

Employment quality based on salary and occupation by gender: a company-level study

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Abstract

Organizations currently face increasing requirements for labor inclusion and decent work, aligned with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This shift has compelled strategic management to prioritize the well-being and professional development of all employees. This study aims to analyze employment quality through the relationship between salary and occupation by gender within 150 surveys service sector organizations in Barranquilla, Colombia. Data were processed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to validate variable convergence, and the model's robustness was verified through goodness-of-fit indicators (RMSEA, SRMR, CFI, and TLI). The results indicate that while employment quality measured by salary and occupation has shown moderate positive behavior and improved job stability in recent years, a significant gap persists in the Employment Opportunity component. The findings reveal that gender differentiation remains a structural barrier, creating a paradox where the conditions under which women are hired often fail to meet quality employment standards, regardless of their professional qualification.

Keywords

Employment quality, Gender Gap, Salary and occupation, 2030 Agenda, exploratory Factor Analysis, Decent work, organizational Strategy.

Introduction

In recent years, organizations have been experiencing requirements for labor inclusion and decent work based on the goals established by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda emphasizes the need to generate full and productive employment that ensures decent work for all men and women, including youth and people with disabilities, as well as correspondence of remuneration for work of equal value (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2019). This endeavor has led the strategic components of each organization to focus on promoting the well-being and development of each of its employees. In this sense, improving working conditions has become a benchmark for employment quality in the globalized society. Today, international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) emphasize the importance of decent work and gender equality, referring to those jobs that provide decent incomes, social protection, and personal and professional development (Somavia, 2014).

In fulfilling the Human Development Indexes proposed at the international level, Colombia, as a Social State under the Rule of Law, has normative concepts contained in its Political Constitution. It includes among its fundamental minimum principles of equality of opportunities, minimum wage vital and mobile based on quantity, quality, and stability in work, as well as social security and training (Pérez, 2019).

These principles, combined with the characteristics established by the ILO regarding decent or dignified work, have sparked interest within organizations to achieve these goals objectively. This normative framework demands a coordinated effort between the State, academia, and the private sector to transform these principles into measurable organizational practices. Such conditions of dignified work, according to the stance of Calvo and González (2013), are related to the organizations ability to contribute to workers expectations, which in turn should coincide with the characteristics of employment and the context in which these activities take place.

Under this futuristic approach, it is imperative to initiate a transformation in the creation of quality and inclusive employment so that timely responses can be made to the global trends emerging in the world of work. To achieve these ends, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Spanish Cooperation (2017) believe that institutions must ensure efficient functioning of the labor market, which means achieving optimal resource allocation and ensuring the protection of the weakest in

a market where there is structural inequality among its different actors. In response to this requirement, Latin American countries have accelerated their efforts regarding the process of formalization, productivity, and social dialogue as a strategy for more inclusive and productive work development.

Although the Americas are considered a heterogeneous region due to their dynamics and structure, represented in the economies that sustain it, they have united in the same purpose of promoting the principles governing the United Nations program related to decent work (OECD/CAF/ECLAC, 2018). This common interest has allowed them to make significant progress through the adoption of government initiatives contextualized to the reality of each country, favoring the slow decrease of some substantial gaps generated by informality and the promotion of sustainable enterprises that provide the opportunity to access formal quality jobs where work is dignified without gender differentiation.

In this sense, considering the heterogeneity of the globalized world in which organizations are immersed, it is necessary to clearly determine the variables of employment quality that are affected. While there are various studies related to salary and occupation, most of this value the variables separately, and few are analyzed in relation to employment quality. While salary and occupation have been extensively studied as independent economic indicators, their simultaneous interaction as a multidimensional construct of employment quality remains underexplored. For this reason, the topic addressed in this article may be considered pioneering as it relates to three variables simultaneously: employment quality, salary, and occupation. However, studies related to occupation indicate an overall decrease in both men and women compared to 2019. The crisis generated by COVID-19 affected the existing gender gap in the Colombian market for some years, negatively impacting the participation of the female population compared to the male (Ramos and Bolívar, 2020). In the specific context of Barranquilla, a city characterized by its dynamic service sector, this post-pandemic recovery reveals that gender gaps are not merely cyclical but structural, requiring a deeper analysis of job quality. Regarding these challenges, the question arises: How does the correspondence between salary and occupation by gender explain employment quality in service sector companies in Barranquilla, Colombia? The question posed leads to answering the objective of the article, which is to analyze the quality of employment based on the correspondence between salary and occupation by gender in service sector companies in Barranquilla, Colombia.

Literature Review

Employment Quality in terms of Salary-Occupation by Gender

In Colombia, the topic of employment quality dates to the early 20th century. The first investigation focused on the employment quality index proposed by the ILO, with pioneer studies by Farné (2003; 2013). The first study, conducted in 2003, focused on 13 cities in Colombia, while the second study covered 23 cities. In

both studies, the evaluation dimensions included income, type of contract, affiliation to social security, and work hours. It was concluded that in the cities studied in Colombia, there were low quality jobs, with improvements in social security and contracting observed between 2010 and 2013. Similarly, Gómez, Galvis, and Royuela (2015) utilized various multidimensional methodologies to assess employment quality in Colombian cities between 2001 and 2015, finding results similar to those presented by Farné (2003), related to persistent precariousness in the qualitative conditions of employment in the Colombian labor market, with few differences observed between genders. Recently, Serna and Álzate (2019) conducted a study related to employment quality among young people and adults in intermediate cities of Colombia between 2009-2017, using the same methodology and dimensions as Farné (2003) to measure employment quality. The results showed an improvement in quality indicators, with income being the component that has decreased in recent years. Unlike previous studies that focus on city-wide indexes, the present research analyzes these dimensions at the company level within the service sector to identify organizational patterns.

From the perspective of Farné, Vergara, and Baquero (2012) and Castro (2018), the precariousness in employment quality stems from the phenomenon of economic globalization initiated in the 1960s. During this period, the world of work was significantly reshaped by increased flexibility¹ in labor modalities, rising unemployment, and pervasive job instability in the modalities of carrying out work activities, unemployment, and job instability. This shift led to a general laxity in contractual conditions and proliferation of atypical employment.

Consequently, employment quality became largely defined by the opportunity for the working population to earn merely a minimum wage, often without formal contract, health benefits, or regulated working hours (Jiménez and Páez, 2014). According to Sánchez (2020), these precariousness conditions disproportionately affect female employment, particularly among women in low socioeconomic strata, creating a persistent gap in labor well-being.

Building upon these foundations, Farné, Vergara, and Baquero (2011) have further refined the dimensions of employment quality, identifying key indicators such as flexibility, security, income, and work life balance. In alignment with this perspective, Weller and Roethlisberger (2012) and Pineda and Acosta (2011) argue that the determinants of quality extend beyond mere job characteristics. Their research emphasizes that institutional factor including collective relationships, contractual stability, and

¹ In the Latin American context, this flexibility is often manifested as labor informality, further deepening the vulnerability of the workforce.

participation dynamic are essential to understanding employment opportunities and mitigating health risks in the workplace.

In the same vein, Moreno (2019) states that decent work should be based on four pillars: i) the creation of decent jobs, ii) human rights referring to equity and equal opportunities, iii) social security related to safe working conditions, and iv) social dialogue aimed at achieving consensus in normative matters to promote gender equality and fight discrimination. This disparity in the dimensions used to assess employment quality results from objective and subjective elements defining such quality, as well as the perception and motivation of the involved actors (Pineda, 2008). These references will serve as a guideline for the country in implementing future initiatives.

Salary-Occupation Correspondence by Gender

The heterogeneity of the globalized world necessitates a clear determination of the employment quality variables affected. While there are numerous studies related to salary and occupation, most of them evaluate these variables separately, with few analyzing them in relation to employment quality. For this reason, this study can be considered pioneering as it relates to three variables simultaneously: employment quality, salary, and occupation. Based on these premises, studies conducted by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), the Presidential Council for Women's Equity, and the United Nations Women (UN Women, 2020) reveal that in Colombia between 2008 and 2019, there was an increase in the overall participation rate by gender. For women, it was 6.7%, while for men, it was 2.8%. These results differ from the unemployment rate, which has been increasing since 2015; specifically, the unemployment rate was 9.8% in October 2019 (Vallejo, 2020).

Similarly, the rate of employment in Colombia at the national level shows that 69 out of every 100 working age men managed to find employment, compared to women, where only 47 out of every 100 women secure employment (DANE, 2020a). These figures highlight that opportunities for participation, employment, and occupation for the female population are lower compared to the male population, a trend similarly observed at the departmental level in Atlántico (Galvis, Rodríguez, and Ovallos, 2021). This gender gap often depends on the level of education attained, which in turn affects the salary assigned to individuals. Women with no formal education earn 63 pesos for every 100 pesos earned by men. However, even with an increase in women's participation in the workforce and education, the gap between men and women persists even at higher education levels, where women with university degrees earn 81 pesos for every 100 earned by men with the same level of education (DANE and UN Women, 2020).

Furthermore, the differentiation in the employment rate and salary between men and women arises from the inclusion of new production processes governed by technological change and automation in recent decades. Occupations have become increasingly specialized, making the search for profiles in the labor market a complex endeavor with significant impacts on salaries (Londoño, 2019; Girsberger, 2018). In this regard, Sainz, Arroyo, and Castaño (2020) and Catalano (2018) believe that these occupational and salary impacts are related to the requirements of activities imposed by the new global system, where technology and digitalization have become decisive components for labor competitiveness. This leads to a new dynamic where women who develop digital skills will have the opportunity to occupy high level hierarchical positions with better salaries.

A study by Cerquera, Arias, and Prada (2019) on the salary and occupational gap between men and women clarifies that this gap does not depend specifically on gender but rather on other factors that must be taken into account, such as the sector's own allocation. This factor is contained in the original job designs, which serve as the basis for the personnel selection process. Such differential allocation, according to Naranjo (2012: 88), directly impacts the capacities of both men and women, given the "determining factors, or in some cases excluding factors, that make up what has been called the thin line of professional mortality. Additionally, it is worth considering that this segmentation in the labor market may also be due to cultural components generated by the traditionally assigned roles of women and, in some cases, the personal decision of women who choose not to participate in the workforce, prioritizing family dedication, as noted by (Diaz, 2014).

Recent studies conducted by DANE (2020b) show that Colombia experienced an average annual variation in salary income between men and women of 12.9% in 2019. This salary differentiation, according to Espino (2010), is the product of a social system that has structured in a unique way the allocation of roles, time, spaces, and activities between men and women, conditions that have blurred the social role of women in the labor market, placing them in an inferior position. Consequently, the overrepresentation of women in occupational categories such as service workers, administrative personnel, and domestic workers in Latin America further exacerbates the occupational gap associated with salary and educational levels (Ñopo, 2012; Escobar 2016; Palacios, 2019). Regarding educational levels, Serna, Alzate, Ramírez, and Castro (2019) affirm that a high level of education in Colombia is not a factor that improves insertion and employability conditions but rather makes them more complex and less inclusive, reflected in the high levels of unemployment experienced by young professionals compared to those with no education.

While Colombia has been working on gender equity in terms of salary and occupation within its normative framework, there is still much to be done, especially concerning deeply rooted cultural

paradigms related to the roles each gender should fulfill (Ríos, 2018). This challenge becomes a premise that must be managed to meet the proposed human development indexes for the country's competitiveness. Therefore, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) and Spanish Cooperation (2017) and Londoño (2019) suggest the development of long-term public policies that can impact the reduction of the salary and occupational gap, which has long been present in the Colombian labor market. Such policies must be comprehensive and focus on seeking the relevance of higher education, job training, and the flexibility of labor relations with the sustainability of social security. Thus, the proposal requires the commitment and intervention of various entities, including the triad of Business, University, and State.

Methodology

The study employs a non-experimental, cross-sectional, and correlational-causal design with a quantitative approach. The target population was purposively selected from final-semester Business Administration students at a private university in Barranquilla (evening shift), a demographic that uniquely combines academic qualification with active labor market participation. Following a rigorous filtering process, the initial population (N=300) was refined based on specific inclusion criteria: active employment in the service sector and a minimum tenure of three years to ensure participants had a stable perception of organizational dynamics. After applying exclusion criteria such as active disciplinary proceedings or medical leave and accounting for voluntary attrition, a final robust sample of 150 participants was achieved (n=150), providing a 60% female representation (n=90) and 40% male representation (n=60).

Employment quality was operationalized through a multidimensional instrument based on the theoretical framework of Pineda and Acosta (2011). It measures four core latent constructs: Employment Opportunities (EO), Occupation (O), Salary (S), and Job Stability (JS). To ensure content validity, the 30-item instrument was subjected to expert judgment by three specialists in organizational economics, who ensured the items were culturally and contextually adapted to the Colombian labor market. The instrument demonstrated excellent psychometric properties, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.89, surpassing the standard threshold of 0.70 for internal consistency.

The study was conducted under the highest ethical standards, strictly adhering to Law 1090 of 2006 and Resolution 8430 of 1993. Beyond informed consent, the protocol ensured double-blind anonymity and was formally sanctioned by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Simón Bolívar (Resolution 05, 2023), aligning with the principles of Social Responsibility in knowledge production. The questionnaire was

administered through the Moodle platform (extended classroom) between January and March 2021. Participants were contacted via institutional email, where the research objectives were detailed, and digital informed consent was obtained prior to accessing the survey.

Data analysis followed a two-stage advanced statistical protocol: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): Conducted via SPSS V22 using a variance-covariance matrix to confirm the convergence of the items within the four proposed dimensions. Structural Validation: The model's fit was rigorously tested in STATA V15 using Maximum Likelihood Estimation. The robustness of the model was evaluated through a comprehensive battery of Goodness-of-Fit indices: RMSEA, SRMR (*Standardized Root Mean Residual*), CFI (*Comparative Fit Index*) and TLI (*Tucker-Lewis Index*).

Results and Discussion

According to the article's objective, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted based on the analysis of variances and covariances for standardized data, aiming to validate the convergence of the variables gathered within each of the four studied categories (see Table 1).

Table 1. Factor loadings for variables of the categories via rotated factor analysis.

Variables	Loadings for variables of the categories			
	Occupation	Job Stability	Salary	Income Opportunities
X13:	0.813			
X21:	0.713			
X15:	0.695			
X28:		0.745		
X6:		0.791		
X9:			0.788	
X24:			0.726	
X3:				0.733
X4:				0.711

Note: Own elaboration (2021). Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization.

Through rotated EFA, significant factor loadings explaining each factor were identified, resulting in a reduction of items. Once the EFA was validated, attending to the factorial loadings corresponding to each factor or category, the proposal was directly analyzed, verifying the goodness-of-fit indicators (RMSEA, SRMR, CFI, and TLI) of the model (Cangur et al., 2015). These data confirm the construct validity of the instrument; it was observed that most items present factor loadings exceeding 0.70. According to statistical

literature, values above this threshold indicate that the factor explains more than 50% of the item's variance, guaranteeing a robust representation of each studied dimension. The fact that variables X13 (0.81) and X16 (0.79) present the highest values suggests that these indicators best define the perception of Employment Quality within the service sector in Barranquilla. On the other hand, while the Income Opportunities dimension presents solid factor loadings (X3: 0.733 and X4: 0.711), it reflects a lower explained variance compared to occupation and stability. This aligns with the finding that growth opportunities remain a structural barrier, particularly when analyzed through a gender lens.

Following the identification of factor loadings, the robustness of the structural model was evaluated using the goodness-of-fit indices presented in Table 2. The results confirm that the proposed four-category model has an outstanding fit with the empirical data collected in the service sector of Barranquilla. Specifically, the CFI (0.993) and TLI (0.988) significantly exceed the excellence criteria (>0.95), indicating that the model explains a large proportion of the variance compared to a null model. For its part, the RMSEA (0.023) is situated at a close or excellent fit level (typically considered as such when it is <0.05), ensuring the parsimony of the model. Although (Chi-square) test yielded a significant p-value common in large sample sizes, the combination of the other indicators validates the soundness of the Employment Quality construct.

Table 2. Goodness-of-fit index of the estimated model.

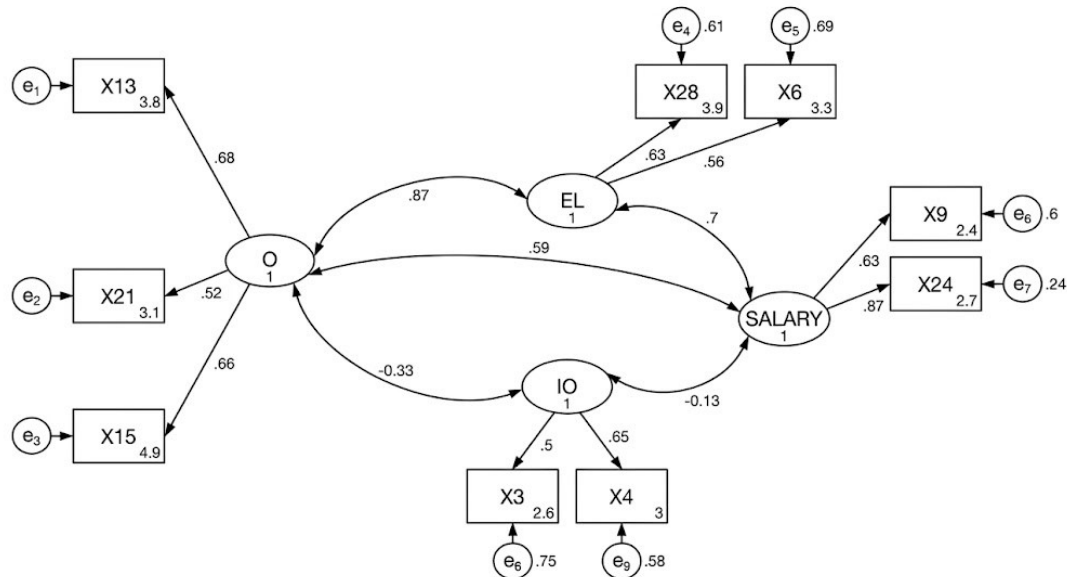
Goodness-of-fit Index Base	Model with four Categories	Criterion	
X ² Significance	p-value =0.0000	p-value > 0.05	
RMSEA (parsimony)	0.023	< 0.08	<0.05
SRMR (Residuals)	0.063	< 0.08	<0.05
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	0.993	>0.90	>0.95
TLI (Tucker–Lewis Index)	0.988	>0.90	>0.95

Note: Own elaboration (2021), based on Cangur and Ercan (2015).

The high fidelity of the model (supported by the CFI and RMSEA) demonstrates that the Salary and Occupation dimensions are objective and precise indicators of labor quality within the studied context. Therefore, the detected gender disparities are not the product of imprecise measurement, but rather of a structural barrier within the city's service organizations. This reinforces the finding that, although the model is statistically sound, the social reality it measures remains far from the decent work standards promoted by the 2030 Agenda.

Figure 1 illustrates the structural model composed of four categories: 1) Occupation (O), 2) Job Stability (JS), 3) Salary (S), and 4) Income Opportunities (IO). The model displays both the correlations between categories and the factor loadings calculated using the Maximum Likelihood method via STATA V15.

Figure 1. Structural Explanatory Model of Employment Quality



Note. Factor loadings calculated using the Maximum Likelihood method via STATA V15. Own elaboration (2026).

To evaluate the structural equation model, goodness-of-fit indicators were verified, reporting a moderate positive correspondence between Salary (S) and Occupation (O) in service SMEs, with a coefficient of .59. This result reinforces the perception of 63% of respondents who identified a consistent alignment between their pay grade and their functional role. This finding is supported by Cerquera et al. (2019), who note that the pace of reducing the gap between salary and occupation in Colombia has been moderate. Furthermore, while DANE (2020) figures show an increase in female labor participation (6.7 percentage points vs. 2.8 for men), the gender difference in access to high-level positions persists as a structural barrier.

The positive direction of the correlation between (S) and (O) suggests a dynamic where higher salaries are linked to specialized job opportunities. As argued by Catalano (2018) and Londoño (2019), salary fluctuations are increasingly driven by occupational shifts toward technological and digital processes. This

aligns with Firpo et al. (2018), who observe that organizations are undergoing radical transformations where occupations focused on non-routine digital tasks gain higher market value, while traditional roles see a reduction in wage variance.

In the same vein, the model reveals a highly positive relationship (0.80) between the dimensions of Occupation (O) and Salary (S) with Job Stability (JS). This demonstrates that higher occupational levels and better compensation are primary drivers of personnel retention. Conversely, as Rincón, Rolón, and Sierra (2010) and Ramos (2020) suggest, job instability often stems from cost-reduction strategies and downsizing, which disproportionately affect lower-tier roles. Thus, the model confirms that job stability in Barranquilla's service sector is an "earned benefit" of higher-status occupations (Cadillo, 2013).

A critical finding arises from the relationship between (S) and (O) with Income Opportunities (IO), which yielded a low negative correlation (-0.33). Although the coefficient is moderate, its direction is revealing: in the real-world scenario of service organizations, higher-paying job offers often result in fewer entry opportunities for women. As Escobar (2016) asserts, the massification of labor supply frequently leads to women being rewarded with lower salaries even in high-qualification roles, hindering their market entry. Furthermore, the negative correlation between Occupation (O) and Income Opportunities (IO) highlights a critical gender gap. DANE and UN Women (2020) argue that while education is a factor, women's entry into the labor market is further obstructed by lack of work experience, race, and social networks. Recently, the demand for new labor competencies in the service sector where 66% of jobs required high digital intensity by 2020 (Ministry of Commerce, 2020) has created a new barrier. As Girsberger (2018) and Pieters (2013) suggest, the absence of these specific digital skills, coupled with public policies that fail to address job vulnerability and gender equality (Piñeros, 2018), deteriorates employment quality. Ultimately, as Serna et al. (2019) contend, a high level of education in Colombia may not currently guarantee better insertion but instead makes the hiring process more exclusive and complex for women.

5. Conclusions

The statistics presented and the results obtained in this study highlight the challenge that Colombia faces regarding the quality of life, specifically in optimizing the correspondence between salary and occupation by gender. Despite the proposals aimed at addressing this issue, there is still evidence of a moderate correlation coefficient in this relationship, a condition that requires greater effort in terms of public policies to reduce gender discrimination in the workplace. A significant contribution of this study is the identification of a paradox within the Colombian labor market: while women have increased their educational attainment, this does not linearly translate into higher employment quality. The findings suggest that professional qualification, rather than acting as an inclusive factor, often encounters a

professional mortality driven by gender-based differential allocations. This implies that public policies must shift from focusing solely on educational access to addressing the structural and cultural barriers that prevent qualified women from reaching high level hierarchical positions.

Additionally, it is pertinent for organizations to seek internal strategies that solidify the value of positions according to their intrinsic responsibilities equitably in terms of gender. The requirements of the new globalized world system entail the need to promote dignified and equitable employment between genders. Colombian companies are not exempt from such guidelines; they have become the focus of action for employee well-being and development programs at the corporate level. Furthermore, the moderate correspondence found between salary and occupation highlights the urgency for organizations to adapt to the digital transformation. As occupations become more specialized due to technological shifts, the gender gap risks widening if women are not explicitly integrated into high intensity digital roles. Therefore, organizational internal strategies should not only focus on equitable pay but also on redesigning job profiles to ensure that technological competencies are rewarded without gender bias.

However, with the adoption of global guidelines on employment quality, it is not intended for companies to standardize their processes, which could be considered a strategic misstep given the differences in tasks, sector capabilities, and employee characteristics. The quality of employment measured from the gender equity perspective does not only depend on the correspondence of salary and occupation. There are other quality components that influence the deepening of the gap, such as the participation rate and unemployment experienced in the Colombian labor market. These figures show a significant imbalance between men and women, despite the normative efforts developed by the government to reduce this scourge.

Finally, achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires a departure from standardized corporate processes that ignore sector-specific capabilities. The triad of Business, University, and State must move beyond normative frameworks toward a transformative social dialogue that deconstructs entrenched cultural paradigms. The negative correlation coefficient found in income opportunities for high quality positions confirms that the current system is exclusionary. Only by integrating job stability, income opportunities, and equitable occupation can we foster a truly inclusive labor environment that reflects human development indices on a global scale.

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