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Sustainability in International Careers

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ABSTRACT:
This thesis reviews and synthesizes research on sustainable international careers. Sustainability of international careers has become increasingly relevant as global mobility expands and traditional linear career paths evolve into more dynamic ones. Previous research often examines either international careers or career sustainability separately, leaving their connection open for analysis. In this thesis, the topic is approached by first introducing the key concepts related to sustainable careers and high-density international work. These include the career outcomes that indicate career sustainability, as well as the antecedents that influence these outcomes. Special attention is given to the distinction between assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), as well as differences between women and men, in shaping sustainable career outcomes. The thesis concludes that sustainability in international careers is best achieved through the joint efforts of individuals and organizations, where proactive career management and supportive structures enable sustainable international careers.

KEYWORDS: sustainable careers, global mobility, high-density work, expatriates, gender differences, assigned expatriates, self-initiated expatriates, career outcomes

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1 Introduction

In today's rapidly changing world of work, career paths have become increasingly dynamic and unpredictable. As traditional linear careers give way to more flexible and self-directed trajectories, the concept of sustainable careers has gathered significant scholarly attention (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020). A sustainable career refers to an evolving sequence of an individual's work experiences that provide meaning and continuity over time while allowing for adaptability across changing personal and contextual circumstances (De Vos et al., 2020). The sustainability of a career depends on maintaining a balance among three interrelated outcomes: happiness, health, and productivity, which together reflect long-term well-being, employability, and satisfaction. The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized the need to understand how individuals can sustain meaningful and viable careers in times of uncertainty (Mello et al. 2025). This global disruption accelerated existing shifts in mobility, remote work, and individual career responsibility, highlighting the importance of resilience, adaptability, and continuous learning as key components of sustainable careers.

Working internationally often exposes individuals to high-density career experiences, characterized by intense learning, cultural transitions, and competing professional and personal demands (Mello, Suutari, & Dickmann, 2023a). The high-density nature of global work can accelerate career capital development and cross-cultural competence, yet it can also increase stress, workload, and disruption to non-work life (Sheffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). Thus, the sustainability of an international career depends on how effectively individuals balance the developmental opportunities of global work with the need to maintain health, well-being, and long-term productivity.

Among those pursuing international careers, expatriates form a key group of interest. Expatriation provides unique opportunities for professional growth but also introduces challenges related to adjustment, performance pressure, and family integration (Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999; Takeuchi, 2010). Expatriates are typically divided into

two main categories which are: assigned expatriates (AEs), who are sent abroad by their employers, and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), who relocate independently in pursuit of international work (Mello et al., 2023). These two groups often experience different forms of organizational support, autonomy, and career outcomes, which may influence their ability to sustain long-term success and well-being (Dickmann, & Mello, 2023).

Gender is another important dimension in shaping sustainable international careers. Although women's participation in global mobility has increased, gender disparities persist in access to international assignments, leadership roles, and organizational support (Mello, Suutari, & Dickmann, 2023b; Tharenou, 2010). Female expatriates may face greater work-family conflict, cultural barriers, or unequal career advancement opportunities, which can affect their health, happiness, and productivity (Rendall, 2013). Nevertheless, research also shows that women who overcome these barriers often demonstrate higher levels of adaptability and resilience, which are key antecedents to sustainable career development (Mello et al., 2023b).

Achieving sustainability in international careers, therefore requires understanding how personal, contextual, and temporal factors interact to shape expatriates' experiences and outcomes. The sustainable career framework by De Vos et al. (2020) provides a lens for analyzing these dynamics by emphasizing the interplay between the person, the context, and time. In the international career context, this means examining how individual agency, cultural environments, and career transitions influence the maintenance of health, happiness, and productivity over time. This study applies the sustainable career model to the international career context to explore how expatriates, both women and men across different types of mobility, experience and maintain career sustainability. By linking concepts such as high-density global work, gender differences, and expatriate well-being, this research seeks to deepen understanding of what enables or hinders sustainable career development in international careers.

1.1 The purpose of the study

This thesis aims to examine the sustainability of international careers by exploring how expatriates experience and maintain health, happiness, and productivity in international careers. The main objective is to apply the sustainable career framework by De Vos, Van der Heijden, and Akkermans (2020) to the international career context and to analyze how individual, contextual, and temporal factors influence the sustainability of expatriates' careers.

The concept of sustainable career emphasizes the continuous, multidimensional nature of career development, where success is not only measured by career advancement but also by the ability to remain healthy, satisfied, and productive across the lifespan. However, while sustainable careers have gained considerable attention in domestic career research, their application within the context of global mobility remains limited. International careers expose individuals to complex environments characterized by cultural transitions, career shocks, and shifting support systems that can either foster or hinder sustainable career outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has prompted a re-evaluation of mobility practices and career models, potentially marking a paradigm shift in how global careers are conceptualized and sustained (Mello et al. 2025).

This paper therefore seeks to extend the sustainable career framework to the international career context by integrating insights from recent studies on expatriate career success (Mello, Suutari, and Dickmann, 2023a, 2023b) and global career management (Dickmann and Mello, 2023). In line with the growing body of research on work and non-work antecedents of expatriate well-being (Biswas, Mäkelä, and Andersen, 2022), this study examines both professional and personal factors that contribute to expatriates' sustainable career outcomes. Specifically, this paper examines how individual attributes, such as career capital, adaptability, and motivation, influence health, happiness, and productivity. It also considers contextual factors, including

organizational support, family relations, and host-country conditions, as well as temporal aspects like career stage and exposure to significant career events.

Moreover, this research aims to identify variations in sustainable career outcomes between assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), as well as between women and men. Previous studies have highlighted the underrepresentation of women in international assignments, persistent gender pay gaps, and limited access to leadership positions, which collectively reflect systemic gender biases within global mobility (Mello, Suutari, and Dickmann, 2023a; Dickmann and Mello, 2023). These disparities may shape the sustainability of international careers in distinct ways. For instance, women expatriates often face greater challenges in achieving work-family balance and social integration abroad, which can affect their health and happiness, while men may experience greater organizational support and career progression opportunities that influence their productivity and career satisfaction. Hence, it is essential to examine whether and how men and women exhibit different degrees of balance among health, happiness, and productivity, and how these variations inform a more inclusive understanding of sustainable international careers.

In addition to building upon the sustainable career model, this study draws theoretical support from positive organizational scholarship (Dutton and Ragins, 2007) and self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2001), which emphasize the importance of meaningful work, intrinsic motivation, and supportive relationships for well-being and performance. Meaningful work has been found to play a central role in maintaining mental health and engagement (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012), reinforcing the idea that sustainability in careers extends beyond employability or performance to encompass deeper experiences of purpose and fulfillment.

Overall, this paper aims to provide new insights into how international careers can be developed and maintained sustainably in an era marked by rapid change, uncertainty, and increased emphasis on personal well-being. The findings are expected to contribute

both theoretically, by contextualizing the sustainable career model within global mobility, and practically, by offering guidance for organizations and individuals seeking to promote long-term, meaningful, and resilient international careers.

To achieve these objectives, this study is guided by two main research questions:

1. How does the sustainable career framework apply to the outcomes that indicate career sustainability - health, happiness, and productivity – among expatriates?
2. Which person, context, and time antecedents most consistently relate to each of these outcomes in international careers?

Supporting these primary inquiries, the study further explores two subsidiary questions:

3. How do indicators of health, happiness, and productivity differ between assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs)?
4. How do these indicators differ between women and men in international careers?

1.2 Structure of the study

This thesis consists of four main chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topic, outlines the purpose of the study and research questions, and explains the relevance of studying sustainability in international careers. It establishes the background for the research and defines the key concepts guiding the study. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework, drawing on the sustainable career model by De Vos et al. (2020). It discusses sustainable careers at the individual level, the main outcomes of sustainable careers, and the antecedents that influence these outcomes. The chapter also examines assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), as well as gender in high-density contexts.

Chapter 3 connects these theoretical perspectives to the context of expatriation. It analyzes the antecedents that influence the outcomes indicating career sustainability

in expatriation, as well as the sustainable career outcomes between AEs and SIEs. Differences between women and men in achieving sustainable career outcomes will also be examined. Finally, the Conclusions chapter summarizes the main findings, highlights the theoretical and practical implications of the study, and suggests directions for future research on sustainability in international careers. The academic sources used in this study are found at the end of the thesis under References.

2 Theoretical perspective of the thesis

This study adopts the process model of sustainable careers developed by De Vos et al. (2020) as its main theoretical foundation. The model identifies the key dimensions and indicators of sustainable careers and provides a dynamic framework for examining the antecedents and outcomes of career sustainability at the individual level. It emphasizes that sustainable careers are built through the ongoing interaction between the person, context, and time. In this framework, career sustainability is achieved when individuals are able to maintain the three interconnected outcomes over time: health, happiness, and productivity. These outcomes serve as indicators of long-term well-being, satisfaction, and effectiveness in one's career. Achieving a sustainable career therefore requires maintaining a balance between these three outcomes.

In the context of international careers, the process becomes even more complex. Expatriation often involves high-density work environments, cultural adaptation, and competing demands between professional and personal domains (Mello et al., 2023a). The high-density nature of international work refers to the intensive, multifaceted experiences that expatriates face, including rapid learning, long working hours, and strong cross-cultural pressures. These conditions make maintaining sustainable career outcomes more challenging, but also more critical. The sustainable career model by De Vos et al. (2020) allows this study to connect the demanding conditions of international careers with the individual-level outcomes of sustainability. It supports analysis of how expatriates balance their health, happiness, and productivity despite high career intensity, mobility, and adjustment pressures.

Furthermore, sustainable career theory aligns with other perspectives that emphasize individual motivation and well-being. According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001), the fulfillment of basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness supports motivation and sustained engagement in one's career. Similarly, Positive Organizational Scholarship (Dutton and Ragins, 2007) highlights how positive

relationships and supportive contexts foster well-being and resilience. These theoretical perspectives complement the sustainable career framework by explaining how individuals derive meaning and satisfaction from their work, even in demanding international contexts (Steger et al., 2012).

2.1 Sustainable career in individual level

As stated by De Vos et al. (2020), sustainable career can be understood as a dynamic process across the lifespan, shaped by ongoing interactions between an individual's choices, contextual influences, and time. In this thesis, the conceptual model of sustainable careers presented by De Vos et al. (2020) is used as the main theoretical foundation for studying career sustainability at individual level. According to the model, a sustainable career is characterized by continuity, adaptability, and meaningfulness. It develops through a dynamic interplay between personal agency and external conditions that evolve across time.

At the individual level, a sustainable career refers to a person's ability to maintain long-term employability, well-being, and satisfaction throughout different stages of their working life (De Vos et al., 2020). It focuses on how individuals actively manage their careers to remain healthy, happy, and productive over time, even as their personal circumstances and work environments change. Sustainable career development is therefore not limited to a single job or employer, but rather reflects an individual's capacity to grow, adapt, and perform across various roles, transitions, and contexts.

The conceptual model of sustainable careers identifies three main outcomes: health, happiness, and productivity. Together, these indicators provide a multidimensional view of career success that goes beyond traditional measures such as income or promotions. Health refers to the mental and physical capacity to cope with work demands and maintain energy for both professional and personal life (De Vos et al., 2020). Happiness

encompasses personal satisfaction and meaning derived from one's work, and productivity reflects the ability to contribute, perform effectively, and remain employable over time (De Vos et al., 2020). A career that supports all three outcomes simultaneously can be considered sustainable, even if it changes direction during the lifespan (De Vos et al., 2020). These outcomes are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

The sustainable career framework by De Vos et al. (2020) emphasizes that both internal and external factors influence the achievement of outcomes, and these factors are called antecedents of sustainable career outcomes. Internal factors represent the person dimension, which includes personal agency, motivation, competencies, and meaning experienced at work, while external factors include context and time. Individuals play an active role in shaping their own careers through continuous learning, self-reflection, and proactive behaviors that enhance employability and adaptability (De Vos et al. 2020). As Dickmann and Mello (2023) note, individuals strengthen their career sustainability by developing career capital, like their knowledge, skills, social networks, and cultural understanding, that enable them to handle change and uncertainty effectively. For expatriates, this is particularly critical, as international assignments require constant adaptation, cultural learning, and the ability to navigate diverse cultural and organizational environments (Mello et al., 2023a).

The sustainable career framework by De Vos et al. (2020) recognizes that contextual factors, such as organization culture, leadership support, and labor market conditions, affect individual outcomes. However, individuals are not passive recipients of these influences, and they can act proactively to align personal and professional goals, build supportive networks, and develop skills that promote employability and adaptability. This interaction between personal agency and contextual opportunities reflects the dynamic nature of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020). Finally, the time dimension emphasizes the long-term evolution of sustainability, as individuals' values, goals, and definitions of success and well-being evolve across different career stages (De Vos et al.

2020). For example, younger professionals may focus on growth and mobility, while later career stages may emphasize stability, health, and work-life balance. Understanding these temporal dynamics is essential for analyzing sustainable career outcomes among expatriates, whose international experiences often coincide with critical life and career transitions.

Takeaway: At the individual level, sustainable global careers rely on the interplay between personal agency, skills, and motivation, as well as the external context in which individuals operate. For expatriates, proactively developing career capital, adapting to changing circumstances, and aligning work with personal values are essential to maintain health, happiness, and productivity over time.

2.1.1 Sustainable career outcomes

According to De Vos et al. (2020), the sustainability of a career is evaluated through three interrelated outcome dimensions: health, happiness, and productivity. Together, these outcomes form a multidimensional understanding of long-term career success and well-being that goes beyond traditional measures such as salary, promotions, or hierarchical advancement. Sustainable career outcomes reflect the degree to which an individual can maintain personal well-being, satisfaction, and performance across changing circumstances and life stages (De Vos et al., 2020).

Health in the context of sustainable careers refers to both mental and physical well-being that enables individuals to meet the demands of their professional and personal lives over time (De Vos et al., 2020). Maintaining health is essential for sustaining employability, motivation, and performance. When individuals experience, for example, chronic stress, exhaustion, or lack of recovery, the sustainability of their careers is compromised. For expatriates, health challenges often stem from relocation stress, adjustment to a new cultural and social environment, and separation from support networks (Shaffer et al., 1999). Ensuring physical and mental well-being during

international assignments is therefore vital for long-term career sustainability. Organizations can support this by providing pre-departure training, psychological support, and flexible working arrangements that facilitate recovery and adaptation (Shaffer et al., 1999; Takeuchi, 2010).

The second outcome, *happiness*, refers to the subjective experience of satisfaction, fulfillment, and meaning in one's career (De Vos et al., 2020) and that the career corresponds to an individual's own values, career goals, or needs related to personal growth or work-life balance (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Sheldon et al., 2004). Ryan and Deci (2001) distinguish between *hedonic well-being*, which focuses on pleasure and positive emotions, and *eudaimonic well-being,* which emphasizes purpose and personal growth. In a sustainable career, both dimensions are relevant; individuals should not only feel content but also perceive their work as meaningful and aligned with their values. Meaningful work contributes to motivation, engagement, and long-term satisfaction (Steger et al., 2012). Furthermore, positive relationships at work, like a supportive work team, inclusive leadership, and fair organizational culture, play a crucial role in fostering happiness (Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2001). These kinds of elements can help to create a psychologically safe and supportive environment that enables individuals to feel motivated and valued and creates a sense of happiness. Expatriates often seek international experiences to pursue professional and personal growth, and the ability to find meaning in their cross-cultural work enhances their happiness and commitment to international careers.

The third outcome, *productivity*, captures an individual's ability to perform effectively, contribute to organizational goals, and remain employable in a changing environment (De Vos et al., 2020). Productivity is not limited to immediate performance outcomes but also includes the capacity to learn, develop, and add value over time (De Vos et al., 2020). From the perspective of expatriates, productivity can be influenced by factors such as cultural competence, organizational support, and alignment between personal and professional goals. Research by Mello, Suutari, and Dickmann (2023b) shows that

expatriates who build strong career capital, including knowledge, skills, and networks, are more likely to sustain high levels of productivity and career success after their international assignments.

Although health, happiness, and productivity are distinct constructs, they are mutually reinforcing and should be viewed as interconnected dimensions of career sustainability. Poor health can undermine bot happiness and productivity, while meaningful work (happiness) can enhance both well-being and performance. Similarly, maintaining productivity can foster a sense of accomplishment that contributes to happiness and motivation, provided that it does not come at the expense of health. For expatriates, achieving balance among these outcomes is particularly complex, as international careers often involve high workloads, cultural adaptation, and family adjustments. Nevertheless, individuals who manage to sustain all three outcomes simultaneously are more likely to experience long-term career satisfaction and success (De Vos et al., 2020).

In international career contexts, these three outcomes tend to align when expatriates experience meaningful work, psychological safety, and sufficient recovery opportunities that enable them to sustain well-being and performance across assignments. Conversely, the balance may break down when excessive work demands, cultural challenges, or a lack of social support lead to fatigue and limited well-being and satisfaction. Career transition, such as relocation or repatriation, can also temporarily disrupt this balance but may also provide an opportunity for learning and growth when managed effectively. Therefore, sustainable international careers require ongoing adjustment to preserve alignment among the outcomes of happiness, health, and productivity across changing environments and life stages.

Takeaway: Health, happiness, and productivity are interconnected outcomes that form the foundation of sustainable careers. For expatriates, maintaining well-being, meaningful work, and performance requires balancing personal, organizational, and

contextual factors across transitions and cultural environments to ensure long-term career sustainability.

2.1.2 Antecedents of sustainable career outcomes

The sustainable career framework by De Vos et al. (2020) highlights that career sustainability is not determined by outcomes alone, but by the antecedents, the underlying factors and mechanisms that influence how individuals maintain health, happiness, and productivity throughout their careers. These antecedents operate across three interrelated dimensions: person, context, and time. Each dimension contributes to the development of sustainable careers through distinct yet interconnected processes.

The person dimension refers to the individual's characteristics, resources, and agency that influence how they manage and sustain their career over time (De Vos et al., 2020). Personal agency plays a central role, as individuals actively shape their career paths by making intentional choices, learning continuously, and adapting their goals in response to changing personal and contextual circumstances (De Vos et al. 2020). Both stable traits, such as personality and values, and more dynamic elements, including skills, competencies, and motivation, contribute to this process by guiding behavior and shaping career decisions. Personal factors, such as career adaptability, proactive behavior, and continuous learning, are critical in sustaining employability and engagement through the career path. For expatriates, these qualities are especially important, as those who take initiative in managing their international assignment, learning from intercultural experiences, and maintaining social connections are more likely to achieve sustainable career outcomes (De Vos et al., 2020).

The context dimension includes all external environments that influence an individual's career, such as the organization, work group, family, occupation, and broader societal or institutional systems (De Vos et al., 2020). These external factors can either enable or

hinder sustainable career development. Organizational practices, such as career development support, inclusive leadership, and flexible work arrangements, can significantly enhance meaningful, healthy, and productive careers (De Vos et al. 2020). Furthermore, Mello et al. (2023a) highlight that the type of expatriation (assigned vs. self-initiated) and the organizational culture surrounding global mobility influence how individuals experience career success. Self-initiated expatriates often demonstrate greater autonomy and self-direction but may lack formal organizational support, whereas assigned expatriates benefit from company structures but face stricter role expectations. In both cases, contextual factors such as leadership support, cross-cultural adjustment opportunities, and family integration play a vital role in sustaining health, happiness, and productivity.

Finally, the time dimension reflects the longitudinal and evolving nature of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020). Over time, individuals' priorities, motivations, and definitions of success evolve in response to life stages, personal events, and changing work environments. Sustainable careers therefore require continuous adaptation and reflection. For example, life changes, such as health challenges, economic disruptions, or changes within the family, can significantly impact career development and the sustainability of a career over time. In this sense, sustainable careers are those that demonstrate resilience and adaptability in evolving circumstances and remain fulfilling and viable over time (De Vos et al., 2020). In addition, the ability to learn from past experiences and transfer those lessons to new contexts enhances long-term employability and well-being (Dickmann & Mello, 2023). Thus, sustainable careers unfold as a lifelong process of adaptation, reflection, and renewal rather than a static achievement.

Takeaway: Sustainable global careers are shaped not only by outcomes but by the interplay of personal agency, contextual support, and temporal dynamics. For expatriates, actively managing one's career, leveraging organizational resources, and

adapting over time are essential to maintain sustainable careers through international assignments.

2.2 High-density nature of international career

Working as an expatriate has been shown to be more demanding and complex than working in one's home country (Shin, S.J., et al. 2007), and for this reason, it is often described as having a high-density nature. In today's globalized world, international assignments and cross-border work experiences have become increasingly common, attracting growing interest from both researchers and professionals. The concept of high-density international careers has recently emerged as an important research topic, emphasizing the intensity, pace, and complexity of global work and its effects on individuals' well-being, motivation, and career trajectories (Mello et al., 2023a; De Vos et al., 2020).

The high-density nature of international careers refers to the concentration of experiences, transitions, and learning opportunities within a relatively short time frame (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). This high level of intensity can significantly influence an individual's skills, motivations, and future career direction. To understand this phenomenon, it is essential to recognize three defining features of global work. The first is physical mobility, which involves relocation and frequent travel between countries and cultures (Mello et al., 2023a). The second is cognitive flexibility, referring to the need for expatriates to continuously adapt their thinking and behavior to new cultural and institutional environments (Mello et al., 2023a). The third characteristic is non-work disruption, which captures the way international work experiences, involving physical mobility and cognitive flexibility, cause disruptions to expatriates' routines outside the work, such as personal life, daily routines, and family dynamics (Shaffer et al., 2012). These characteristics make international careers both challenging and developmental for individuals, as working abroad widely affects an individual's

competencies, work motives, and future careers, and requires continuous adaptation (Mello, R. et al. 2023), but also gives a valuable learning experience.

While high-density career experiences can enhance career capital, they may also increase the risk of strain and reduced well-being if not properly managed (Dickmann & Mello, 2023; Mello et al., 2023a). Hence, the sustainability of international careers depends on the ability to balance developmental opportunities with the need to maintain health, happiness, and productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). Moreover, international careers often blur the boundaries between work and personal life, intensifying the psychological and emotional demands of expatriation. Factors such as spouse/family adjustment, relocation stress, and dual-career challenges can increase this complexity (Shaffer et al., 1999). Successful expatriates manage these challenges proactively by cultivating adaptability, resilience, and social support networks that promote long-term sustainability (Mello et al., 2023a).

From an organizational perspective, providing appropriate support is essential to mitigate the challenges associated with high-density international work. Initiatives such as pre-departure training, flexible working arrangements, mentoring, cross-cultural coaching, and psychological support can help expatriates manage transitions effectively and protect their well-being (Shaffer et al., 1999; De Vos et al., 2020). Therefore, the high-density nature of international careers can be viewed simultaneously as a source of accelerated growth and a potential threat to the sustainability of the career, depending on how individuals and organizations respond to its demands and opportunities.

Takeaway: The high-density nature of international careers intensifies learning, transitions, and personal challenges within short timeframes. For sustainable global careers, expatriates and organizations must balance developmental opportunities with well-being by fostering adaptability, resilience, and supportive structures that maintain health, happiness, and productivity.

2.2.1 AEs vs SIEs in high-density contexts

Within the high-density nature of international careers, differences between AEs and SIEs reveal distinct pathways to sustaining health, happiness, and productivity. Although both groups navigate in similarly intense global environments characterized by high levels of physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption (Mello et al., 2023a), the nature of their career agency, organizational support, and adaptation processes differ substantially.

AEs are typically sent abroad by their employers to fulfill specific organizational objectives. Their international experiences are therefore characterized by formal structures, clear performance expectations, and higher degrees of organizational support, such as relocation assistance, pre-departure training, and repatriation planning (Takeuchi, 2010). These resources can help AEs manage the challenges of high-density contexts and maintain productivity, yet they may also reduce autonomy and personal control over career direction. High organizational demands and long working hours can increase work intensity, which may reduce health and happiness if recovery and personal balance are neglected (Shaffer et al., 2012).

By contrast, SIEs independently choose to pursue career opportunities abroad, often driven by intrinsic motivation, personal growth, or lifestyle considerations (Tharenou, 2010; Mello et al., 2023a). Their autonomy grants greater flexibility and self-direction, which can enhance happiness and perceived meaning at work (Ryan & Deci, 2001). However, SIEs often face uncertainty, limited access to organizational resources, and weaker integration into formal career systems (Dickmann & Mello, 2023). This lack of institutional support may increase adjustment stress and financial instability, influencing their ability to sustain long-term health and productivity.

Despite these differences, both AEs and SIEs must navigate the same high-density challenges of global mobility, such as frequent transitions, cultural adaptation, and work-life balance concerns. Success in such contexts depends on the ability to adapt, resilience, and career management (De Vos et al., 2020). AEs tend to benefit from structured learning and organizational backing, enabling rapid career capital accumulation but often at the cost of autonomy and well-being (Mello et al., 2023a; Dickmann & Mello, 2023). Conversely, SIEs develop broader personal agency and intercultural competence through self-directed experiences, but they must compensate for limited external support by cultivating personal networks and self-regulation skills.

From a sustainability perspective, the distinction between AEs and SIEs underscores how different configurations of person, context, and time shape the balance among sustainable career outcomes. AEs may achieve productivity through structured support systems but have a higher risk to fatigue due to high organizational pressure, while SIEs may experience enhanced happiness and meaning yet struggle to maintain stability and health under uncertainty. Therefore, fostering sustainable international careers requires recognizing these contrasting types of expatriation and designing tailored support mechanisms that address the distinct needs of both expatriate types in high-density global environments.

Takeaway: In high-density international careers, AEs and SIEs face different pathways to career sustainability: AEs rely on structured organizational support, but risk reduced autonomy and well-being, whereas SIEs gain more autonomy and meaning but face uncertainty and limited resources. Sustainable global careers require tailored strategies that balance personal agency, organizational support, and adaptive capacity for each expatriate type.

2.2.2 Gender in high-density contexts

In international careers, expatriates enter diverse cultural environments where levels of gender equality and inequality vary (Rendall, M. 2013). Gender thus remains a significant factor influencing individuals' expatriation experiences and their ability to achieve sustainable career outcomes. Historically, international assignments have been male-dominated, with men more frequently selected for expatriate positions and leadership roles abroad (Mello, Suutari, & Dickmann, 2023a). Despite the growing participation of women in global careers, research shows that gender disparities persist in terms of access to opportunities, compensation, and organizational support (Dickmann & Mello, 2023). These inequalities can influence how men and women experience and sustain the three key career outcomes of health, happiness, and productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). Men and women may experience different challenges in maintaining well-being and career balance in international contexts. Female expatriates often face higher work-family conflict and social isolation due to cultural expectations and gender norms in host countries (Shaffer et al., 1999). Additionally, dual-career constraints and family responsibilities can limit women's mobility and the range of assignments available to them (Mello et al., 2023b). These contextual pressures may affect women's mental health and career satisfaction, which are integral elements of a sustainable career. Conversely, men may encounter greater pressure to achieve measurable performance outcomes, which can increase work intensity and stress, potentially impacting health and work-life balance (Tharenou, 2010).

However, recent studies suggest that women who overcome these barriers often demonstrate higher levels of adaptability, resilience, and cultural intelligence, which are key factors supporting sustainable career development (Mello et al., 2023b). Female expatriates may place stronger emphasis on meaningful work and relationship-building, aligning closely with the happiness and meaning dimensions of sustainable career (Steger et al., 2012; Mello et al., 2023b). In contrast, men may traditionally prioritize career progression and productivity, reflecting different orientations toward sustainable

career outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2001; De Vos et al., 2020). Organizations also play an important role in shaping gendered career sustainability. Gender biases in selection and evaluation, limited mentoring opportunities, and unequal access to family-friendly policies can disadvantage women in maintaining long-term international careers (Dickmann & Mello, 2023). Promoting inclusive practices such as flexible mobility arrangements, equitable promotion systems, and mentorship programs for women can foster a more sustainable and balanced environment for all expatriates (Mello et al., 2023b).

Overall, while both men and women face challenges in sustaining international careers, the nature of these challenges differs. Men often encounter pressure to maintain high productivity and linear career advancement, whereas women frequently must navigate cultural and organizational barriers that constrain access and well-being. Recognizing and addressing these gender dynamics is crucial to advancing equity and promoting sustainable career outcomes in international careers.

Takeaway: Gender shapes the challenges and opportunities in high-density international careers. Sustainable global careers require organizations and individuals to address gender-specific barriers and leverage strengths, ensuring that both men and women can maintain health, happiness, and productivity across diverse cultural and organizational contexts.

3 Sustainable expatriate careers

Expatriation represents one of the most complex and high-intensity forms of global work, demanding continuous adaptation to shifting cultural, professional, and personal environments (Shaffer et al., 2012). In such contexts, sustaining career success over time requires more than short-term performance, it involves maintaining health, happiness, and productivity throughout the international career cycle. Drawing on the sustainable career framework proposed by De Vos et al. (2020), this chapter examines how different expatriate types attain sustainable careers under the dynamic conditions of global mobility and diverse cultural contexts, as well as how gender influences sustainable career outcomes. First, this chapter defines the key antecedents of sustainable career outcomes from an expatriation perspective, and then continues by comparing sustainable career outcomes between AEs and SIEs. Gender-related sustainable career outcomes will also be discussed to gain a broader understanding of international sustainable careers and the factors that contribute to achieving these outcomes.

3.1 Antecedents of sustainable career outcomes in expatriation

Expatriation represents an especially high-density career context where individuals continuously balance personal resources, contextual demands, and temporal transitions to sustain the outcomes that indicate career sustainability (health, happiness, and productivity). Building on the antecedents of sustainable career outcomes by De Vos et al. (2020), sustainable expatriate careers emerge when individual agency aligns with supportive environments and adapts effectively over time.

From the person dimension, adaptability, emotional stability, and self-regulation are central antecedents of expatriates' sustainable career outcomes. Individuals with high openness to experience and proactive career orientation demonstrate better

adjustment and well-being under global pressures (Shaffer et al., 2012). Such personal resources enhance resilience, which in turn supports continuous learning and long-term employability (De Vos et al., 2020). In contrast, low self-efficacy or limited coping capacity heightens stress and undermines both health and productivity in high-intensity assignments (Biswas et al., 2022).

The context dimension refers to the organizational, social, and cultural environments that shape expatriates' experiences. Organizational support helps to mitigate stress and maintain engagement (Takeuchi, 2010; Dickmann & Mello, 2023). Conversely, lack of institutional and social inclusion can increase uncertainty and isolation, which can affect well-being and satisfaction (Biswas et al. 2022). Supportive work environment and host-country integration foster happiness and meaning, while rigid corporate demands may sustain productivity at the expense of health and happiness (Mello et al., 2023a). Thus, contextual alignment plays a decisive role in enabling sustainable career outcomes.

The time dimension highlights how expatriates' career sustainability evolves dynamically. As health, happiness, and productivity fluctuate across stages of preparation, on-assignment, and repatriation (Shaffer et al., 2012; Takeuchi, 2010), expatriates must respond to changing demands and contexts. Over time, expatriates can develop career capital and intercultural competencies that strengthen adaptability to changes (Mello et al., 2023b). However, extended periods of high-density global work without adequate opportunities for recovery can decrease well-being and job satisfaction (Shaffer et al., 2012). Achieving sustainable outcomes therefore requires longitudinal adaptability to respond to evolving personal and professional circumstances. In conclusion, person, context, and time antecedents explain how expatriates sustain sustainable career outcomes across international careers.

Takeaway: Sustainable expatriate careers depend on the dynamic interaction of personal adaptability, supportive contexts, and temporal opportunities for adjustment. When individual adaptability is supported by favorable organizational and cultural contexts,

and when time allows for recovery and renewal, expatriates are most likely to sustain both productivity and satisfaction. Whereas these elements are misaligned, such as when work intensity outweighs personal or contextual resources, health and happiness tend to decrease, even if short-term career success is achieved.

Implication: Organizations and individuals should actively manage the alignment of personal, contextual, and temporal factors to support sustainable international careers. For expatriates, this means developing adaptability, resilience, and career capital to navigate high-density assignments effectively. For organizations, it entails providing structured support, inclusive practices, and opportunities for recovery and development to sustain employees' health, happiness, and productivity. Misalignment among these factors can compromise well-being and long-term career sustainability, even when short-term performance is achieved.

3.2 Sustainable career outcomes: AEs vs SIEs

Building on the high-density nature of international careers, this section examines sustainable career outcomes among AEs and SIEs through the sustainable career framework by De Vos et al. (2020). The outcomes of happiness, health, and productivity differ markedly between AEs and SIEs due to variations in organizational support, autonomy, and personal agency (Mello et al., 2023a). The outcome of health often diverges between AEs and SIEs. AEs generally benefit from structured organizational support, such as pre-departure preparation, relocation assistance, and repatriation planning (Takeuchi, 2010), which helps AEs reduce stress and maintain physical and mental well-being. However, AEs frequently experience high workload intensity, limited autonomy, and strong organizational expectations, which may compromise recovery and increase burnout risk (Shaffer et al., 2012). In contrast, SIEs tend to have greater personal control over mobility decisions and work-life balance, which can promote autonomy and mental resilience. But because SIEs often lack formal organizational support, they may

encounter heightened uncertainty or social isolation that negatively affects their health (Biswas et al., 2022). Thus, while AEs' structured environments may sustain stability but reduce recovery, SIEs' autonomy enhances self-care potential but increases exposure to insecurity and stress.

Happiness, understood as subjective career satisfaction, also varies among expatriate types. For AEs, happiness often stems from achievement within organizational structures, such as career progression, skill development, and recognition (Mello et al., 2023a). However, alignment between personal and corporate goals can be limited, and dissatisfaction may arise if assignments primarily serve organizational needs rather than individual aspirations. SIEs, conversely, often report higher motivation and career meaning due to a self-directed choice to pursue an international career (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Tharenou, 2010). Their autonomy supports a sense of purpose and engagement, though the absence of structured advancement paths can constrain long-term satisfaction if expectations to career growth are not met. The pursuit of meaningful work thus enhances SIEs' happiness, while structured career rewards more strongly reinforce AEs' satisfaction.

Productivity in sustainable expatriate careers reflects the ability to maintain effective performance and continuous development. AEs typically achieve high productivity due to organizational resources, clear objectives, and integration into corporate systems (Takeuchi, 2010). Their structured learning environments enable rapid skill accumulation and measurable performance outcomes (Mello et al., 2023a). However, this externally driven productivity may come at the expense of work-life balance and intrinsic motivation. SIEs rely more on self-management, adaptability, and proactive learning to sustain performance. SIEs' experiential learning across diverse contexts enhances career capital and intercultural competence, yet inconsistent institutional support may limit their ability to translate these experiences into stable productivity (Mello et al., 2023a).

Overall, patterned differences between AEs and SIEs reveal how structural support and personal agency shape the sustainability of international careers. AEs tend to maintain productivity and stability through organizational frameworks, but risk reduced health and happiness due to high demands and limited autonomy. SIEs achieve greater happiness and meaning through self-direction but face vulnerabilities in maintaining health and consistent productivity without formal support systems.

Takeaway: The sustainability of international careers differs between AEs and SIEs due to varying levels of organizational support and personal agency. Achieving health, happiness, and productivity depends on aligning external resources with individual autonomy, highlighting that no single expatriate approach guarantees sustainability; thus, tailored strategies are needed for different expatriate types.

Implication: Organizations should design differentiated support systems that account for the unique needs of AEs and SIEs. For AEs, this may include workload management, recovery opportunities, and career planning that respects personal autonomy. For SIEs, providing access to mentoring, social networks, and developmental resources can reduce uncertainty and enhance career sustainability. Recognizing and addressing these differences ensures that expatriates can maintain well-being, engagement, and performance across diverse international contexts.

3.3 Gender patterned differences in sustainable career outcomes

Gender continues to shape how expatriates sustain the outcomes of sustainable careers in high-density global work contexts. Although both women and men face similar career demands, gendered expectations and different cultural surroundings often lead to different experiences and outcomes. Research suggests that while organizational policies toward global mobility have become more inclusive, gendered barriers persist in

subtle ways, influencing the sustainability of international careers (Mello et al., 2023a; Tharenou, 2010).

Health-related differences in expatriation often emerge from unequal access to social and structural support. Female expatriates frequently navigate additional layers of complexity, including cultural gender norms and family-related expectations that may increase stress and reduce opportunities for recovery (Tharenou, 2010). Moreover, women may experience a double burden of managing professional performance alongside caregiving or relational responsibilities, which can strain both mental and physical well-being (Shaffer et al., 2012). However, empirical findings also indicate that women tend to engage in stronger relational and coping strategies, which can relieve stress and sustain health in demanding contexts (Biswas et al., 2022). Male expatriates, by contrast, often benefit from stronger institutional support and higher organizational status but may be more exposed to work-life imbalance due to long working hours and high-performance expectations (Mello et al., 2023a).

Happiness, defined as career satisfaction and subjective well-being, is also affected by gender dynamics. Female expatriates often derive happiness from meaningful work, autonomy, and interpersonal relationships, emphasizing the relational and value-driven aspects of international work (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Steger et al., 2012). Yet, persistent underrepresentation and subtle bias can hinder their sense of belonging and professional recognition abroad, limiting perceived career satisfaction (Tharenou, 2010). Male expatriates may experience higher extrinsic rewards, such as career advancement or compensation, which can reinforce satisfaction but sometimes at the expense of intrinsic meaning and balance (Mello et al., 2023a). Thus, women's happiness in expatriation often stems from intrinsic and relational fulfillment, whereas men's satisfaction tends to align more closely with organizational success indicators.

Productivity outcomes in expatriation also exhibit gender patterns. Male expatriates often occupy higher organizational positions and benefit from structured performance

evaluation systems, allowing them to demonstrate productivity through measurable results (Mello et al., 2023a). Whereas female expatriates may need to exert greater effort to prove competence and legitimacy in male-dominated environments (Tharenou, 2010). Despite these challenges, women frequently demonstrate strong cross-cultural communication and adaptability skills, which contribute to team effectiveness and long-term organizational success (Shaffer et al., 2012; Shin et al., 2007). Therefore, men's productivity may be more visible through formal structures, but women's contributions often enhance organizational learning, inclusion, and innovation, supporting sustainable performance over time.

Taken together, gendered differences illustrate how sustainability in international careers is shaped not only by organizational practices but also by broader societal and cultural norms. Women's expatriate experiences often highlight resilience, relational competence, and meaning-making as key enablers of sustainable career outcomes, while men's experiences emphasize the benefits and risks of high organizational expectations for productivity.

Takeaway: Gender shapes how expatriates experience and sustain the outcomes of health, happiness, and productivity. While men may benefit from formal support and status, women often rely on skills, adaptability, and meaning-making to maintain sustainable career outcomes. Recognizing these differences is essential for fostering equity and long-term career sustainability in international contexts.

Implication: Organizations should implement targeted practices that address gender-specific challenges and leverage strengths. For women, this includes inclusive leadership pathways, mentoring, and family-friendly policies to enhance well-being and engagement. For men, supporting work-life balance and recovery opportunities helps prevent burnout and sustain productivity. Aligning organizational structures with the diverse needs of both genders promotes more equitable and sustainable international careers.

Conclusions

In this chapter, the findings of the thesis are summarized in the form of conclusions. The main objective of this thesis was to explore how sustainability can be achieved in international careers by applying the sustainable career framework by De Vos et al. (2020) to the context of expatriation. This was researched and analyzed through the lens of two main research questions that examined how the sustainable career framework applies to the outcomes that together indicate career sustainability - health, happiness, and productivity – among expatriates, and which personal, contextual, and temporal antecedents most consistently relate to these outcomes in international careers. To support the main research questions, two subsidiary questions were set, focusing on how the indicators of health, happiness, and productivity differ between assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), and how these indicators differ between women and men in international careers.

To properly investigate the research objective and questions, the theoretical perspective of the study was first discussed in depth. After reviewing the existing literature, a clearer focus began to form around the sustainable careers in individual level and the high-density nature of international careers. Within this context, the thesis further explored sustainable expatriate careers and the antecedents of sustainable career outcomes in expatriation, as well as how the indicators of sustainable career outcomes differ between AEs and SIEs, and between women and men. Once these aspects were analyzed, the thesis was ready to provide answers to the research questions and overall research objective.

The first sub-question examined the differences in sustainable career outcomes between AEs and SIEs. The findings show that AEs typically enjoy structured organizational support, clear career paths, and defined performance expectations, which sustain productivity but may restrict autonomy and recovery (Takeuchi, 2010; Shaffer et al., 2012). This can lead to decreased happiness or health if work intensity outweighs

personal resources. In contrast, SIEs benefit from higher autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and stronger sense of purpose, which enhance happiness and engagement, yet they often face financial or social insecurity due to limited institutional support (Biswas et al., 2022). These findings suggest that the sustainability of expatriate careers depends on balancing structure and independence: AEs gain stability through organizational backing but risk overwork, while SIEs enjoy freedom and meaning but face uncertainty. Achieving sustainable career outcomes in both groups therefore requires aligning personal agency with adequate organizational and social support (De Vos et al., 2020; Mello et al., 2023a).

The second sub-question compared the outcomes of sustainable careers between women and men in international careers. The findings indicate that gender continues to shape the sustainability of expatriate experiences through both structural and social factors. Female expatriates often face barriers such as underrepresentation in leadership, work-family conflict, and cultural biases, which can negatively affect health and career satisfaction. At the same time, women frequently demonstrate high adaptability and relational competence, which promote happiness and long-term engagement abroad (Biswas et al., 2022). Male expatriates, who are more positioned in senior roles and receive stronger formal support, may experience greater pressure to maintain high productivity, sometimes at the expense of health and work-life balance (Mello et al., 2023a). Overall, gender influences how expatriates experience, sustain, and maintain health, happiness, and productivity, highlighting that sustainable international careers are not only shaped by individual capability but also by the structural and social contexts that define access to support, opportunities, and well-being abroad.

Once the answers to both subsidiary questions were found, they provided support for examining the main research questions and the main objective of this thesis, which was to explore how sustainability can be achieved in international careers. The main research questions examined how the sustainable career framework applies to expatriates' outcomes of health, happiness, and productivity, and which antecedents most consistently relate to these outcomes. The findings showed that expatriation can offer

valuable opportunities for learning, development, and career advancement, yet it also introduces several challenges that may threaten long-term sustainability, such as mobility stress and adjustment pressures (Shaffer et al., 2012). Health, happiness, and productivity together form the foundation for sustainable international careers, yet these outcomes are often difficult to maintain simultaneously in high-density global work environments. Health tends to be influenced by workloads, relocation demands, and access to recovery resources, whereas happiness depends on the expatriate's ability to find meaning, autonomy, and belonging in the new context (De Vos et al., 2020). Productivity benefits from skill accumulation, career capital development, and organizational support, but may come at the expense of well-being if recovery and balance are neglected (Mello et al., 2023a).

The sustainable career framework thus helps explain how individual agency, contextual support, and time interact to sustain these outcomes across different expatriate types and genders. AEs often maintain high productivity through structured organizational backing but risk declines in health and happiness due to work intensity, while SIEs sustain higher happiness and meaning through autonomy yet face insecurity that may limit long-term productivity (Mello et al., 2023b). Gender further moderates these dynamics: women often experience barriers such as work-family conflict but display relational competence and adaptability that support well-being, whereas men more often receive formal support but face stronger performance pressures that challenge balance (Tharenou, 2010). Overall, the findings demonstrate that the sustainable career framework captures the dynamic balance among health, happiness, and productivity in expatriation and can be applied to show how personal, contextual, and gendered factors interact to shape international careers.

In conclusion, the findings reveal interesting connections between sustainable career outcomes and expatriation, as well as which antecedents most consistently relate to each of these outcomes, across different variations of expatriation types and gender. Sustainable career outcomes and the antecedents influencing them receive different

weighting depending on whether the individual is AE or SIE and whether they are a woman or a man. Depending on the individual variation, personal factors, contextual circumstances, and temporal aspects influence the outcomes differently, and it may be easier for some individuals to achieve sustainable career outcomes than for others. The findings that were made in this thesis provide new insights into how international careers can be developed and sustained in this rapidly changing and uncertain era of increasing global work. For individuals, it is essential to identify the type of variation they represent and aim for a sustainable international career based on that, promoting meaningful, long-term, and resilient international careers. For organizations, it is essential to adopt more inclusive and supportive practices that promote equal treatment, opportunities, and well-being for all expatriates worldwide.

In future research, the sustainability of international careers could be further explored by focusing more deeply on different industries, cultures, and career stages. While this study synthesized existing literature, longitudinal and comparative empirical studies could better capture how health, happiness, and productivity evolve over time in international careers. Future studies could also examine intersectional factors, such as age, family status, and cultural background, that interact with gender and expatriation type to influence sustainable career outcomes. Additionally, exploring how organizational policies, global mobility trends, and digital forms of international work affect the sustainability of international careers would provide valuable insights in the context of an increasingly uncertain and flexible global labor market.

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