Article

10.20856/jnicec.5306

How possible is fulfilling work for mid-life women: A review of the empirical psychology literature

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To cite this article:

Walker, L. (2024). How possible is fulfilling work for mid-life women: A review of the empirical psychology literature. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, *53*(1), 51-67. https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5306

Abstract

There are over nine million women aged 40-60 in the UK alone, but they remain under-represented in the psychology and career literature. Whilst there is limited research into fulfilling work for midlife women, this broad review identified 50 related studies offering important clues for women themselves and practitioners working with them. It seems fulfilling work is possible for midlife women, but they are likely to face more, and different, challenges compared with men or other women. Five key insights are highlighted and specific findings for midlife women summarised.

Key words: mid-life; women; career; work; fulfilling work

Introduction

With longer working lives, sustaining fulfilling work becomes more important. Despite this, few organisations are proactively addressing the retention, value and promotion of older workers including midlifers (Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008; Irving, 2018). What suits people at 20 may well be different to what is fulfilling at 40 or 60.

Mid-life can be a uniquely challenging time with the collision of social, physiological and emotional challenges (Lachman et al., 2015; Ryan, 2023; Jackson, 2019). Fulfilment is highly pertinent to mid-lifers as the need for meaning appears to grow through

the lifespan, only peaking beyond 65 (Baltes, 1980). Choices made at this stage can significantly impact future health, wealth, wellbeing and happiness in later life (Lachman et al., 2015).

> Midlife is a critical inflection point for later health, productivity, and retention, yet this aging stage is overlooked in the process model and generally in the workforce aging literature (Burke & Grandey, 2020).

In career counselling practice, fulfilling work is often positioned as a central, aspirational goal, but remains largely undefined. Recent vocational psychology literature (since 2016) does offer several options, but they are still to be tested with many different groups, including midlife women.

Women make up a major portion of the labour force. Globally, roughly half of working age women participate in the labour force, compared with 80% of men. Rates vary considerably across regions – under 20% in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to over 60% in East Asia and the Pacific (World Bank). Similarly, midlife women represent a large portion of paid workers. About 47% of U.S. workers between 40 and 54 years old are female (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

For midlife women, the dominant narrative, in popular and organisational literature, is one of decline and struggle, exacerbated by menopause and empty nest syndrome, but is this validated or challenged by the empirical psychology evidence?

Key terms

Fulfilling work

In career counselling, 'fulfilling work' is not specifically defined but is often considered as part of an individual's career decision making process – what would make your work fulfilling to you? Vocational psychology, however, offers several recent, broader definitions:

> Work fulfilment as work that is personally satisfying and meaningful (Duffy et al., 2016).

> Fulfilling work is the complete, integrated, and comprehensive experience of well-being in the work context (Owens, Allan, et al., 2019a).

> Fulfilling work is a holistic and complete sense of wellbeing and flourishing in the work context (Allan et al., 2019).

There are several other terms related to 'fulfilling work' including meaningful work, engaging work, satisfying work, decent work, and good work. Whilst all these terms were included in the study search criteria, 'fulfilling work' is the main focus of this review for three key reasons.

- To acknowledge the possibility of different types of work (paid, unpaid, fulltime, part-time, portfolio, voluntary etc) and sources of work fulfilment.

- To bridge across disciplines as 'fulfilling work' is an identified concept in career counselling, vocational psychology, HR, management, and coaching.
- To include an 'internal felt-sense' of the work experience to balance traditional external measures of work success or achievement.

Midlife

Search for 'midlife' online and you are inundated with page after page of midlife crisis symptoms and advice about how to deal with them. The term 'midlife crisis' was coined by Jacques in 1965. His work, however, was based on male patients and has not since been replicated. Other studies found little evidence that a crisis is any more likely in midlife than at any other time, although the impact of a major life event may have longer lasting implications (e.g. Johnson et al.,2009).

Across Europe, there seem to be varying perceptions of the length of midlife. If midlife is the gap between when youth ends and old age begins, the European Social Survey data suggests that midlife could be between 40 and 62. Interestingly, there is less consensus around when youth ends than old age begins. The end of youth ranges from 34 in Norway to 52 in Greece with a mean of 40. Old age ranges from 55 to 68 with a mean of 62 (AGE UK report, 2011; DWP report, 2011).

Whilst the issues with defining mid-life by age are acknowledged, this study uses the range of 40 to 62.

Midlife women

This review focuses specifically on midlife women rather than all midlifers. Existing vocational psychology literature suggests women's work experience (generally and in midlife) is different, potentially significantly different (Ellemers, 2014; Flores et al., 2021; Fouad et al., 2023). Midlife challenges are described as 'physiological, social and emotional' (Jackson, 2019) and are likely to be experienced differently across gender. Finally, stereotypes about midlife are thought to be particularly harmful for working women and ambivalent for men (Burke & Grandey, 2020; Finkelstein et al., 1995; Gordon & Arvey, 2004; Ng & Feldman, 2012).

Midlife women are a significant population and a major part of the workforce. Understanding more about what fulfilling work means and the factors that influence its availability for them could benefit the women themselves, practitioners who work with them, organisations, and even society.

Review strategy and method

Given there are no specific studies into 'fulfilling work for midlife women' a broad approach was taken to this particular search. Studies were included if they addressed fulfilling work / midlife / women (or any combination), were empirical research, and psychology-related.

Mid Life (ML) including 40-62	27
Women specific	35
ML women specific	25
Fulfilling work (FW)	3
Adjacent to fulfilling work	14
ML women & adjacent to FW	0 (pre 2006)
ML women & fulfilling work	0

Table 1: Focus of the study (n = 50)

Of the 50 studies reviewed, only three tackled fulfilling work with any population, and 14 considered related concepts, including decent work, meaningful work, career satisfaction, fulfilment of career dreams, and Kaleidoscope Careers.

Thirty-five studies focused on women specifically and 25 of these were with midlife women. 36 specified a country, of which 24 were in the United States and there was a cluster in California. Other locations were Canada, Australia Iran, South Africa, and the UK. Almost half were quantitative studies. Many used large, pre-existing datasets and nine were longitudinal. Many drew participants from college alumni cohorts.

Mixed method	7
Quantitative	24
Qualitative	11
Systematic / narrative review	8

Table 2: Study type (50 in total)

Of the 11 qualitative studies, 10 examined the experience of 'midlife' or 'older' women. Six of the mixed method studies included midlife women only participants. Of the eight literature reviews, three were large scale systematic reviews of women's careers (not just midlife women). The earliest study was from 1986 and the most recent from 2023. There was a relatively even spread across time, with approximately 12 per decade. Whilst a thorough search was conducted, it may not be exhaustive.

Several other authors have called for more studies into the intersectionality of women's careers with race, social class, LGBTQ, health and ability status, and age (Fouad et al., 2023; Flores et al., 2021; Burke & Grandey, 2020); highlighting the lack of representation of the complexity of issues faced by midlife women.

Findings – research insights

Five key insights emerged from the literature and these are reviewed in turn and potential implications for midlife women highlighted.

1. Work fulfilment seems to be predicated on decent work
2. Fulfilling work goes hand in hand with health and wellbeing
3. The nature of fulfilling work can shift through the life course
4. Fulfilling work tends to be a different experience for women and men
5. Knowing if work is fulfilling is largely subjective, a felt sense

1. Work fulfilment seems to be predicated on decent work

An influential theory in this field is the Psychology of Working Framework (PWF) which aims to explain the structural and psychological factors that intersect to provide access to decent and then fulfilling work (Blustein et al., 2008).

The PWF's definition of 'decent work' is derived from the International Labour Organization.

> Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men (Blustein et al., 2008).

The PWF was operationalised into the Psychology of Work Theory (PWT) in 2016 which underscores the significance of contextual factors, especially economic constraints and social identity-based marginalisation (Duffy et al., 2016), all issues that may be pertinent to midlife women.

The proposed predictors of decent work in PWT have received empirical support and the model appears to be applicable to a variety of population groups, including workers of colour in the U.S. (Duffy et al., 2018, 2019), LGBTQ workers (Douglass, Velez, Conlin, Duffy, & England, 2017), transgender and gender nonconforming workers (Tebbe, Allan, & Bell, 2019), workers in China (Wang et al., 2019), college students in Korea (Kim et al., 2019), and workers with chronic health conditions (Tokar & Kaut, 2023). There have not been any specific studies for midlife women.

Some researchers, however, argue that the 'decent work agenda' neglects individual psychological experiences and may not fully explain the experience of people not close to poverty (Nourafkan & Tanova, 2023).

The literature suggests that several of the theorised predictors of decent work such as economic constraints, marginalisation, high work volition and high career adaptability may be less favourable for many women (Flores et al., 2021; Fouad et al., 2023).

In terms of the economic context and economic constraints, a few studies highlighted the relevance for midlife women. A study of five college cohorts found later cohorts benefitted from 'societal liberalisation', progressive social and economic climates for women, compared with earlier cohorts (Schuster, 1990). Self-esteem was significantly and positively related to the role of paid worker, more than the unpaid roles of wife and mother (Baruch & Barnett, 1986). Gender differences requiring women to negotiate between home and work life continue into midlife and beyond (Emslie & Hunt, 2009a).

Marginalisation can impact midlife women with the intersectionality of gender and other factors, such as age, race or ethnicity. Studies found the potential for fulfilling work differs by social class and privilege (Allan et al., 2020; Duffy et al., 2016; Tokar et al., 2023), culture and race (Kim & O'Brien, 2018; Owens et al., 2019), age (Allan et al., 2021; Dordoni & Argentero, 2015), intersectionality e.g. gendered ageism (Itzin & Phillipson, 2003; Ross, 2023; Still & Timms, 1998; Ryan, 2019), and quality of relationships including violence (Allan et al., 2020; Fouad et al., 2023; Lightbody et al., 1997; Marcinkus et al., 2007).

Midlife women's career decisions are often constrained, impacting work volition, being 'part of a larger and intricate web of interconnected issues, people, and aspects that had to come together in a delicately balanced package' (Leonard & Burns, 2006). Support to overcome constraints seems to be particularly important, and has been shown to impact hope (Cheavens et al., 2006) resilience (Armstrong-Stassen & Cameron, 2005; Brown & Yates, 2018; Klohnen et al., 1996), challenging stereotypes (Dordoni & Argentero, 2015), authenticity (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018a), balance (Marcinkus et al., 2007), and a sense of control (Barnett & Baruch, 1978).

According to Savickas, career adaptability is a construct that 'denotes an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks of vocational development' and includes concern, control, curiosity and confidence (Savickas, 2002). Several of the studies reviewed support the impact of related concepts for midlife women including career importance (Roberts & Friend, 1998), interest in their work (Ryan, 2019), control, (Lachman, 2004), positivity (Brown & Yates, 2018), self-esteem (Baruch & Barnett, 1986) and self-awareness (Maree & Nortjé, 2022).

Given the many constraints midlife women can experience, the possibility of fulfilling work could be less available to them. Access to decent work along with meaningful support to build work volition and overcome these constraints seem to be central to the possibility of fulfilling work.

2. Fulfilling work goes hand in hand with health and wellbeing

The second insight is that health and wellbeing are closely linked to the possibility of fulfilling work, in fact they may go hand in hand. When wellbeing is better, so are the chances of fulfilling work. All three key fulfilling work theories emphasise the role of wellbeing, but not necessarily in the same way.

The Model of Fulfilling Work developed by Allan at al. in 2019 suggests fulfilling work is *all* about wellbeing, with four well-being related components interacting and contributing to the general factor of 'fulfilling work'. Their components address job satisfaction (hedonic cognitive), meaningful work (eudaimonic cognitive), work engagement (eudaimonic affective), and workplace positive emotions (hedonic affective). Hedonic well-being – living a pleasurable life. Eudaimonic well-being – living a meaningful and actualised life (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Affective well-being – reflects current emotional states. Cognitive well-being – retrospective evaluations, such as global evaluations of job satisfaction (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006).

Similarly, the authors of the Strengths-Based Inclusive Theory of Work (S-BIT of Work) assert that fulfilling work is the 'complete, integrated, and comprehensive experience of well-being in the work context… a set of overlapping and dynamic individual positive experiences that scholars have historically conceptualised as well-being variables'. They acknowledge that people in different contexts may understand and experience well-being in different ways, placing emphasis on different aspects (Owens, Allan, et al., 2019).

The PWT positions wellbeing rather differently, arguing that work is an essential component of mental health and an outcome alongside fulfilling work. They define higher well-being is 'indicative of higher life satisfaction, higher positive affect, and lower negative affect' (Duffy et al., 2016). According to them, psychological needs are predictors of wellbeing and fulfilling work, and group these need into three basic need groups (Allan et al., 2020, Duffy et al., 2016).

- Survival/power needs, which relate to basic physiological necessities such as food and shelter, as well as access to structures of opportunity like education systems.
- Social contribution needs, which reflects the human need to contribute to and feel a sense of belonging to a community.
- Self-determination needs, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

They claim the relationship between these needs and work fulfilment and well-being has been empirically supported, not just theoretically. When these needs are met, fulfilling work and wellbeing are viable outcomes.

Wider midlife research also supports the importance of physical health and wellbeing to the experience of midlife, balancing growth and decline (Lachman, 2004). Is this also the case for midlife women? Whilst there have been no specific studies of the PWT for midlife women, a few related studies broadly support the influence of health and psychological needs on wellbeing and fulfilling work.

Stressful working conditions can affect mental and physical health which influences decisions to change labour force activity for midlife women (Abramson, 2007). Health status is a predictor of career satisfaction in older professional women (Armstrong-Stassen & Cameron, 2005).

Women with high career momentum scored higher on measures of self-acceptance, independence, effective functioning and physical health in their early 50s (Roberts & Friend, 1998). Ego-resiliency was shown to be 'a powerful personality resource that

enables individuals to adaptively negotiate the challenges of this period' in a longitudinal US study (Klohnen et al., 1996). Both rumination and effective instrumentality mediated the relationship between regret and well-being (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). A sense of meaning is higher when women can fully express themselves in their work (Kiely, 2000). Women who have fallen short of their earlier career goals can suffer from lower life purpose and greater depression, even after controlling for social background, human capital, family, and health characteristics (Carr, 1997).

Whilst the nature of the relationship between wellbeing and fulfilling work is unclear, the available evidence does point to an association for midlife women too.

3. The nature of fulfilling work can shift through the life course

Life stages and the life course have been of interest to psychologists for a long time. For example, Levison proposed eight stages including a 'mid-life transition' stage from age 40 to 45 and a 'questioning and modification' stage from age 50 to 55 (Levinson, 1978). Life course theory (LCT) is a more recent interdisciplinary theory that seeks to understand the multiple factors that shape people's lives from birth to death with key themes including the 'interplay of human lives and historical time, linked or interdependent lives, human agency in making choices, diversity in life course trajectories, and developmental risk and protection' (Hutchison, 2011).

Even though the career counselling literature does not specifically define fulfilling work, career theorists and practitioners do expect people's work aspirations to evolve. For example, Savickas' influential career construction theory is grounded in constructivism, expecting and encouraging sense making to be continual and contextual (Savickas et al., 2009). The Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006) and Social-Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 2001, 2003; Lent & Brown, 2019) both argue that individuals construct their own meaning of career, both at macro and micro levels, in relation to complex influences.

Health psychology has recognised the intricate interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors for some time. For example, the biopsychosocial model 'construes human health as a product of the reciprocal influences of biological, psychological, interpersonal, and macrosystem contextual dynamics that unfold over personal and historical time' (Lehman et al., 2017). Given the interrelationship of wellbeing (physical and psychological) and fulfilling work, it seems likely that age related changes would also influence the experience of fulfilling work.

The social and psychological impact of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination can shift and occurs in many intergroup contexts. Ageism is the most prevalent form of prejudice and can be experienced by both older and younger people resulting in prejudice, discrimination and ridicule (Bratt et al., 2020). Almost all (93%) of older people (age 50 to 80) regularly experience at least one form of ageism according to a large US study (Ober Allen, J. et al (2020). Research also suggests age stereotypes can involve both positive and negative stereotypical beliefs simultaneously (Dordoni & Argentero, 2015).

In the case of gender, descrimination experienced by women can be both hostile and benevolent (Sutton and Douglas, 2019). The term 'gendered ageism' was first introduced

by Itzin and Phillipson in 1993 as they studied age barriers at work with a particular focus on gender. Since then, it has been defined in a variety of ways, with the concept of 'double jeopardy' a common theme. Others have even pointed to a so-called 'triple jeopardy' as appearance has been posited as a further interactive dimension of ageism against women (Granleese & Sayer 2006; Handy & Davy 2007; Jyrkinen 2013; Jyrkinen & McKie 2012).

Despite 'gendered ageism' being widely used, some authors suggest the concept is underdeveloped. For example, Krekula et al (2018) argue it needs to be considered as 'a socio-cultural practice involving privilege, subordination, and inequality requiring us to rework existing conceptualizations of multiple marginalizations and of gendered ageism'

Overall, it seems the experience of work can shift over time, influenced by many factors including biological, psychological and social. Yet Fouad et al. (2023) argue that 'there is sparse research examining the effects of women's age on their career trajectory' (Fouad et al., 2023). However, some of the studies reviewed provide clues on how age influences women's experience of career. Several authors used The Kaleidoscope Model of Careers (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) to explore how three factors – authenticity, balance, and challenge – shift in importance over time. They suggest mid-career women prioritise finding balance, the desire for authenticity increases across the lifespan, and several unique meanings are associated with the idea of authenticity and balance in later life (August, 2011; Cabrera, 2007; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018b).

The impact of life events is also considered. One study found when historical and social events coincide with early adult experiences there is a greater impact later in life, that for those not going through a formative experience at the time (Duncan & Agronick, 1995).

It seems to be common for women to make changes in early middle age (late 30s), and to engage in a process of life review and midcourse correction. (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998). Role transition turning points for women were more common before midlife, and personal growth ones after midlife, but adversity can occur at any time (Leonard & Burns, 2006).

Whilst non-US evidence is limited in vocational psychology, the wider literature does suggest the experience of fulfilling work is likely to evolve through the life course and influencing factors may affect midlife women differently.

4. Fulfilling work tends to be a different experience for women and men

Several writers argue that women-specific career research is needed to better represent women-specific challenges, not adequately explained by male dominated theories. Worldwide indicators clearly show that women are socially and economically disadvantaged relative to men. For example, in relation to earnings, career and education opportunities, freedom of dress and movement, victimisation in sexual and domestic violence, and representation in political, business and religious leadership (e.g. Rhode, 1989; World Economic Forum, 2017).

In relation to fulfilling work specifically, women face challenges associated with the continual negotiation between personal lives and lives at work, multiple role management, difficulty in securing adequate mentoring experiences, sexual harassment, inadequate pay, job quality, workplace climate, and relational factors (Flores et al., 2021; Fouad et

al., 2023). They are over-represented in part-time work and in 'feminised' sectors and occupations characterised by low and variable earnings, poor working conditions, and limited advancement opportunities.

Career progression structures and processes may also be more of a barrier for women. Difficulties with advancement, more challenging transitions especially if time is taken off between jobs (Cabrera, 2007), implicit bias decreases the odds women will enter and perform in male-dominated job levels or organisations; 'glass cliff' effects make career development less attractive for women; 'queen bee' effects prevent women in leadership from acting as role models for other women (Ellemers, 2014). Women also seem to receive less of a benefit from skills mastery than men do, potentially due to the structural barriers women face in the workplace (Reynolds et al., 2007).

Since the 1990s, some theorists have added contextual variables to emerging or existing theories, arguing this reduces the need for women-specific models. For example, PWT includes specific recognition of marginalisation due to sexism influencing work volition and adaptability (Duffy et al., 2016). Lent and colleagues added proximal and distal contextual factors to the Social Cognitive Career Theory including environmental supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2019).

If the possibility of fulfilling work is predicated on decent work along with the meeting of security, social and self-determination needs, women may well find fulfilling work is less available to them than men.

Researchers suggest that a sense of meaning for women in midlife comes from having the opportunity to fully express themselves in their work as the unique women they are, without having to adopt ideals set forth in the masculine script for men (Kiely, 2000). Executive midlife women seem to share three particular ambitions: enjoyment and innate interest in the work; flexibility from an organisation to give them space to 'feed all areas of their lives'; and the ability to grow and develop inside and outside the organisation. It is worth noting that this study did not consider whether these were unique to midlife women rather than men (Ryan, 2019).

In contrast to men, writers suggest the career histories of women are relational with their career decisions part of a larger and intricate web of interconnected issues, people, and aspects that had to come together in a delicately balanced package (Leonard & Burns, 2006). The relational nature of women's careers seems to persist into midlife, with gender continuing to be interwoven in the business of negotiating home and work life well into midlife (Emslie & Hunt, 2009)

Whilst many of the fears about 'being old' at work may be common across women and men, there do seem to be gender based nuances that could persist into midlife. For example, the kind of work men and women do, sources of meaning, more constraints and barriers (e.g. gendered ageism), a differing shape and trajectory of careers, and potentially different priorities.

5. Knowing if work is fulfilling is largely subjective, a felt sense

If fulfilling work is a 'worthy aspiration for an array of individuals' how does anyone know if their work is fulfilling or not? (Owens, Allan, et al., 2019).

> For many decades, research on the concept of success has largely used quantitative methods to assess the external aspects of success in a male-dominated culture (Borna et al., 2022).

Subjective perceptions dominate for 'fulfilling work' suggesting knowing if work is fulfilling is largely a 'felt-sense'. Several researchers propose measures, based on their definitions, and some have been tested with different populations. It is noticeable that almost all the measures are assessments of perception - in the moment (affective), on reflection (cognitive), or predictively (Allan et al., 2020; Duffy et al., 2016; Owens, Allan, et al., 2019).

The PWT uses a number of scales and sub scales, and whilst some factors could be measured 'objectively' (like economic constraints), the majority are based on self-report and perception. Similarly, the Model of Fulfilling Work uses established self-perception measures for each of their four factors – job satisfaction, meaningful work, work engagement, and workplace positive emotions (Allan et al., 2021).

The SBIT of Work does not propose specific measures, using wider empirical research to support components of the theory. They assert that factors including hope, strengths, adaptability, and empowerment may positively influence contextual factors, the work context, and the experience of fulfilling work. Again, these factors typically use perception-based measures.

Of the studies included in this review, half were quantitative and largely asked perception-based questions in surveys. Whilst there are no specific studies into fulfilling work for midlife women, related studies also underline the importance of perception to career satisfaction (Armstrong-Stassen & Cameron, 2005), work wellbeing (Baruch & Barnett, 1986; McQuaide, 1998b), fulfilment of career dreams (Carr, 1997a), and meaningful work (Kiely, 2000; Still & Timms, 1998).

A career momentum study (for 52 years olds in California) used a mixture of measures including subjective career momentum, status level in work, objective career momentum, family factors, work importance, personality and psychological wellbeing. Whilst this study wasn't specifically about fulfilling work and was based on college educated women only, they did conclude that career momentum cannot be 'reduced to either individual differences in personality traits or life experiences, but rather an integrated set of factors including subjective ones' (Roberts & Friend, 1998).

Several researchers assert that objective assessments are not sufficient to understand the experience of fulfilling work or even the experience of work in midlife, proposing qualitative or mixed methods be used for future research (Baruch & Barnett, 1986; McQuaide, 1998, Borna, 2022). The literature suggests knowing if work is fulfilling (or not) is largely subjective, a felt sense. It is not entirely clear whether this is because of the nature of the concept itself or the nature of how the research was conducted. Given the multiplicity of influencing factors, it does seem reasonable to suggest a holistic assessment or outcome is appropriate – the whole is more than the sum of the parts – as proposed by leading writers in the field in their definitions (Allan et al., 2019, 2021; Duffy et al., 2016; Owens, Allan, et al., 2019)

Conclusion

The five key insights discussed above emerged from the literature and provide potential clues for women themselves and practitioners working with them. In the absence of any definitions of fulfilling work, that have been tested or developed with midlife women, it is challenging to draw too many firm conclusions beyond the insights offered.

The available research does suggest that fulfilling work is possible for mid-life women, but they are likely to face more, and different, challenges compared with men or other women. Decent work can be less readily available due to economic constraints, multiple sources of marginalisation, limited work volition, and restricted career adaptability. Meeting basic psychological needs, particularly survival / power and self-determination needs, may be tougher.

During midlife, biological, psychological, and social factors collide to make it a challenging and disruptive stage. Whilst there has been a notable increase in interest and research into menopause, few women want to defined by this aspect of the midlife transition alone. As the nature of fulfilling work shifts in midlife, fulfilment is pertinent and choices made at this stage can significantly impact future health, wealth, wellbeing and happiness.

Despite midlife women representing an important and sizable population, they are largely neglected by the literature. There is little robust evidence as to what fulfilling work really means to them or what the most important barriers or boosts are. The dominant career models do not seem to fully represent the highly relational nature of women's careers as they continue to negotiate the multiplicity of roles society expects of them.

If fulfilling work is indeed an aspirational outcome available to most people, more work is needed to truly answer the question 'how possible is fulfilling work for midlife women' and provide guidance as to what can help them achieve it.

Future research

Given the absence of directly relevant research, there is real potential for future work. For example, clarifying what fulfilling work means to midlife women would be important foundational work – whether this be a new definition or testing existing definitions with this population. None of the existing models of fulfilling work have been tested with midlife women as yet, and given the potentially unique combination of challenges and constraints, the insight could add to the understanding of practitioners women themselves and practitioners working with them. Finally, identification of the most important boosts and barriers impacting the possibility of fulfilling work for midlife women would help target support for greatest impact.

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