will be of key interest to academics and researchers from the fields of education, psychology, management, geography, labour market economics and sociology, as well as career practitioners, managers, trainers, researchers and policy developers.

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Foreword

This book represents a significant achievement and in many ways is a first in the literature. Its editors and authors are to be congratulated for the book's conceptualisation and its realisation. The book presents an international and multidisciplinary investigation into older women's careers. Its comprehensive content and structure provides an insight into social, political and economic contexts across nine countries, and the voices of older women in relation to their paid and unpaid work decisions and experiences. Part I of the book presents research overviews from a number of disciplines and Part II provides a unique combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of older women's careers in nine countries. Each part of the book is carefully introduced and synthesised, enabling readers to select chapters for particular countries, or realise its contribution through synthesis. In Part II, documenting the international research study, the quantitative background sets a human backdrop for the actual women's voices. The third and final part of the book presents compelling analyses and reflections on future theorising, research, policy, and practice in relation to this multidisciplinary field of women's careers, or working lives (Patton 2013).

However the book is much more than that – in presenting the socio-political and economic context to the position of women in the workplace it proposes a challenge to theoreticians, to researchers, to practitioners, and to policy makers. As the editors state:

It is also clear that while the term gender relates to a single social variable, in reality it is often associated with multidimensional disadvantage. Other biological, social and cultural categories, like race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, age and other axes of social identity interact, often simultaneously and at different levels, thus contributing to systematic injustice and social inequality.

(Bimrose *et al.*, Chapter 1)

The book is therefore a powerful political statement, as highlighted by Blustein (Chapter 18), it 'is the next step in this courageous struggle to place women's voices at the forefront of our intention to create a world that offers opportunities for meaning and dignity at work'. The book emphasises that women's voices about the meaning and reality for work in their lives are truly global – voices

from women in countries that had experienced major political, social, cultural and economic change all demonstrated a commonality of themes for women's experiences, evident in Western countries as in non-Western and new market economies.

While women's participation in paid work has increased and educational attainments and occupational levels actually exceed those of men in many countries, women continue to experience structural labour market disadvantages in most countries, evidenced by horizontal and vertical gendered segregation in occupations. Wage gaps, although narrowing, continue to be evident, and women continue to be employed in lower paid and lower level positions and in jobs that are often part-time, insecure, and which have fewer prospects for advancement. As Blustein (Chapter 18) commented, 'equal opportunity is the exception rather than the norm'.

The universal challenge of women's role in child care and increasingly in elder care continues, re-emphasising the existence of the double shift referred to by Green (Chapter 2) and Parker and Roan (Chapter 6). Almost all of the women across all countries attempt to develop solutions to these competing demands. Where women contribute financially to the family through their market work roles, they continue to carry family and household responsibilities. Richardson and Schaeffer (2013a, b) and Richardson *et al.* (Chapter 19) have emphasised the need to recognise the value of both market work and care work in both women's and men's lives.

Chapter authors have emphasised that, despite the many advances in developed societies, most societal infrastructure continues to act as an inhibitor for women's occupational participation. The cost, if it does exist, of social and organisational infrastructure for child care, and increasingly elder care, acts to maintain traditional gender roles. Parker and Roan (Chapter 6) note that organisational processes need to be developed such that women do not need to continue the family-work juggle personally. As Duarte (Chapter 17) asserts 'the construction or the designing of a working life is always compromised by the context' – it is evident throughout the book that women develop careers through their own individual pursuits, despite the organisational, social, and infrastructural challenges. As such, their lives demonstrate a multiplicity of career patterns that vary considerably across life stages.

Part III of the book provides chapters which speak to the broad foci of the contribution of the book, and where authors have discussed the challenges for the field. Richardson *et al.* (Chapter 19) emphasise the importance of changing the discourse, as opposed to helping people to adapt to a changing world. Blustein (Chapter 18) emphasises that this volume 'forces a serious reckoning of the fundamental assumptions of existing and emerging theoretical ideas'. Roberts (Chapter 20) acknowledges the importance of policy, and encourages career services and practitioners to listen to the advice provided by the research participants in this book. In the final chapter, McMahon, Watson and Bimrose (Chapter 21) challenge the role of career guidance in women's lives, and suggest major changes to the preparation of career practitioners especially in relation to broadening cultural and global perspectives. Finally, these authors challenge career practitioners to become advocates for

social justice and social change, emphasising the need to challenge the systemic underpinning of women's labour market disadvantage.

This book is sure to become a landmark work. It challenges current theorising, it embraces and demonstrates the complexity of multidisciplinary research, and it provides suggestions for policy and practice. More importantly it demonstrates the gendered nature of occupational opportunity, no matter what country and what socio-political and economic stage in a country's development. Fundamentally it is the voices of the women who highlight these challenges, and the editors and authors are to be congratulated for providing the opportunity for them to speak.

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Acknowledgements

This book represents the culmination of an exciting international project that began in 2010 with a study conducted in three countries, England, Australia and South Africa. Our project sparked the interest of international researchers who then replicated the study in their own countries. We subsequently decided that the whole project might be best represented in a book that contextualised the research and also considered the implications of the nine country studies for theory, research, policy and practice.

We are deeply appreciative of the authors who responded enthusiastically to the concept and so willingly and generously contributed to this important book. We would also like to thank Professor Wendy Patton whose publications testify to a longstanding commitment to women's careers. We were thrilled when she agreed to write a foreword for us.

We would especially like to thank the women from the nine countries who so willingly shared their stories with the researchers and provided the stimulus for this book.

This book tells an international story and will be a valuable resource to career theorists, career researchers, policy makers and career practitioners.

Due thanks is also given to the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press for permission to reproduce text from *CREATING CAPABILITIES: THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH* by Martha C. Nussbaum, pp. 18–19, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 2011 by Martha C. Nussbaum in Chapter 18.

1 Introduction

Jenny Bimrose, Mary McMahon and Mark Watson

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), written in the wake of the catastrophically destructive impact of the Second World War (1939–45) states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights (United Nations UDHR 1948). According to this Declaration, gender equality is a basic human right. Yet the majority of the world's poor are women and their lack of access to financial resources has a profound effect on their overall wellbeing. Gender inequality is deeply entrenched in all societies (United Nations 2010). There is no shortage of data that relate to the persistently unequal and disadvantaged position of women, compared with men, in societies across the world. The Global Gender Gap Index, for example, introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006, quantifies the magnitude of gender-based disparities, tracking progress across four key areas: economic, political, education and health (World Economic Forum 2013). Similarly, statistical indicators provided by the United Nations in reports, databases and archives similarly testify to continuing gender discrimination, inequality and injustice (United Nations Women's Watch 2014).

These data objectify global gender inequality. Invaluable for understanding the sheer scale, pervasiveness and persistence of the problem, the existence of these data sometimes masks an important subjective dimension. Gender is essentially a social construct. It refers to the membership of a particular social category, masculine or feminine, that aligns more or less to the two sexes. It is different from biological sex, sexual orientation, sexual preference and to other categories or descriptions that relate to various behaviours and identities associated with the sexes (Bimrose 2008, 2012). Gender is defined by reference to those attributes associated with being female and being male (Gilligan 1982). These attributes are fluid, not fixed. They differ between cultures or societies, across different periods in history and change within the same culture or society over time. Such changes are bound up with subtle changes in societal role expectations. Consider, for example, the social expectations and values associated with the role of mothers over the past two or three decades, which have changed dramatically in many societies. In many countries, it is now socially acceptable for women with primary responsibility for young children to be in paid employment in the formal economy, alongside their caring responsibilities, in a way that was not previously the case. In fact, the values and expectations associated with this social role have shifted so dramatically in some

societies that dual wage earners (i.e. where both the man and woman in the family earn a wage or salary through formal employment) have become the norm, because of the economic necessity for women in a family to make a financial contribution, alongside men (Paden and Buehler 1995).

Intersections of social disadvantage

The fluidity of these gender role expectations illustrates not only the ways in which gender is constructed and defined by different societies over time. It also highlights how ways in which being male and being female are valued differently – different and not equal. For example, despite women's increased participation in the labour market, little change has occurred in the gendered allocation of domestic duties. Women, on average, continue to take the primary responsibility for domestic and care responsibilities, with studies showing how men's share of domestic labour has actually slowed down or remained the same in some Western countries (Bimrose 2008). The intensification of work, characterised by, for example, long and unpredictable working hours and/or work outside formally contracted hours, has had a particularly negative impact on women shouldering the main responsibility for housework and caring who are consequently forced to develop various coping strategies to help manage the dual demands and stresses of paid employment and domestic duties (Bimrose 2008).

It is also clear that while the term gender relates to a single social variable, in reality it is often associated with multidimensional disadvantage. Other biological, social and cultural categories, like race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, age and other axes of social identity interact, often simultaneously and at different levels, thus contributing to systematic injustice and social inequality. The term intersectionality is useful to our understanding of the complexity of the layers of disadvantage that are often evident in this context (Begum 1994). It refers to the interaction of different types of social oppression and injustice in ways that create multiple manifestations of discrimination (Crenshaw 1991). Despite certain flaws (Davis 2008; Ludvig 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006), intersectionality usefully emphasises the combined impact on an individual of the convergence of factors like gender and age, together with other factors such as race and socio-economic status (Bradley 1996; Moore 2009).

The negative impact on individuals of the interplay of various social factors is being increasingly recognised (Ainsworth 2002; Weller 2007). Where gender and age converge, for example, it has been found that structural factors not only determine the basis on which older women join the labour market (Buchmann *et al.* 2010; Dex *et al.* 2008), but they also influence employment destinations (Moore 2009). Additionally, it increases vulnerability to unemployment. In the UK, for example, unemployment 'amongst women aged 50–64 has increased by 41 per cent, compared with one per cent overall' (The Commission on Older Women 2013: 3). Social disadvantage associated with ageing has become a particularly critical issue in countries around the world experiencing increased life expectancy and falling birth rates contiguously through a combination of improved health care and living standards (Del Bono *et al.* 2007; Roberts 2006; Smeaton and Vegeris 2009). Labour market penalties associated with ageing, like vulnerability to redundancy,

forced early retirement and minimum wages (Sussman and Tabi 2004; Taylor and Walker 1997) have been found to interact with gender inequality in a pernicious manner (United Nations 2010). Compared with older men, economic resources are unequally distributed among older women (Del Bono *et al.* 2007).

Despite the need to extend working lives (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2006) and with the economic costs associated with the under-utilisation of female labour being a recurrent theme (e.g. International Labour Office 2010), research into how women's career transitions into and through the labour market could be supported effectively is scant (Bimrose 2001). A detailed understanding of the formal career support needs of older people is also lacking (Ford 2005). Age related, gendered labour market discrimination should be a particular concern for those providing formal career guidance and counselling services, since the consistent failure of women to sustain continuous employment can lead to an impoverished old age, which may also be characterised by social exclusion and reduced quality of life (Smeaton and Vegeris 2009). Commentaries relating to the formal support required to facilitate women's career progression (including older women) have tended to reflect traditional and mainly psychological career theories, developed in relatively homogenous Western capitalist contexts that were strongly individualised, masculine, secular, action- and future-focused (Bimrose 2001, 2008). Such theories have largely failed to address the complex contextual and relational nature of women's career development (August 2011; Bimrose 2008), including that of older women, resulting in a paucity of relevant frameworks to inform practice for this particular group.

Gender inequality: multidisciplinary and transnational inquiry

A Commission on older women set up in the UK to investigate the position of older women in society found that:

Across every generation women are feeling the strain. Women are being hit three times as hard as men by the Government's economic policies, despite earning less and owning less than men, and female unemployment has reached its highest level in 25 years ... They are working hard to hold families together, increasingly relied upon by their sons and daughters for childcare whilst also caring for elderly parents or sick relatives. They make up six in every ten carers and provide over £7 billion in unpaid support to our economy. They are the generation who fought for better rights in the workplace, made the economic arguments for childcare and fought for equal pay, but for whom the workplace has never caught up.

(Commission on Older Women 2013: 5)

It is against this background that a qualitative research inquiry into women's career development across the lifespan was carried out with the specific purpose of investigating the career stories of older women (aged 45 to 65) across different country contexts. A particular motivation for the original three researchers in the study (those

who carried out research in England, Australia and South Africa) was their interest in finding out the extent to which the women had been supported in their career transitions across their lifetimes. In-depth interviews were carried out with twelve (in one country thirteen) women in this particular age group in nine countries: Argentina, Australia, Canada, China, England, Germany, Italy, Portugal and South Africa.

A key finding from the research investigation relates to the importance of context. The career development of each of the women in the nine country studies was played out in a particular social, economic and historic context. The impact of these contexts was both profound and unique, as was each woman's story. Each career trajectory reflected the influence of context, mediated by the styles and characteristics of the women. The iterative nature of the dynamic interaction of the individuality of the women in their social contexts is what provides rich and deep insights into the ways in which these women navigated their ways through political and social upheaval (sometimes revolution), economic boom and bust, and their life cycles of production and/or reproduction.

Part I – The international context: research perspectives

The critical importance of social and economic contexts in which women make their way is the common thread running through the first five chapters in Part I of the book. Chapter 2 invites us to consider a much-neglected aspect of career practice – the geography of gendered employment. An examination of one labour market (India) is presented in Chapter 3, with a particular focus on the position of women in that economic context. This broad perspective is narrowed in Chapter 4, which explores through research, employment policies within employing organisations and the ways in which these impact on women, particularly older women. Ways that jobs can be negatively affected when colonised predominantly by one gender are tracked in Chapter 5. The final chapter in Part I, Chapter 6, reverts to a focus on an organisational perspective on gender.

Part II – National studies: hearing the voices of older women

Findings from the research study of women's transitions in nine countries provided the genesis and inspiration for the present book. The research methodology (see Chapter 7) was designed to give the women participants a voice. Although all the women in the study were in the age group 45–65 (the age at which women have difficulty entering or re-entering the labour market), the stories they provided were retrospective and spanned their lifetimes. Powerful insights to the career progression of these women across their entire lifespan were collected and analysed (Chapters 8 to 16). This pivotal section of the book also contains an insightful chapter that synthesises the contents of the section. In this synthesis, Duarte (Chapter 17) reflects on the complex interplay of the multiple dimensions affecting the construction of women's careers, emphasising the importance of the past for an accurate understanding of the present and appreciation of what is possible in the future: 'Listening

to the voices of women aged between 45 and 65 years of age, ages during which the past is re-evaluated and during which the future still stretches out ahead, is a challenge that helps to better understand' (p. 214).

Part III – Looking to the future

A key motivation for this book was to scrutinise the career support that older women require in the career transitions that typify their trajectories. The final section of the book, therefore, turns attention to the implications of the findings from this book project for career guidance and counselling. These implications are explored and examined from different angles by thought leaders in their fields. Chapter 18 considers the implications of the international research study and findings for career theory. Chapter 19 takes the same approach for career research. Chapter 20 examines some implications for career policy of the research study. Finally, Chapter 21 reflects on career practice. Each of these chapters is hard hitting, identifying crucial angles and challenging readers to confront uncomfortable questions. For the theory, research, policy and practice of the profession of career guidance and counselling to advance, these are questions with which we must all engage.

Conclusion

Equality and liberty are basic human rights. Despite the formal recognition that the empowerment of women to achieve their full potential not only stimulates economic productivity, but also fuels thriving economies (United Nations 2010), gender inequality continues to exist on a shamefully massive scale worldwide. Its continued existence undermines and challenges the universal truths of equality and liberty. We hope that this book increases understanding of some of the challenges that have been faced by the older women in this study over their lifetimes and contributes to an improvement in the support available to them as they develop their careers across their life courses. There are signs that policy is beginning to espouse this agenda. A key recommendation from The Commission on Older Women (2013: 7) reflects the lack of careers support for older women in the UK: 'The Commission would like to see much better careers service support for older workers.' We hope that the evidence presented in this book can be used to support this aspiration.

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Part I

The international context

Research perspectives

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2 Geographical perspectives on women's careers

Why and how space matters

Anne Green

This chapter focuses on geographical variations in employment and experiences of paid work, with a particular focus on women. Its fundamental premise is that where individuals live is important for the quantity and quality of employment available to them (Green 2009) and so for opportunities for skills utilisation and career development. It outlines quantitative and qualitative dimensions of employment by gender at international and sub-national levels. In particular, at the local level of everyday lives, the chapter uses the concept of gendered localisation to suggest that, due to the so-called double shift of paid and unpaid household work practised by many – albeit not all – women, a geographical perspective is particularly important for understanding the opportunities and constraints faced by women in accessing employment and developing their careers. This is especially so for less-skilled women who are more limited than their more highly-skilled peers in the jobs that they can perform.

It follows that there is considerable heterogeneity in the employment and career development experiences of women, by location, skill level and position in the life course. Those who have the poorest qualifications tend to have a relatively weak position in employment and in the labour and housing markets more generally, and to be more restricted than those with higher skills in the distance that they are able and can afford to travel. They are more likely to be workless (either as unemployed or economically inactive) relative to their more highly-skilled peers. Similarly, those with the least formal work experience and the heaviest caring responsibilities for children and other household/family members are most constrained by geography in their employment opportunities and career development. The quantity and quality of opportunities for education, training and employment available locally is of particular importance to these sub-groups (Green and Owen 2006). By contrast, those who have the highest qualifications, and who have the least burden of non-work responsibilities and/or are best placed to cope with them, are least constrained by geography in opportunities for employment and career development. However, for all women, opportunities and geographical constraints for career development vary by life stage, and the circumstances of other household members.

As the chapter proceeds, the geographical focus of attention shifts successively from the international to the regional and to the local level scale. The next section of this chapter outlines key dimensions of geographical variations in women's economic opportunities internationally. This is followed by a discussion of regional variations in

employment rates in Europe. Then the focus shifts to the intra-regional and local level scales of everyday lives, and a consideration of how geographical factors help shape the careers of women in dual career households and of women in weaker labour market positions. The final section synthesises the key findings and looks to the future.

International perspectives

Internationally, there are considerable differences in the economic fortunes of and prospects for women. The Women's Economic Opportunity Index, developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2010) and based on international data (from the World Bank, the United Nations, the International Labour Organisation, the World Economic Forum, the OECD and newly created indicators), comprising 26 indicators relating to jobs and the labour market, access to finance, women's legal and social status and the general business environment, captures some of these variations. The geographical pattern of variation indicates that women face fewer economic barriers and have more opportunities in more advanced countries. The ten top-ranked countries on the Index are Sweden, Belgium, Norway, Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Canada and Australia. The next ten countries in the rankings include the United States and countries in Europe. The bottom ten ranked countries are in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia: Sudan, Yemen, Chad, Ivory Coast, Togo, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Syria, Cameroon and Bangladesh.

On the Labour Policy and Practice components of the Women's Economic Opportunity Index (Economist Intelligence Unit 2010), which are derived from measures including legal restrictions on job types, equal pay, non-discrimination, maternity and paternity leave and provision, differential retirement age, *de facto* discrimination at work, and access to childcare, the countries with the highest scores are Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands. Hence, it might be in these countries that institutional factors are most conducive to the development of women's careers, holding other factors constant.

Other international data on global employment trends from the International Labour Organisation (2012) indicate that so-called gender gaps in the labour market (defined as the numerical extent to which women are disadvantaged relative to men on any particular labour market indicator) reveal a similar picture of international variation, with the gaps being most pronounced in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, and least pronounced in the developed economies and the European Union, East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The data also indicate that convergence in the fortunes of women and men prior to 2008 reversed thereafter. These reversals in fortunes were most pronounced in East Asia, South Asia and Central and Eastern Europe.

Sub-national perspectives

Within countries sub-national variations in economic opportunities and prospects for women's career development would be expected, in accordance with geographical variations in economic circumstances and in the quantity and characteristics (by sector, occupation, hours of work, contract type, etc.) of jobs. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show