

The Status of Women's Career Development: Supporting Women in the Movement Toward Gender Parity

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Women's presence in the United States workforce made significant advancements in the 1960s and 1970s with Affirmative Action, the Equal Pay Act, and the development of school programs promoting women's involvement in STEM careers. Although most Black and Latina women were already participating in the workforce, economic recessions in the 1970s and 1980s also increased women's involvement in the workforce as White couples found it necessary to have dual incomes. Despite these advancements, and while women now represent 55% of the U.S. workforce, they are overrepresented in a number of occupations (e.g., nursing, teaching) and underrepresented in others (e.g., engineering, construction trades). These disparities are further evident upon consideration of women's intersecting sociocultural identities, such as race and sexual orientation. While individual preferences, abilities, and values influence women's decisions about the occupations they enter, there is a complex web of individual and societal factors that contribute to gender differences in occupations. Although women's career development has been an area of focus in vocational psychology and counseling for decades, questions remain about how to increase gender parity in many occupations and decrease the barriers that women experience at all stages of their careers.



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In their recent article, Fouad et al. (2023) reviewed 25 years of empirical literature on women's career development. Their findings, organized along the developmental timeline of "adolescence," "women in postsecondary education," and "women in the workforce," critique the research and provide valuable implications for practice, training, and advocacy around women's career development. Research examining the career development process in adolescence suggests that parental input and societal messaging around career traditionality are contributing factors to girls' and women's academic self-efficacy and achievement, as well as their career interests and planning. Meanwhile, women in postsecondary education have already begun anticipating some of the career barriers they may face. Evidence suggests that women in higher education settings may experience "chilly" climates in their academic programs, or work environments characterized by microaggressions and overt discrimination that leads to the differential treatment of women. Chilly climates may be especially prevalent in fields where women are traditionally underrepresented. Concurrently, women in higher education settings may also be planning for multiple roles, namely in the domains of work and family, which can correspond with the traditionality of the careers they choose. For women who have already entered the workforce, navigating the demands of multiple roles can contribute to women's decisions about remaining in their careers. This, along with receiving mentoring from other women and experiencing a warm workplace climate, or a work environment that actively supports women's career development, contributed to women's decisions to persist in the workplace but was not always correlated with women's wellbeing.

Fouad et al. (2023) further highlighted that intersecting identities influence women's career trajectories across all points of career development – from early perceptions of career possibilities that may be available to them, to the role of family, acculturation, and experiences of discrimination and harassment grounded in systemic oppression. They specifically note that there has been an over-sampling of cisgender, heterosexual women from middle-class backgrounds, signaling a need for research examining women's intersecting identities, especially those identities that have been historically marginalized. While the authors do describe the limited research that has examined race, sexual orientation, social class, ability status, and age, they caution readers that the lack of research emphasizing intersecting sociocultural identities limits a comprehensive understanding of women's career development. Three interventions emerged in the research to support women in their career development processes:

1. Raising awareness is critical for women. Understanding the career barriers they may face, as well as the resources (e.g., counseling, mentoring, gender affinity groups) that may be available to them at varying points in their career development processes can aid women in making career-related decisions that are suited to their personal needs, values, and interests.

2. Women engaging in or planning to engage in multiple roles may benefit from exploring internal and external conflicts that arise in navigating these responsibilities. The opportunity to vocalize internalized beliefs about socialized gender norms may allow women to manage and prioritize their responsibilities in ways that are congruent to their needs.

3. Support for women's career development can occur in personal and professional settings by colleagues, family members, mental health providers, and career counselors among others. Regardless of where women are receiving support and by whom, attention should be paid to women's intersecting identities and how those unique intersections may benefit and/or challenge their career development.

Recommended reading

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