

Empowering Women in Retail: Building Sustainable Work Cultures Through Employee Well-Being Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

A large number of retail workers are women, and they often face challenges in balancing work and personal life. "It is easy to overlook them in discussions because they play a key role in our readiness, sustainability, and business resilience, but the focus is usually on the people in the field." This paper emphasizes the importance of employee well-being programs for women in retail as essential for creating strong and sustainable work cultures. It looks at how flexible work arrangements, mental health support, fair pay, and open workplace policies affect the well-being of women in retail and their ability to stay in the industry. By using a mixed-methods approach that includes survey and interview data from 75 women retail employees in Kollam and Pathanamthitta districts of Kerala, the study combines quantitative and qualitative insights to offer a deeper understanding. The findings show that, in fighting burnout and preempting turnover, investment in employee well-being far outperforms efforts to increase productivity alone, particularly under regulatory and environmental pressures.

The present study proves that investment in the welfare of female employees in the retail industry is both a social duty and a strategic economic necessity. This paper identifies how human resources can promote inclusive cultures, empowering women to rise while improving organizational performance by connecting well-being practices with widely adopted sustainability frameworks, such as Green Human Resource Management, Sustainable HRM, and Environmental, Social, and Governance principles. The analysis addresses the unique well-being requirements of women in retail, evaluates the impact of supportive workplace cultures on organizational outcomes, and contributes to the growing literature connecting Sustainable HRM practices with organizational resilience and long-term sustainability (Bai, 2025; Madero-Gómez et al., 2023). Firms that do invest for in their women workforces are rewarded with greater resiliency, better performance and greater sustainability over the long haul.

Keywords: Women Employees, Retail Sector, Employee Well-being, Sustainable Work Culture, Work-Life Balance, Diversity and Inclusion, Organizational Resilience, Green HRM, ESG, Sustainable Business

1. INTRODUCTION

The retail industry is one of the major employers of women in the world, and about 60% of the retail workforce in emerging markets is actually women. In India, the retail career provides employment to over 40 million people, and women constitute a large part of this workforce, especially in the customer-facing roles, merchandising, and store operations. However, gender-specific challenges of women in retail deteriorate their well-being, career advancement opportunities and work-life balance to a very large extent such as irregular working hours, high level of emotional labour, low possibilities of upward mobility and lack organizational support mechanism.

The concept of "sustainable work cultures" is growing in importance as organizations understand the links between worker well-being and long-term business sustainability. They are also beneficial for individual and organizational sustainability as practices that favour employee well-being, commitment and loyalty while promoting organisational resilience and performance. This is even more important for women in retail who are balancing multiple roles, often as caregivers.

The social dimension of sustainability has been increasingly stressed in recent corporate sustainability frameworks such as Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) principles and Green Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, placing a greater emphasis on employee well-being. Businesses are starting to realize the fact that the word 'sustainability' should not just be about the environment, but also comprehend the 'looking after your employees', pointing to marginalized groups like women in a usually hard-to-thrive industries such as retail.

The retail environment of Kerala, along with the districts of Kollam and Pathanamthitta, has its peculiarities that impact women's work experiences. These market areas have seen a considerable rise of organized retailing opposed to traditional unorganized ones and thus provide various entrepreneurial opportunities for women. Still, issues regarding women retail workers in these regions attracted relatively little attention, despite their front-line contribution to the sustainability and expansion of the sector.

Research Objectives

The aim of this research will be to establish how employee well-being initiatives focused on women impact the development of sustainable work cultures in retail. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. Investigate the impact of workplace-based well-being initiatives on the job satisfaction, turnover, and work-life balance of women employees.
2. Identify the major organizational and cultural factors that enable or restrict the effective implementation of women-focused well-being programs.
3. Assess how these initiatives contribute to broader sustainability goals and to overall organizational performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Women in the Retail Workforce

The retail industry's heavy reliance on female workers points to both structural opportunities and systemic vulnerabilities within patterns of American labor. Empirical studies indicate that women tend to be overrepresented in customer service jobs, part-time jobs, and lower-paying sectors of retail work. Whereas retail offers women a relatively accessible source of employment, this sector continues to suffer from persistent wage differentials, severely limited avenues for advancement, and significant barriers to work-life balance.

Irregular work schedules, emotional labor, and restricted autonomy are all found to adversely impact women's well-being who work in retail. Women employees have been expected to maintain friendly encounters with customers regardless of challenging situations, and these often go unrewarded. It was also reported that irregular schedules, the need to perform emotional labor, and lack of autonomy at work impede well-being among women working in retail. Women employees are expected to show friendly relations with customers despite challenging situations, and these are frequently unrewarded. These work demands contribute to higher levels of stress; despite this fact, current policy in these workplaces does not account for such challenges.

Women employees in Indian retail also face specific issues relating to societal expectations, family obligations, and a lack of institutional support. Empirical studies show that women experience more work-family conflict than men, which in turn adversely affects their career development and psychological well-being.

2.2 Employee Well-being and Organizational Sustainability

Most of the existing literature has clearly indicated a strong causation between employee well-being and organizational sustainability. Based on the Conservation of Resources theory, when employees receive enough support and resources, they show more engagement and commitment towards their organization (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This evidence thus supports that companies should invest in employee wellness programs.

Recent studies show that employee well-being programs can lower turnover, boost productivity, and improve a company's reputation (Nielsen et al., 2017). However, most research looks at general wellness programs, and there is not much data on how well programs for women employees work.

Sustainable HRM has been identified as a new concept by which organizations need to ensure their HR practices corresponding with the long-term sustainable goals. Sustainable HRM involves systems, where practices take into account the interests of employees, organisational performance and society (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018). This model offers conceptual grounding to understand the potential role of women-targeted wellness programs in organizational sustainability.

2.3 Work-Life Balance and Women's Career Sustainability

Work-life balance is an important component of employees' well-being, especially for women who tend to have more caregiving duties. Literature has termed work-life conflict as adverse to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, career advancement and women across sector (Allen & Eby, 2016).

Challenges related to work-life balance are heightened within the retail environment, as they are faced with irregular schedules, weekend work and inflexibility of working conditions. Female retail employees with a more favourable well-being are found to be better performing, less stressed and more satisfied with their careers (Haar et al., 2014).

Career Sustainability refers to maintaining both immediate work-life balance and long-term career growth. For women in the retail sector, their sustainable careers depend on organizational policies and resources that foster both their well-being now and their ongoing professional development.

2.4 ESG and Green HRM in Retail Organizations

ESG and the incorporation of its principles into business operations offer new frameworks for shaping our notion of employee well-being as part of wider sustainability ambitions. The "S" in ESG includes employee treatment, diversity and inclusion, workplace conditions, and to make women's well-being projects directly relevant for sustainability reporting/stakeholder expectations (Friede et al., 2015). Green HRM concentrates on maintaining environmental sustainability with employee well-being. There is

evidence that employees in firms with strong environmental and social commitments have higher job satisfaction and organizational pride (Renwick et al., 2013). This link between sustainability practices and employee well-being enables us to understand how women-focused initiatives can be part of a larger organizational sustainability agenda.

The high profile of the retail industry with consumers and other stakeholders greatly increases the importance of ESG performance; the brand ultimately matters in terms of branding reputation and competitive advantage. Companies that demonstrate concerns about employee welfare, particularly employees in vulnerable circumstances like female workers, might enhance their social license to operate and attract the attention of socially conscious consumers and employees.

2.5 Organizational Culture and Women's Workplace Experience

Organizational culture has an important influence on women's workplace experiences—from ordinary interactions to career-long opportunities. Some of these cultural features foster a culture that is conducive to their welfare and development; for example, inclusive leadership, flexible work practices, and acknowledgment of various kinds of contributions.

Culture in retail businesses depends on customer needs and expectations about performance, pay structure, and chain of command. Research has established that those retailers that have a women-friendly culture perform better in terms of employee retention, customer satisfaction, and financial performance relative to their counterparts (Stamolampros et al., 2019).

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Psychological safety refers to the belief that individuals are able to raise concerns, can admit errors and receive support from others in doing so without fear of retribution (Edmondson, 1999; Schein, 1990). It has become an important aspect of a supportive organisational climate. For female retail employees, psychological safety allows them to speak up about their work-life balance, ask for help with problems on the job and offer feedback to improve the organization.

2.6 Research Gap and Theoretical Positioning

While increasing attention has been paid to employee well-being and gender inclusion in the workplace, there is little knowledge of how distinct efforts to promote well-being affect women, especially within retail environments. The majority of studies are on general well-being programs or consider women's experiences across a range of occupations without addressing the specific nature of work in retail.

In addition, little research exists on the association between women-focused well-being programs and more general organizational sustainability outcomes (e.g., ESG and Green HRM). The special nature of retail work in developing countries, such as India, involves additional complexity which needs to be studied in a focused manner.

Although the importance of employee well-being and gender inclusion has been established in previous work, these concepts have not been much integrated with organizational sustainability in the literature. The more recent systematic reviews suggest that Sustainable Human Resource Management (HRM) and Green HRM encompass improved employee well-being and resilience while calling for more sectoral empirical enquiries, particularly in the Indian retail industry. Accordingly, this study places women's well-being into the context of Sustainable HRM and Green HRM and fills the contextual gap in the literature regarding Kerala's retail workforce (Madero-Gomez et al., 2023; Lawter & Garnjost, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Ethical Considerations

The sequential approach will allow for the incorporation of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews

to comprehensively understand the effects of well-being efforts on female retail employees. This has allowed an initial quantitative assessment and has been followed by an in-depth qualitative exploration of unfolding patterns and individual experiences of the same (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The data collection was conducted from March 2024 to July 2024 and was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee at Bharathidasan University in accordance with ethical principles.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

Participants for this study were selected using stratified random sampling to represent both organized and unorganized retail sectors, different levels of experience, and age groups from retail outlets in Kollam and Pathanamthitta districts of Kerala. The sampling frame consisted of women in different retail professions such as sales associates, cashiers, store supervisors, and department coordinators.

From a total of 85 invited participants, 75 women completed the quantitative survey (response rate: 88.2%), whose demographic characteristics are provided in Table 1. From this sample, 15 participants were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, ensuring variation in professional roles, levels of experience, and types of retail establishments.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics (N=75)

CHARACTERISTIC	CATEGORY	N (%)
AGE	22-30 years	32 (42.7)
	31-40 years	28 (37.3)
	41-50 years	15 (20.0)
EDUCATION	High School	18 (24.0)
	Higher Secondary	34 (45.3)
	Graduate	23 (30.7)
EXPERIENCE	1-3 years	22 (29.3)
	4-7 years	31 (41.3)
	8+ years	22 (29.3)
RETAIL TYPE	Organized Retail	45 (60.0)
	Unorganized Retail	30 (40.0)
DISTRICT	Kollam	40 (53.3)
	Pathanamthitta	35 (46.7)
MARITAL STATUS	Single	28 (37.3)
	Married	47 (62.7)

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The survey instruments were developed based on established measures adapted to the Indian retail context. The final survey instrument consisted of demographic information, Employee Well-being Index (20 items, $\alpha = 0.91$), Work-Life Balance Scale (16 items, $\alpha = 0.88$), Organizational Support Measure (18 items, $\alpha = 0.89$), and Sustainability Practices Assessment (14 items, $\alpha = 0.86$). Semi-structured interviews explored experiences with well-being initiatives, workplace culture, and suggestions for improvement.

The survey questionnaires were given in Malayalam or English, whatever the participant preferred. The interviews lasted for 40-60 minutes at locations convenient for the participants. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 28) through descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple

regression. Thematic analysis was performed with the qualitative data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Current Well-being Initiatives and Adoption Patterns

The survey found out that levels of well-being initiative at retail markets of Kollam and Pathanamthitta districts were entirely different. A total of 73.3% of respondents reported access to at least one formal well-being initiative in their workplace. However, the specific types and effectiveness of these initiatives differed substantially.

The most popular initiatives offered were flexible work arrangements (68.0%) followed by health insurance benefits (62.7%), maternity leave provisions (58.7%) and employee assistance programmes (41.3%). Participant identified value services such as mental health support services were among the least frequently provided (24.0%). There were marked differences in terms of score mean between the organized and unorganized retail (4.2 vs. 2.8, $p < 0.001$).

The results of the analysis showed material differences by organizational size and management philosophy in the effectiveness of initiatives. Larger retailers with established HR and more formal well-being initiatives were found to have a greater consistency derived from establishment, where small premises had more reliance on informal relationship-based sources of support.

4.2 Impact on Work-Life Balance and Job Satisfaction

Well-being initiatives significantly impacted work-life balance and job satisfaction among women retail workers. Table 2 presents the relationship between specific initiatives and well-being outcomes.

Table 2: Impact of Well-being Initiatives on Employee Outcomes (N=75)

WELL-BEING INITIATIVE	WORK-LIFE BALANCE SCORE	JOB SATISFACTION SCORE	RETENTION INTENT SCORE	P-VALUE
FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING	4.2	4.1	4.3	<0.001
CHILDCARE SUPPORT	4.5	4.4	4.6	<0.001
HEALTH BENEFITS	3.8	3.9	3.7	0.002
MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT	4.1	4.2	4.0	0.001
CAREER DEVELOPMENT	3.7	4.3	4.1	<0.001
FAIR COMPENSATION	4.0	4.5	4.4	<0.001

Multiple regression analysis identified significant relationships between well-being initiative availability and reduced burnout ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$), improved work-life balance ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), and increased

organizational commitment ($\beta=0.45, p<0.001$). The presence of childcare support emerged as the strongest predictor of positive outcomes, particularly for married women with children.

However, these associations were significantly moderated by retail type: whereas organized retail employees reported the most positive benefits from formal well-being initiatives, unorganized retail employees valued personalized, informal approaches to support more highly (interaction term: $\beta=0.33, p=0.003$).

4.3 Organizational Culture and Support Systems

Thematic analysis concerning elements of organisational culture, personal impact and contextual factors showed how these played an integral part in the mechanism by which wellbeing interventions were successful. Women indicated that to be successful, an initiative required supportive management attitudes, effective policies of the workplace and recognition of family responsibilities.

Participants identified three key dimensions of culture: psychological safety with respect to speaking up about work-life balance concerns, managerial understanding of women's unique challenges, and peer support networks among female colleagues. Organizations that scored high on these dimensions demonstrated 34% lower turnover rates and 28% higher job satisfaction scores.

One retail supervisor with 6 years' experience related: "When my Manager understood I needed to leave for my daughter's medical appointments twice a week and made accommodations without making me feel bad about it, it made all the difference. I was more dedicated to my job and worked harder when I'm there."

4.4 Barriers and Facilitators to Implementation

Table 3 presents key barriers and facilitators to implementing women-focused well-being initiatives in retail settings.

Table 3: Barriers and Facilitators to Well-being Initiative Implementation (N=75)

BARRIERS	%	FACILITATORS	%
COST CONCERNS BY MANAGEMENT	70.7	Supportive leadership commitment	81.3
LACK OF AWARENESS ABOUT NEEDS	64.0	Clear business case demonstration	76.0
TRADITIONAL MINDSET ABOUT WOMEN'S ROLES	58.7	Employee involvement in design	69.3
LIMITED HR EXPERTISE	53.3	Gradual implementation approach	62.7
CUSTOMER SERVICE PRIORITY CONFLICTS	48.0	Success story sharing	56.0

A sales associate with 4 years' experience said: "At the beginning our store manager thought that flexible hours might affect customer service. But when they saw that happier employees gave better service and stayed longer, they became our biggest supporters. Now they even inquire what else we want help with." To effectively apply this procedure, a systematic approach was needed that consisted of assessment, piloting, regular feedback collection, and continuous improvement. The organisations that involved female employees in the development and assessment of workplace initiatives reported increased employee satisfaction and higher participation rates.

4.5 Sustainability Outcomes and Business Impact

Well-being initiatives were significantly related to organizational sustainability outcomes: companies with comprehensive women-focused well-being programs experienced a 31% lower turnover rate, a 24% reduction in absenteeism, and a 19% improvement in customer satisfaction scores compared to companies with minimal programs.

Furthermore, results indicated that these actions significantly reduced recruitment and training costs, increased employee engagement, and facilitated the organization's reputation, making it more attractive to top talent. It also supported ESG criteria, helping to attract values-driven consumers.

Well-being programs were found to be particularly effective when combined with Green HRM practices. Companies that linked employee wellness to sustainability practices had greater levels of engagement and pride in company mission.

4.6 District-Specific Contextual Factors

Some unique contextual factors that affected the success of well-being initiatives were found for Kollam and Pathanamthitta districts. Each district demonstrated a good network of supportive community structures, which promoted the employment of women, although there were differences between them in terms of levels of infrastructure and organisational development.

With better commercial infrastructure, Kollam demonstrated greater utilization of formal well-being programmes in organized retail. Pathanamthitta, which has stronger traditional community support mechanisms, proved success of informal relationship-based systems of support.

Cultural factors specific to Kerala, such as its higher female literacy rates and greater acceptance for women to participate in the workforce, supported implementation of well-being initiatives when compared with other states within India. Nevertheless traditional gender roles still presented obstacles in relation to flexible working and career progression.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Key Findings and Theoretical Implications

The findings support the Conservation of Resources (COR) perspective. The theory is that workplace resources, such as flexibility, managerial support, and psychological safety, facilitate the conservation of emotional and material resources among employees. The findings are consistent with those from other studies in the areas of Sustainable Human Resource Management (HRM) and Green HRM, which indicate that sustainability-oriented HR practices contribute to employee well-being and organizational resilience (Lu et al., 2023; Bai, 2025). These approaches explain the ways in which investments in micro-level employee well-being contribute toward macro-level sustainability outcomes.

The findings of this study have established that women's well-being initiatives in retailing are central, both to individual development and organizational sustainability. Three key findings stand out.

Well-being programs create a positive feedback loop: improved employee well-being drives better performance and organizational results, and the latter motivates further investment in support systems. The finding that turnover is 31% lower for firms with established well-being programs also provides supportive business rationale, consistent with the COR theoretical expectations that investment in resources would have positive returns.

The success of well-being initiatives depends on organizational culture and implementation strategy. In particular, the strong moderating effect of management support ($\beta=0.33$, $p=0.003$) indicates that in the

absence of wider cultural change, such initiatives are never effective. This extends theory on sustainable HRM by highlighting cultural alignment in pursuit of sustainability objectives.

Third, the integration of high-level sustainable goals and employee well-being lends itself to the interlinking of social responsibility and business objectives. Those organizations that could successfully link well-being programmes with ESG promises indeed delivered both employee satisfaction and stakeholder recognition, which provided further evidence of the business value in joined-up sustainability strategies.

These findings support recent studies which have related sustainability-focused HR practices to positive employee outcomes. Bhoir and Sinha (2024) reported that bundled, well-designed HR practices for well-being positively enhance engagement and retention. Similarly, Lawter and Garnjost (2025) reported that Green HRM initiatives build employee commitment and pride. This paper extends their research by providing evidence from the retail sector. Initiatives with a clear focus on women, such as support for childcare and flexible scheduling, certainly contribute to higher satisfaction and lower turnover among employees.

Conceptual Framework

The present work presented is based on a Women's Well-being-Sustainability Framework that enhances organizational benefits by linking well-being initiatives with outcomes. Well-being initiatives, such as flexible scheduling and childcare, mental health support, and appropriate remuneration, lead to improved job satisfaction and retention, hence driving organizational sustainability and, consequently, improving ESG performance. These are further influenced by a positive workplace culture and managers who are committed, reflecting Sustainable HRM and Green HRM frameworks, respectively (Bai, 2025; Lawter & Garnjost, 2025).

This is the conceptual pathway: Well-being Initiatives → Job Satisfaction → Retention → Sustainable Culture → Organizational Sustainability.

5.2 Practical Implications

Table 4: Practical Implications for Key Stakeholders

STAKEHOLDER	KEY IMPLICATIONS	IMPLEMENTATION PRIORITIES
RETAIL ORGANIZATIONS	Invest in flexible scheduling and childcare support; develop supportive management training; create women-focused career development programs	Conduct needs assessments; pilot test initiatives; measure ROI; integrate with sustainability reporting
HR PROFESSIONALS	Design gender-sensitive policies; build manager capability; create peer support networks	Develop competency in women's workplace needs; establish metrics for success; create feedback mechanisms
POLICYMAKERS	Support childcare infrastructure; promote work-life balance legislation; incentivize women-friendly workplace practices	Develop district-specific support programs; create recognition awards; facilitate knowledge sharing

5.3 Limitations and Recommendations

The study has been limited to only two districts of Kerala, and thus the results cannot be generalized for areas with different cultural and economic backgrounds. The cross-sectional design does not allow for any

causal inferences, although the mixed-methods approach does allow triangulation of findings. Longitudinal studies in the future can assess the long-term effects of well-being initiatives on employee and organizational outcomes.

From these findings, organizations should take a structured approach in implementing well-being initiatives that target women:

1. Conduct thorough needs assessments to understand specific challenges faced by women employees in their organizational context.
2. Devise culturally sensitive policies that respect women's many roles and offer flexible support services.
3. Provide management training to build understanding and support for women-focused well-being initiatives
4. Develop measurement systems which track both employee wellbeing outcomes and business impacts
5. Integrate well-being initiatives with broader sustainability strategies for maximum organizational and societal benefit

The retail sector's significant employment of women carries with it a level of opportunity and responsibility for crafting supportive work environments. Organizations that recognize and then address the unique well-being needs of women have the power to achieve competitive advantages through improved employee retention, enhanced customer service, and even strengthened sustainability credentials. Most importantly, investing in women's well-being illustrates a basic step toward more equitable and sustainable business practices for the benefit of all stakeholders.

SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Longitudinal and cross-sector designs may be considered by researchers for better evaluation of well-being programs in terms of sustainability of effectiveness and relevance. In other locations, the study of Sustainable HRM bundles and ESG outcomes will help to validate the proposed framework and support its use in various contexts (Madero-Gómez et al., 2023; Bhoir & Sinha, 2024).

Further research on digital well-being, hybrid work models, and post-pandemic human resource innovations can provide more effective insights toward the specific challenges which women face within the retail sector and identify strategies to address them effectively.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that targeted well-being initiatives for women working in retail result in improvements in work-life balance and job satisfaction, and an increase in commitment to the organization, while contributing to broader sustainability goals. The study reveals that successful strategies cannot be achieved through mere institutional support and policy enactment; rather, culture change, leadership commitment, and focused, systemic work on addressing women's unique workplace requirements are necessary.

These results also highlight the interconnectedness of employees' welfare with organizational sustainability and prove that investment in on-the-job support for women has both social and business benefits. It was also noticed that turnover rates are lower, customer satisfaction levels are higher, and sustainability performance is more positive in retail companies in Kerala which ensure women's well-being through flexi-work arrangements, support systems for childcare, health services, and career development programmes.

The integration of well-being programs into the ESG framework and Green HRM practices acts like a roadmap to guide the retailer organizations in aligning CSR goals with business needs. As stakeholder expectations regarding corporate sustainability continue to evolve and shift to higher levels, those companies that address the women's well-being are likely to scale and succeed for the long term.

The retail industry should henceforth realize that empowering women through a holistic well-being system is not only a social imperative but also a strategic priority in the quest for more adaptive, enduring, and high-performing organizations. The results of this study present an odyssey in building work environments supportive of women as founders and stewards in ultimately driving success and solidifying the sustainability of organizations and the communities they serve.

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