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Decent work in terms of perceptions of gender-related career barriers and marginalization: a mediated moderator model

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Abstract
Decent work is conceptualized as regulations for working conditions, the provision of health and safety services, and the protection of rights and interests that align with human dignity. This comprehensive and remarkable issue is significant for many young people still in the career development process, as it enables them to actively manage their expectations. In the current study, the mediating effect of marginalization and the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between university students' gender-related career barriers and perception of decent work were examined. 421 individuals participated in the study, of whom 307 (72.9%) were female, and 114 (27.1%) were male. 'Future Decent Work Scale,' 'Gender-Related Career Barriers Scale,' and 'Lifetime Experiences of Marginalization Scale' were used as data collection tools. The first finding confirmed the mediating role of marginalization in the effect of gender-related career barriers on perception of decent work. On the other hand, it was observed that gender did not have a moderating role in the relationship between gender-related career barriers and marginalization. Finally, the differences in gender between the variables were also determined. All these contribute to examining the antecedents of young people's perception of decent work.

Keywords Decent work · Gender-related career barriers · Marginalization · Gender

Introduction

Upon graduating from university, young people may believe they have reached a significant career milestone by obtaining a high-quality education. However, the successful completion of this task may not always yield positive outcomes. Many university graduates face challenges, including underemployment and unemployment (Allan et al., 2017; Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). In addition, issues such as gender discrimination, injustice, and mobbing, which are frequently encountered in work environments after university graduation, are among the common problems. Problems encountered in the workplace, as well as unemployment after graduation, can affect the hopes and expectations of students who are still pursuing their university education (Keser & Buyukgoze-Kavas, 2022; Kıcır, 2017). Therefore, graduates' current problems may affect young people's expectations during undergraduate education regarding the jobs they aim to achieve and their perception of decent work. In this context, decent work can be understood as a summary of their expectations and demands in the working life (ILO, 2018).

Decent work represents a framework established by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to regulate working conditions, provide health and safety services, and protect rights and interests that respect human dignity (ILO, 1999). Decent work is also a key focus of the "Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)" theme, one of the United Nations' 2030 targets. In addition, the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), developed by Duffy et al. (2016a, b), adapts the concept of decent work, which is analysed at the macro level, into a psychological framework and establishes it on a crucial theoretical basis. The theory is critical in analysing individuals' perceptions of decent work. Decent work, which holds a vital place in working life and career transition processes,

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is expected to serve various functions (ILO, 2008, 2012). These include regulating labour standards through policy, developing fundamental rights, establishing social dialogue between workers and employers, establishing a social security system that addresses gender-related discrimination, and creating a productive employment environment. Decent work, which addresses key elements of working life, can lead to many important individual, organisational, and social outcomes. These are related to important outcomes, such as life satisfaction (Atitsogbe et al., 2021), job satisfaction and fulfilment (Kim et al., 2022; Olckers & Koekemoer, 2024), occupational fatigue, and turnover intention (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2019; Mcllveen et al., 2021). Given these significant outcomes, it is crucial to understand the factors that influence decent work. In the literature, this concept has frequently been examined within the PWT framework (Duffy et al., 2020; Yazan et al., 2025).

PWT examines decent work in terms of predictive variables such as marginalisation, career adaptability, and economic conditions. It was also explained that contextual factors such as social class and gender are important in this process (Duffy et al., 2016a, b). Findings from some studies conducted in this context support the significant effect of gender, a contextual factor, on decent work (Carkıt, 2025; England et al., 2020). Although gender is important for decent work, recent studies show that decent work does not differ by gender (Kul et al., 2025). Similarly, when gender is controlled for in the precursors of decent work, the results do not change significantly (Sen-Baz, 2025). This necessitates examining different sources on gender within the scope of decent work and its antecedents. This will help address gaps and dilemmas in the literature. In this context, the present study will adopt a different theoretical perspective, in addition to PWT (Duffy et al., 2016a, b), to examine the precursors of decent work. This is the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994), which relates these career processes to various cognitive-individual and contextual factors. Gender-related career barriers are characterised as a contextual barrier in SCCT (Lent et al., 2000). This barrier can affect the perception of decent work. This perspective can offer a different theoretical contribution to the current study, going beyond research that examines decent work and its antecedents from a female or male perspective. Consequently, this study aims to examine the antecedents of decent work within the PWT and SCCT frameworks. In this context, we examined gender-related career barriers, marginalisation, and decent work in line with the relevant theoretical suggestions in the research. We also investigated the moderator effect of gender in this process.

Gender-Related career barriers and decent work

Career barriers are defined as events or conditions created by the individual or their environment that obstruct career development (Swanson & Woitke, 1997). In this context, university students' beliefs about stereotypical gender roles can be considered barriers to their careers (Eccles, 2011; Weisgram et al., 2010) because social expectations and cultural values shape perceptions of gender by assigning different responsibilities and duties to women and men (Korkmaz & Özbeşler, 2022). Furthermore, gender discrimination experienced by employees can also negatively impact young people's perceptions and processes regarding their careers (ILO, 2009). Gender-related career barriers also refer to perceptions that the roles society deems appropriate for women and men may hinder their ability to achieve career goals (Simşek et al., 2021). Therefore, gender roles are important factors influencing people's interests, social relationships, actions, and career decisions (Miller, 2016). For example, a young person who prioritises gender stereotypes may think, 'I am a woman, and engineering is for men' (Butler, 2014). Considering all of this, gender-related career barriers can also affect perceptions of decent work, an important career outcome.

According to social cognitive career theory (SCCT), perceived gender-related barriers are characterised as contextual barriers, and this can influence career-related processes (Lent et al., 1994, 2000). For example, Alok et al. (2023) state that acceptance of gender role barriers reduces the likelihood that women in the workforce will continue their career paths. Another study found that masculine roles have a stronger effect on job and career satisfaction than feminine roles (Ngo et al., 2014). This thinking may stem from a male-dominated culture that views these fields as competitive and that sees career advancement achieved through long, strenuous working hours (Blackwell & Glover, 2008). On the other hand, Bolat and Odacı (2017) state that androgynous individuals, who are less affected by social pressure and traditional understandings, have higher career decision-making self-efficacy compared to individuals with feminine or masculine gender roles. These strong self-efficacy skills are an important factor in terms of positive career outcomes. For this reason, young people who perceive gender-related barriers to their career goals may believe they cannot achieve them or that they are prevented from doing so (Simsek et al., 2021). Another study on gender barriers in careers also explains that most male employees in the information technology sector describe their job group as more masculine than women do, based on technical skills. In other words, although women also consider these jobs to be masculine, they do so to a lesser extent than men (Trauth

et al., 2016). This confirms that women and men may be affected by internalised barriers regarding their expectations of the workplace. This differentiation can be influenced by perceptions of gender inequality as well as gender roles more generally (Annovazzi et al., 2018). Considering the negative effects of being exposed to and accepting gender-related barriers, it is quite important to examine the impact of this situation on decent work. Studies on the relationship between perceived career barriers and decent work are relatively limited (Kemechian et al., 2023). Given that many of these studies were conducted within the scope of PWT, using SCCT in the present study will provide a broader and more eclectic perspective. Furthermore, most studies examining the effects and precursors of decent work focus on employees (Carkıt, 2025; Duffy et al., 2020; Kemechian et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2025a, b). However, the university students selected for the study by the researchers may have negative perceptions about working life before entering the labour market, which could adversely affect decent work (Aca & Akdamar, 2023). In this context, some existing studies focus on university students (Wei et al., 2021; Yazan et al., 2025), but they have not sufficiently examined perceived gender-related career barriers. Examining university students' perceptions of gender-related career barriers at a critical transition stage in their career paths is crucial for future jobs, occupational aspirations, and life satisfaction (England et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2015). These studies, which address decent work in the context of perceived gender barriers, can help achieve SDG targets (SDG 8 and SDG 5) and address numerous economic, political, and social issues in countries. Examining the impact of gender-related career barriers on perceptions of decent work from the perspective of university students who are not yet employed may help develop preventive measures before problems arise. These factors not only make the study remarkable but also demonstrate its theoretical and practical impact.

The mediating role of marginalization

Marginalization can occur when individuals are perceived as weaker in society and less included in the group (Duffy et al., 2016a, b). PWT state that having a different racial or ethnic background and experiencing gender differences, as well as various contextual factors such as social class level, can lead to injustice and marginalization (Cole, 2009; Duffy et al., 2016a, b; Masdonati et al., 2022). Although women are comparable to men in terms of knowledge, skills, and education, they are perceived as a more disadvantaged group in areas such as employment and career advancement (OECD, 2023). This situation may increase their perception of marginalization. However, some studies that emphasise gender directly have proved insufficient for explaining marginalization. For example, in Tolays' (2020) study on Turkish culture, nearly half of female employees prefer male managers. On the other hand, fewer women in the same group do not care about their manager's gender, believing that managerial activities and character are more important (Tolay, 2020). Beyond what is stated in these studies and in PWT, the present study indicates the need to explain marginality through a structure other than gender.

Morales and Marcén (2024) argue that changes in social norms regarding gender equality could increase women's participation in male-dominated occupations. This situation can be explained not only by the differentiation of social pressures that drive the display of behaviour consistent with gender roles (Burn, 1995), but also by some individuals internalising gender-related expectations more than others and behaving accordingly. This structure represents perceptions of gender inequality in the context of career development. Also, it may reinforce university students' views that they may be prevented from achieving their career goals and occupational aspirations (Simsek et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2015). On the other hand, it is also noted that men are exposed to marginalization. For example, Torre (2018) reports that men who enter professions dominated by women leave their jobs after a short time. Thus, discrimination can also be observed in environments in which women hold positions of power and authority. Gender role barriers in career, which have also been declared a threat by the SCCT (Lent et al., 2001), may cause individuals to become marginalised, leading them to distance themselves from those career options. For example, a study conducted with engineering students found that gender threats are a contextual barrier within the scope of SCCT regarding career processes for both women who have chosen the department and those in the selection phase. Moreover, this effect was even more pronounced among those who perceived the field of science as more masculine (Sebastián-Tirado et al., 2023). Therefore, being female alone may not fully explain marginalization. Greater awareness of gender-related career barriers may influence this process.

Within the same theoretical framework, Duffy et al. (2020) examined decent work using longitudinal data. This study found that increased employees' marginalization predicted a decrease in decent work. However, studies examining the impact of gender-related career barriers, which constitute a contextual obstacle, on marginalization are limited. Moreover, the decent work effect of this relationship has not been examined. Evidence from SCCT and PWT supporting the research is highly significant for examining the mediating role of marginalization, a contextual factor, in the relationship between gender-related career barriers and the likelihood of securing decent work. Thus, in this

study, the precursors of decent work will be examined in terms of both PWT and SCCT contextual factors, unlike other studies. All of this can help examine contextual factors from both broad and specific perspectives by contributing to an understanding of how marginalization is mediated by university students' gender-related career barriers and their perceptions of decent work.

The moderating role of gender

Türkiye signed and ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on July 30, 2002 (Official Gazette, 2002). Despite the passage of time, issues related to gender, particularly those affecting women, persist. Research shows that women applying for jobs are frequently subjected to gender discrimination. In addition, emotional pressure, low pay, and unfair labour practices are common problems faced by women in the workplace (Gürcan, 2022; Macdonald, 2021). A study in this context found that female faculty members experienced more workplace discrimination than their male co-workers (Zimmerman et al., 2016). In addition, gender-related stereotypes (Saluja et al., 2023) can affect women's participation in career processes. This can contribute to the internalisation of gender-related attitudes that women are exposed to in life, thereby reinforcing their sense of marginalization. PWT also explains how gender affects individuals' exclusion processes, thereby negatively impacting decent work and overall career processes (Duffy et al., 2016a, b). Additionally, this situation allows examination of gender and gender roles as contextual barriers to SCCT in relation to different career behaviours. Thus, as Lent and colleagues (2016) also suggested, the SCCT model has been expanded and supported by PWT.

Previous studies on decent work and gender have predominantly examined female samples (Kemechian et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Yazan et al., 2025). This situation is acceptable from the PWT perspective, which shows that women are marginalised. In addition, a review of the literature indicates that gender-related barriers and perceptions of these barriers are more common among women (England et al., 2020; Stojmenovska, 2023). On the other hand, this issue is among men (Kouta & Kaite, 2011; Haskan-Avcı et al., 2019). For example, many studies examine the problems faced by male early childhood and primary school teachers and teacher candidates (Bhana et al., 2022; John Martino, 2008; Reich-Shapiro et al., 2021). An ideological perspective suggests that men working in these fields may be biologically deficient in abilities such as nurturing, caregiving, and even empathy (Connell, 2020). Alongside this perspective and these pressures, many male teachers have made changes to their working lives (Bhana et al., 2022). Another study explains that women are often exposed to negative actions in their emotional and relational lives. In contrast, men are exposed to negative actions due to their job performance. Although the same study states that women are exposed to bullying more than men, men who suffer from this situation are not few in number (Campanini et al., 2006). Also, there are studies explaining that men working in nursing are exposed to gender-related pressures and discrimination (Budu et al., 2019; Chang & Jeong, 2021). These factors affecting employee performance can lead to organisational problems (Damanik & Widodo, 2024; Widodo et al., 2024). Therefore, these problems are too important to be ignored.

SDG 8.5, one of the sub-goals of SDG 8, aims to ensure complete and productive employment and equal pay for work of equal value for all women and men in the near future (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). PWT also explains that marginalization is significantly affected by gender. In summary, when the theoretical framework and the research are examined, it becomes clear that women are more deeply marginalized. At the same time, men encounter such problems, particularly in specific fields of work. Both an examination of the SDG goals from the perspective of both genders and a more comprehensive analysis require consideration of gender as a moderator. Therefore, it is thought that gender may play a moderator role between perceived career barriers and marginalization. Findings in this direction will contribute to a deeper understanding of gender-related prejudice in business and help determine its effects on individuals' career development.

Theoretical framework

This study utilised both the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) in a theoretical framework. In the literature review, the relevant concepts were addressed within these theoretical frameworks. This section also includes more general and summarised information about both theories. According to the fundamental assumptions of PWT, decent work, the existence of dignified and stable employment, is listed among human rights (Blustein et al., 2019). This theory explains how contextual and psychological factors affect decent work (Duffy et al., 2016a, b). Decent work contributes to job and life satisfaction by supporting the fulfilment of individuals' needs, such as sustaining their lives, autonomy, and social relationships (England et al., 2020). According to the theory, marginalization and economic constraints play an important contextual role in terms of decent work. Marginalization explains how individuals are seen as disadvantaged due to their gender, ethnicity, immigrant status,

or racial characteristics (Duffy et al., 2016a, b). Marginalization and/or economic constraints can lead to an individual's sense of having fewer career choices and insufficient resources to overcome workplace barriers (Duffy et al., 2020). Economic constraints are defined as access to economic resources and investment capacity, beginning in childhood and continuing for many years (Duffy et al., 2016a, b; Huston & Bentley, 2010).

PWT indicates that contextual barriers, such as economic constraints and marginalization, limit the career process and choice, and, as a result, skills related to decent work may decline (Duffy et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2022). It also states that the effects will vary with the presence of mediating variables, such as work volition and career fit, as well as moderating variables, such as proactive personality, social support, economic conditions, and critical consciousness (Duffy et al., 2016a, b, 2020). PWT has a multifaceted structure that applies to both individualistic and collectivist societies (Duffy et al., 2016a, b). In this regard, Turkey, with a collectivist and patriarchal cultural heritage, provides a suitable social context for examining the theory across different sample groups and structural proposals.

SCCT has derived its understanding of career processes from Bandura's (1986) general social cognitive theory. The theory explains the existence of various cognitive-personal variables that support individuals' career development. Accordingly, various cognitive variables related to career (e.g., self-efficacy, goals, or outcome expectations) are relevant. On the other hand, contextual variables are environmental factors perceived as either supporting or a barrier to people's efforts to achieve career goals. They are interacting with other aspects of the individual and their environment (e.g., gender, race, social supports, and barriers) to influence career outcomes. One of the social barriers in this theory is gender stereotypes (Lent et al., 2001; Lent & Brown, 1996). Therefore, these gender barriers can be considered significant obstacles affecting an individual's career processes and outcomes.

Current study

Türkiye is a developing country with a high population density. Current research reports also confirm this. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT), the average youth population rate across the 27 member countries of the European Union (EU) in 2023 was 10.6%. Turkey, by contrast, has a higher youth population than many countries, with a youth population rate of 15.1% in 2024 (TURKSTAT, 2024). In developing countries, meeting the future expectations and demands of the young population is a crucial criterion for national welfare (World Bank, 2007). These issues are addressed in various workshops organised by the ILO in Turkey (ILO, 2024). Although these workshops have included engaging themes, they are insufficient to address the challenges faced by many young people in Türkiye who are still waiting to enter the labor market.

The main issue is facing gender-related career barriers. Young people may face gender discrimination, feel marginalized, and lack equal access to occupational sectors, both in the career choice process and in the transition to the labour market (Imdorf et al., 2015; Schoon & Polek, 2011). This situation is also supported by SCCT (Lent et al., 1994), which posits that contextual barriers negatively affect career outcomes. Although gender roles have been examined extensively in relation to these outcomes (Alok et al., 2023; Bolat & Odacı, 2017), studies on decent work remain insufficient. Moreover, young people who perceive these barriers may feel more marginalized. Marginalization, a negative precursor to decent work, is one of the contextual variables in PWT (Duffy et al., 2020). Numerous studies confirm that marginalization, a negative precursor of decent work, is one of the contextual variables in PWT (Duffy et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Tokar & Kaut, 2018). Furthermore, according to PWT, marginality and the gender thought to influence it are important precursors for decent work (Duffy et al., 2016a, b; Masdonati et al., 2022). Although these studies examine the impact of gender and marginalization on decent work, there is a lack of research that simultaneously examines gender and gender barriers to career advancement in this regard. In light of this information, it is crucial to examine decent work for university students in the context of gender, gender-related career barriers, and marginalisation. However, the literature on decent work is insufficient in terms of examining these theoretical and practical issues.

This study examines decent work from a new perspective, offering an update to the literature. Furthermore, by examining the SSCT and PWT perspectives, which are particularly important for individuals' career development, it also offers a unique perspective. This is because examining decent work and recognising its requirements are essential in an evolving world order. From this perspective, examining this concept from different dimensions and theoretical frameworks can help address an important need. These will help determine the auxiliary skills that university students need to develop during their educational and professional activities to transition into a successful career. Additionally, it can support intervention studies by raising awareness of the obstacles that affect young people's perceptions of decent work and their aspirations for jobs that align with human dignity.

In this context, the main purpose of this study is to examine the mediating effect of marginalisation on the relationship

between gender-related career barriers and the perception of decent work among university students, as well as the moderating effect of gender. In line with this main purpose, the sub-hypotheses of the research are as follows:

H1: The perception of gender-related career barriers has a direct and negative effect on the perception of decent work.
H2: Marginalization mediates the relationship between perceptions of gender-related career barriers and perceptions of decent work.
H3: Gender moderates the relationship between perceived gender-related career barriers and marginalization.
H4: Perceptions of marginalization differ significantly by gender.
H5: Perceptions of decent work differ significantly by gender.
H6: Perceptions of gender-related career barriers differ significantly by gender.

The theoretical components derived from PWT and SCCT, consistent with the research hypotheses, were combined and visualised in the comprehensive model shown in Fig. 1 below.

Method

Participants and procedure

The study participants comprise 421 individuals, 307 (72.9%) females and 114 (27.1%) males. Participants are from 10 faculties at two state universities in Türkiye. The sample size was calculated using G*Power 3.1.9.7 software (Faul et al., 2009). For the a-path, a small effect size (f^2) of 0.02; for the b-path, a moderate effect size of 0.15 was assumed. For the interaction of the a-path, a power of 0.80 for a two-tailed test of a single regression coefficient (with alpha = 0.05, two-tailed, and three predictors in the submodel) resulted in a sample size of 395. Using the same sample size of 395 in a power calculation for the b-path (two-tailed, alpha = 0.05, two predictors in the submodel) leads to a power of 1 for the assumed effect. This resulted in an overall expected power of $0.80 \times 1 = 0.80$, assuming statistical independence of both effects. Thus, a sample size of 395 is sufficient to achieve a statistical power of at least 0.80 for testing whether both parts of the moderated mediation are significant simultaneously. Since simplifying assumptions were made in this power calculation, 6% was added to the sample size of 395, resulting in a sample size of 421 participants. Participants are aged 18–35 (Mean = 21.68, SD = 2.49). Students from the Faculty of Education participated in the study. Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the *[hidden for anonymity]* at the corresponding author's institution. All participants volunteered for the study. The data were collected online (via Google Forms) in the classroom. Answering the scales took approximately 8 min.

Measures

Future decent work scale

Developed by Kim et al. (2019), the Future Decent Work Scale (FDWS) was designed to measure university students' perceptions of securing decent work in the future. The scale consists of five sub-dimensions: Physically and interpersonally safe working conditions, access to adequate healthcare, adequate compensation, free time and rest, and alignment of organizational values with family and social values. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

Keser & Buyukgoze-Kavas (2022) conducted the Turkish adaptation of the scale. The Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient was 0.86 for the total scale and ranged between 0.82 and 0.87 for the sub-dimensions. The Cronbach's alpha for the total scale in the current study was 0.89.

Gender-related career barriers scale

Developed by Simsek et al. (2021), the Gender-Related Career Barriers Scale measures individuals' perceptions of career barriers arising from gender inequalities. The scale

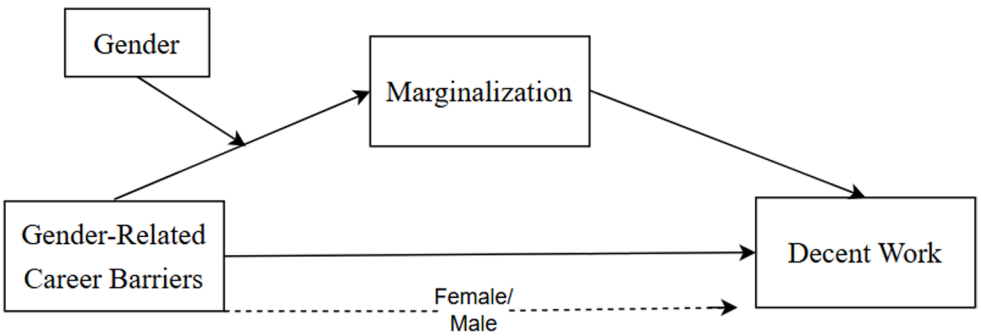

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework of the research

consists of two sub-dimensions: *Perceived Career Barriers* and *Gender Inequalities in Business Life*. The Perceived Career Barriers sub-dimension includes items reflecting participants' concerns that their gender may hinder their career progression (e.g., "My gender negatively affects my job search process", "I think I will experience problems in my professional life because of my gender"). The Gender Inequalities in Business Life sub-dimension captures perceptions of systemic discrimination in the workplace (e.g., "There are gender-based discriminations in professional life", "Even when a woman and a man do the same job, there is a wage gap between them"). Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (Disagree) to 4 (Agree). The Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient was 0.85 for the total scale and 0.82 for Perceived Career Barriers and 0.76 for Gender Inequalities in Business Life sub-dimensions. In addition, the Cronbach's alpha for the total scale in the current study was 0.85.

Lifetime experiences of marginalization scale

Developed by Duffy et al. (2019) and adapted by Kim et al. (2025a, b), the Lifetime Experiences of Marginalization Scale measures individuals' experiences of marginalization throughout their lives. The unidimensional scale consists of 3 items, rated using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient was 0.94 in the original study and 0.98 in the adaptation study. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha calculated from the data obtained in this study was 0.93.

Data analysis

The data were collected between March and May 2024. During classroom data collection, students were informed about the study, provided with informed consent, and only those who volunteered participated in the research. Within the scope of the study, 514 people were reached, and data were collected from them. The convenience sampling method was used. Before starting the analyses, the participants' responses to the three validity items included in the scale battery were examined. Data from participants who did not provide the expected response to the validity items (e.g., selecting "Strongly disagree" for this item) were removed from the dataset. Data from 93 participants who did not provide the expected response to all validity items were removed from the dataset. Of the 514 students invited to participate in the study, 421 provided valid responses, resulting in a net response rate of 81.9%.

Before the analyses, the data distribution was examined, and skewness and kurtosis were calculated for the scale scores. When the skewness and kurtosis values were examined (Table 1), it was observed that the values obtained were within ±1.5. Accordingly, it was decided that the data distribution was normal (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). In addition to the main analyses, variance inflation factor (VIF) values were calculated to test for potential multicollinearity between the independent variable (gender-related career barriers) and the mediator (marginalization). All VIF values were below the recommended threshold of 5, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern in the present study. Pearson's correlation, the independent-samples *t*-test, and Hayes' SPSS Process Macro Model 7 (Hayes, 2018) were used for the analyses. IBM SPSS 29 was used for the analyses.

Results

To examine the discriminant validity of the study variables, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted comparing a three-factor model (future decent work, gender-related career barriers, and marginalization) with a one-factor model. The three-factor model demonstrated good fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.31$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.056, SRMR = 0.041), whereas the one-factor model exhibited poor fit ($\chi^2/df = 6.47$, CFI = 0.71, TLI = 0.68, RMSEA = 0.138, SRMR = 0.102). These results support the distinctiveness of the key constructs employed in the current study. To assess the potential threat of common method bias (CMB), Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The results of an unrotated factor analysis revealed that the first factor accounted for 32.7% of the variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50% (Kock, 2020; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, common method bias was not considered a serious concern in this study. In addition to discriminant validity, convergent validity was examined

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations of the variables

Variables	1.	2.	3.	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Female Mean	Male Mean	t
1. FDWS	1.00			69.71	12.92	−0.19	−0.03	69.48	70.32	−0.59
2. GRCBS	−0.30***	1.00		26.69	7.35	0.15	−0.49	27.61	24.22	4.29***
3. LEMS	−0.24***	0.30***	1.00	8.60	4.77	0.70	−0.36	8.76	8.18	1.09
4. Gender	0.03	−0.21***	−0.05							

$N = 421$, ***$p < .001$, Gender was dummy coded (0 = male, 1 = female), FDWS: Future Decent Work Scale, GRCBS: Gender-Related Career Barriers Scale, LEMS: Lifetime Experiences of Marginalization Scale

through average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR). The AVE values were 0.68 for the Gender-Related Career Barriers Scale (GRBCS), 0.83 for the Future Decent Work Scale (FDWS), and 0.73 for the Lifetime Experiences of Marginalization Scale (LEMS). The CR values were 0.88 for GRBCS, 0.91 for FDWS, and 0.83 for LEMS. Each construct demonstrated AVE values above the recommended 0.50 threshold and CR values exceeding 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), providing strong evidence for convergent validity across all measures. Descriptive statistics for the study variables are given in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, females' gender-related career barrier scores are significantly higher than those of males ($t(419)=4.29$, $p<.001$). Participants' future decent work ($t_{(419)}=-0.59$, $p>.05$) and marginalization ($t_{(419)}=1.09$, $p>.05$) scores do not differ significantly according to gender. So, H4 and H5 were rejected, and H6 was accepted. Accordingly, gender is not a significant variable in determining future decent work and marginalization. When the correlation findings are examined, it is seen that future decent work has negative and significant relationships with gender-related career barriers and marginalization. In addition, there is a positive and significant relationship between gender-related career barriers and marginalization.

The results of the moderated mediation analysis are presented in Fig. 2.

Analysis results showed that the mediation effect was not significantly moderated by gender. The GRCBS×Gender interaction term was not significant (β = 0.0214, 95% CI = [−0.1226; 0.1654]) and the index of moderated mediation was not significant (β = −0.0093, 95% CI= [−0.0927, 0.0621]), indicating that gender did not moderate the indirect effect of gender-related career barriers on future decent work via marginalization. So, H3 was rejected. These results suggest that gender does not moderate the mediation model. In other words, the negative indirect effect of gender-related career barriers on future decent work through marginalization was similar for both male and female students. Regardless of gender, students who perceived more career barriers due to their gender also tended to feel more marginalized, which in turn reduced their expectations of achieving decent work. Thus, the mediating mechanism of marginalization appears to operate consistently across genders.

The indirect effect of gender-related career barriers on future decent work through marginalization was significant for both males (β = −0.0841, 95% CI = [−0.1503, −0.0260]) and females (β = −0.0934, 95% CI = [−0.2017, −0.0187]). These findings indicate that marginalization plays a significant mediating role for both male and female students. So, H2 was accepted. Specifically, higher perceptions of gender-related career barriers were associated with stronger feelings of marginalization, which in turn decreased expectations of future decent work. The similarity of the indirect effect across genders suggests that marginalization is a key explanatory mechanism linking career barriers and perceptions of decent work, independent of students' gender.

In addition, the direct effects of gender-related career barriers on future decent work (β = −0.4344, $p<.001$), on marginalization (β = 0.17, $p<.05$), and on future decent work (β = −0.4343, $p=.001$) were significant. So, H1 was accepted. The direct paths in the model were also significant. Specifically, gender-related career barriers were negatively associated with future decent work, indicating that students who perceived stronger barriers reported lower expectations of achieving decent work. In addition, gender-related career barriers were positively associated with marginalization, suggesting that such barriers increase students' sense of being marginalized. Finally, marginalization was negatively

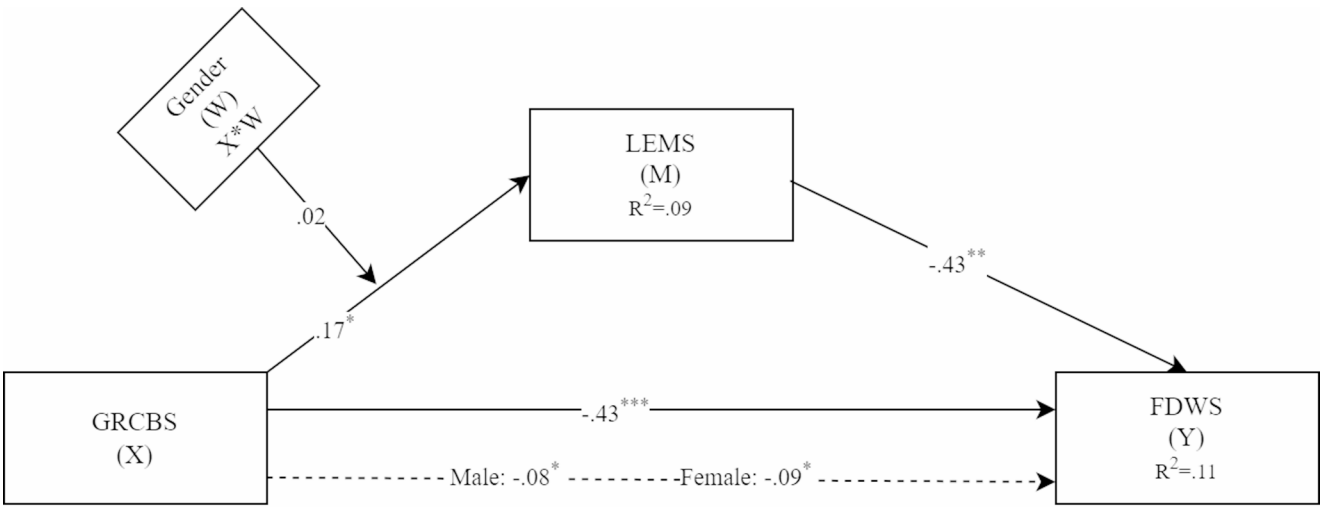

Fig. 2 Mediation model with marginalization, and moderated by gender. Note. $N=421$, *$p<.05$; **$p<.01$; ***$p<.001$. FDWS: Future Decent Work Scale, *GRCBS: Gender-Related Career Barriers Scale*, *LEMS: Lifetime Experiences of Marginalization Scale. Dash line shows the indirect effects*

associated with future decent work, indicating that higher levels of marginalization reduce students' confidence in securing decent work opportunities. Together, these findings highlight both the direct and indirect mechanisms through which gender-related career barriers shape students' work expectations. The findings of the moderated mediation analysis are presented in Table 2.

As a robustness check, we re-ran the moderated mediation analyses, including age and gender as control variables. The results remained consistent with the original model. Specifically, the direct effect of gender-related career barriers on future decent work (β = −0.41, p <.001), the effect of gender-related career barriers on marginalization (β = 0.16, p <.05), and the effect of marginalization on future decent work (β = −0.42, p =.001) all remained significant. The indirect effect via marginalization was also significant (95% CI [−0.14, −0.04]). Neither age (β = −0.03, p =.412) nor gender (β = 0.07, p =.187) was a significant predictor in the model. These results suggest that the main results are robust to the inclusion of control variables.

Discussion

This study examined the contextual antecedents of university students' perception of decent work within the framework of the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) and the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). The indirect effect of gender-related career barriers on future decent work through marginalization is significant for both men and women. These contextual variables explain 11% of decent work. On the other hand, the mediating effect is not significantly moderated by gender. All of these findings contribute significantly to the examination of the antecedents of university students' perceptions of decent work, who are still in the career-structuring process.

The first research result confirmed that perceptions of gender barriers in careers have a direct negative impact on perceptions of decent work. So H1 was accepted. This situation can be explained by the fact that individuals with a higher perception of career barriers tend to have lower expectations and interest in that field, ultimately affecting their perception of decent work. This study examines decent work by integrating SCCT and PWT, proposing an original framework for understanding the relationship between gender and career outcomes. PWT and SCCT suggest that gender and gender roles may negatively impact career outcomes. (Lent et al., 2001; Duffy et al., 2016a, b). It adopts a different theoretical approach from many studies examining decent work (Kim et al., 2022; Yazan et al., 2025). Some PWT-based (Wang et al., 2024) and SCCT-based (Inda et al., 2013) studies have found no significant difference in career outcomes by gender. For example, a recent study of university students found that perceptions of decent work did not differ by gender. Researchers found this to be contrary to their expectations and suggested that one reason may be perceptions of gender roles (Kul et al., 2025). For example, men who take on the responsibility of providing for their families may reinforce traditional gender roles and the barriers these roles create. On the other hand, young women who improve their education and gain access to better job opportunities can change perceptions of gender barriers (Enneli & Enneli, 2017). This situation can affect perceptions of decent work among women and men who face different career barriers. A similarly longitudinal study has indicated that although second-generation immigrant children make gender-related career choices, girls strive to overcome barriers stemming from these perceptions. This situation may positively influence girls' targeting of male-dominated and high-status occupations and their attainment of these goals (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005). This situation may explain the importance of examining the individual's perspective and acceptance of this perception, rather than associating decent work solely with women and men as a highly significant career outcome (Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007; Simsek et al., 2021). In other words, this situation may underscore the need to examine the impact of perceived gender-related career barriers on decent work, beyond gender.

In this context, a study explains that traditional gender norms can prevent women from entering male-dominated professions. This can also be a significant obstacle to university students' perceptions of decent work (Morales & Marcén, 2024). Alcázar and colleagues (2024) indicate that some barriers to decent work are related to gender stereotypes. However, this issue is addressed only in the context of women. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that men also perceive these career barriers, albeit to a lesser extent (García-González et al., 2019; Roth & Coleman, 2008). For example, the views of male pre-school teacher candidates from various universities in Turkey were examined in relation to gender. The research revealed that some participants in this profession faced various individual and societal

Table 2 The direct and indirect effects of GRCBS on FDWS

	β	SE	95%CI
Direct effect			
GRCBS → LEMS	0.17*	0.10	[0.02, 0.36]
LEMS → FDWS	−0.43**	0.13	[−0.69, −0.18]
GRCBS → FDWS	−0.43***	0.09	[−0.60, −0.27]
Indirect effect			
GRCBS → FDWS (Male)	−0.08	0.03	[−0.15, −0.03]
GRCBS → FDWS (Female)	−0.09	0.05	[−0.20, −0.19]

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; *CI: Confidence Interval; FDWS: Future Decent Work Scale, GRCBS: Gender-Related Career Barriers Scale, LEMS: Lifetime Experiences of Marginalization Scale*

challenges (Haskan-Avcı et al., 2019). This is because some employees and prospective employees experience gender barriers to career advancement more intensely, from both women's and men's perspectives. Some of these individuals struggle to manage their career processes and are unable to cope with these issues. For example, even girls who are interested in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) studies in their early years and are successful in these fields may perceive the possibility of graduating from these fields as lower over time (Stoet & Geary, 2018). This can be considered in terms of the fact that those who adopt traditional gender roles feel the perception of gender barriers to careers more intensely. If this situation is not resolved at an early age, it may affect the quality of work of individuals entering university and, furthermore, of employees. In light of these studies confirming the theoretical foundations of SCCT and PWT, university students' perceptions of decent work may be influenced by gender-related career barriers. Furthermore, reducing gender-related career barriers could increase perceptions of decent work.

Marginalization has a mediating role in the effect of gender-related career barriers on decent work. So H2 was accepted. Our results, which support the negative impact of marginality on decent work, are consistent with numerous studies in the PWT literature (Ayvaz & Karacan Özdemir, 2024; Lee et al., 2025). For example, Sen Baz's (2025) recent research confirms that the marginalization of university students is a meaningful predictor of decent work. Similarly, Masdonati et al. (2022) found that marginalization, which plays a contextual role, can influence perceptions of decent work. This situation can be explained by marginalised individuals' limited ability to connect with the business world and labour markets, and to make investments, ultimately leading to career development problems (Duffy et al., 2016a, b). However, what distinguishes this study from others is that it treats marginalization as a mediating variable, focusing on a structural factor beyond the contextual factors that influence it. This strengthens the theoretical framework. Numerous studies explain that women feel more marginalised in their working lives due to their gender and therefore struggle to advance to senior positions (Khan & Turuc, 2024). Despite workplace obstacles, numerous studies examine successful female managers (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Sen-Baz & Aslan, 2021). On the other hand, the existence of female employees who prefer male managers is also interesting. However, some women do not consider their manager's gender important, believing that managerial activities and character are more important (Tolay, 2020). So, if women are a more marginalised group, what affects their success as managers, or conversely, why do they not want female managers? Given that they are of the same gender, factors beyond marginalization may be influential. Indeed, a study by Lee and colleagues (2025) also shows that gender alone does not yield meaningful results regarding marginalization. This study attempted to answer these questions by explaining that individuals' perceptions of career barriers change and that this, in turn, affects decent work through marginalization.

In a study of migrants who identified as belonging to a marginalised group in terms of PWT (Duffy et al., 2016a, b), it was found that the host country's stance in favour of gender equality increased migrants' participation in male-dominated professions in their new country (Morales & Marcén, 2024). This finding confirms that individuals' perceptions of marginality may be influenced not only by gender but also by a more multidimensional, sociocultural structure. Therefore, when examining decent work in line with the PWT model (Duffy et al., 2016a, b), it is important to look beyond individuals' gender. In this context, the present study provides a broader perspective on gender-related career barriers within the SCCT's category of contextual barriers (Lent et al., 2002) and on PWT. On the other hand, individuals distance themselves from the relevant field as they are increasingly exposed to and internalise societal gender perceptions stemming from career barriers (Cadaret et al., 2017). Indeed, Logel et al. (2009) indicate that female employees in the engineering field show that sexist male discourse is perceived as a stereotype threat, which distances them from the relevant academic field. Therefore, it can be argued that perceptions of marginalization are a key factor in the relationship between decent work and exposure to gender-related barriers. People who receive education with such a perception are more likely to accept lower wages and face greater job insecurity. This makes those exposed to these conditions more vulnerable to marginalization (ILO, 2009). It is suggested that women with a feminine gender role attitude may be more inclined to accept such perceptions of marginalization (Velez et al., 2018). In these cases, viewing the feminine attitude as a facilitator may be linked to avoiding the pursuit of rights, objecting to problems, or struggling against them. Although such an attitude may seem functional in the short term, it may hinder the development of a more accepting attitude and instead foster resilience against gender-related social pressures. This could ultimately negatively impact decent work because young people with low expectations of decent work, who believe this is primarily due to contextual factors, give up on striving for their future (Barford et al., 2021). Given the theoretical foundations of SCCT and PWT, these studies support the notion that increased gender-related career barriers among university students may lead to greater marginalization. This, in turn, may ultimately diminish perceptions of decent work.

The study's other result is that the gender of university students who have not yet started their professional careers

does not moderate the relationship between perceptions of gender barriers to career and marginalization. H3 not accepted. In other words, this result indicates that the impact of perceived gender-related career barriers on marginalization is equivalent across genders. Although gender is an important variable from various theoretical perspectives, its moderator effect in this study is not significant. In the literature, it has been noted that gender role orientation towards femininity or masculinity has a stronger predictive effect than biological sex in explaining the work attitudes and behaviours of some employees (Ngo et al., 2014; Morales & Marcén, 2024). These pressures affect many areas of life, including career choices and expectations. Given the theoretical framework on gender's influence, empirical studies are needed to examine its role in perceived career barriers and marginalization.

The final results of the study reveal that women perceive more barriers in relation to gender. So H6 was accepted. This situation can also be explained by Miyake et al.'s (2010) study. They focused on the impact of socio-psychological factors rather than teaching methods aimed at reducing gender achievement gaps in STEM fields. In this study, a psychological intervention programme, values affirmation, was implemented for 15 weeks among students. As a result of the study, it was observed that the average physics scores of women who believed that men were more successful than women in physics and who internalised this belief increased significantly by the end of the intervention. This confirms that sexist attitudes of individuals are an important factor that can affect their learning experiences and thus their career choices and even their career expectations (Ramaci et al., 2017). In a study conducted in this context, the effect of perceived internalised sexism on the acceptance of external influence among individuals who grew up exposed to traditional gender roles is explained (Bozkur & Sahin, 2022). This situation confirms the research findings, suggesting that individuals who internalise and accept sexism regardless of their own gender may experience an altered perception of marginality and career attitudes.

On the other hand, marginalization and decent work do not differ significantly by gender. Therefore, H4 and H5 were rejected. A study related to our findings, on the marginalization of teachers in rural areas of China, finds that this marginalization does not differ by gender (Wang & Chang, 2025). Furthermore, Kul et al. (2025) reported that perceptions of decent work do not differ by gender among university students. A similar finding among engineering students indicates that women report lower self-efficacy and career interest than men. However, students' career outcome expectations do not differ significantly by gender (Inda et al., 2013). These outcome expectations play a role similar to individuals' perceptions of future decent work. On the other hand, Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) report that women participating in their study perceived more gender-related career barriers, whereas women and men reported similar levels of confidence in their ability to cope with and manage these barriers. Although our findings show that women perceive more barriers, the fact that marginalization and decent work are not significant in terms of gender can be explained by women's developed coping skills. However, studies examining decent work in a gendered context could deepen research by examining perceptions of gender-related differentiation among individuals marginalised based on gender. Considering all these, other factors that may have influenced male or female individuals to feel more marginalised may have suppressed this relationship, which may be due to gender. Given the limited number of studies focusing on such protective factors, it may be advisable to prioritize them in future research.

Limitations and suggestions

This study was conducted only among students continuing their university education, which may limit its applicability beyond this group. In future studies, in addition to students, the perceptions of decent work among individuals across different business lines and positions can be examined and compared. Moreover, by examining women's perceptions of marginality in high positions, the effect of gender role perception on the positions they obtain can be examined. This is because it is important to see female role models in all sectors of work in order to shape the preferences of future generations. Designed as a cross-sectional study, this research is limited in its ability to explain cause-and-effect relationships. Despite these results, the possibility of conceptual endogeneity cannot be entirely excluded. It is plausible that marginalization may also influence individuals' perceptions of career barriers, or that a common underlying factor, such as gender, may affect both constructs. Future longitudinal or experimental studies are recommended to better address the causal direction of these relationships. Another limitation of the present study is the lack of a broader set of control variables. Although age and gender were statistically controlled, and the results remained consistent, other potentially relevant factors, such as socioeconomic status, class level, or employment status, were not available in the dataset. Future studies should incorporate these variables to reduce the influence of confounding factors further and strengthen the internal validity of the findings. Finally, the study examined the effects of gender-related career barriers, which provide a unique perspective on decent work. However, there may also be coping mechanisms that could further highlight the impact of this structure on the marginalization of individuals. Therefore, future research could further strengthen the theoretical framework by including these coping skills.

Conclusion

In the study, the mediating role of marginalization and the moderating role of gender in the relationship between university students' perception of gender-related career barriers and decent work were examined. The findings revealed a significant mediating effect of marginalization, whereas the moderating role of gender was not supported.

Based on these findings, it can be said that an increase in students' perceptions of gender barriers in their careers may lead to internalizing the belief that they will have less respectable jobs. On the other hand, it can be said that perceiving more gender barriers to careers may affect marginalization, which may ultimately negatively affect decent work. Moreover, this is confirmed regardless of individuals' gender. In other words, being a woman or a man is not directly significant in this relationship. This situation indicates that people might feel more marginalized regardless of their gender, which could ultimately negatively affect decent work.

Finally, although gender-related barriers to career differed significantly by gender, marginalization and perceptions of decent work did not. Although there is a gender difference in terms of gender perception of career, it is seen that gender will not be an effective factor in marginalization and decent work, which are important career outcomes. All findings provide a specific framework for the antecedents of decent work, which is among the SDGs and contributes significantly to societal development within the scope of PWT and SCCT theory.

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Declarations

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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