

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 Career Development Throughout the Lifespan

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.

Wendy Patton

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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.

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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