



Sustainable Human Resource Management under Capitalism: A Marxist Critique of Labour Control, Green Capitalism, and Generation Z Work Ethos

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Abstract: Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) has increasingly been positioned as an organizational approach for integrating environmental responsibility, employee well-being, and long-term organizational sustainability, yet its relationship with the structural dynamics of capitalist labour remains insufficiently examined. This conceptual study critically examines how Sustainable HRM operates within the capital–labour relationship, how sustainability-oriented leadership mediates labour control, and how Generation Z's emerging work ethos can be understood in relation to contemporary capitalist labour conditions. Drawing upon Marxist political economy, labour-process theory, social reproduction theory, and ecological perspectives, the study employs critical conceptual analysis to examine the contradictory relationships among sustainability, accumulation, managerial control, alienation, ecological responsibility, and worker resistance. The analysis demonstrates that Sustainable HRM can generate meaningful environmental and social outcomes while simultaneously reproducing existing labour relations when sustainability responsibilities are translated into individualized behavioural expectations, performance indicators, moral obligations, and digitally mediated forms of control. Sustainability-oriented leadership occupies a mediating position by translating organizational sustainability objectives into workplace expectations while potentially expanding employee participation or managerial surveillance. Generation Z's preferences for financial security, flexibility, meaningful work, sustainability, and work-life balance are interpreted as historically situated responses to contemporary employment insecurity and changing labour conditions rather than merely generational characteristics. The study proposes the Marxist Sustainable Labour Process Framework (MSLPF), comprising accumulation, labour control, alienation, ecological contradiction, and collective resistance, as a framework for advancing critical Sustainable HRM research.

Keywords: Sustainable Human Resource Management, Capital–Labour Relations, Labour Control, Generation Z, Marxist Labour Process

INTRODUCTION

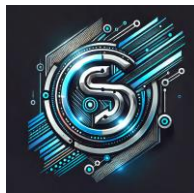
Sustainability has become an increasingly influential organizing principle in contemporary organizations as environmental degradation, employee well-being, social responsibility, and economic resilience increasingly shape debates concerning the future of work and organizational management. Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) has consequently developed as an important field that seeks to integrate environmental, social, and economic considerations into human resource policies and practices. The literature positions Sustainable



HRM within a broader understanding of organizational sustainability in which human resource practices are connected with employee well-being, environmental performance, stakeholder interests, organizational resilience, and long-term organizational viability (Westerman et al., 2020; Vickneswaran, 2025). This development has expanded the scope of HRM beyond conventional concerns with productivity and employee performance toward questions concerning how organizations can maintain human and ecological resources while continuing to operate under changing economic conditions.

The expansion of Sustainable HRM also creates a critical theoretical problem concerning the social relations within which sustainability practices are implemented, particularly because organizational sustainability does not automatically transform the unequal distribution of power between employers and employees. Conventional approaches tend to emphasize the potential alignment between organizational performance, employee well-being, and environmental responsibility, while critical HRM scholarship draws attention to the contradictory interests embedded within employment relations and the mechanisms through which labour is organized and controlled (Omidi et al., 2023). This tension is particularly relevant because sustainability initiatives may improve environmental outcomes while simultaneously introducing new expectations concerning employee behaviour, performance, values, and organizational commitment. The central question is therefore not simply whether organizations become more sustainable, but for whom sustainability is produced and under what relations of production it is organized.

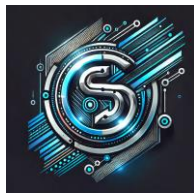
A Marxist political-economy perspective provides an analytical foundation for examining these contradictions because labour under capitalism is organized through the commodification of labour-power and the separation between workers and the means of production. Marx's analysis conceptualizes labour-power as a commodity that workers sell in order to obtain the means of subsistence, while capital purchases labour-power because its utilization in production can generate value beyond the value represented by wages (Marx, 1975, 1990). The employment relationship consequently contains a structural contradiction between the worker's dependence upon wages and the organization's imperative to organize labour for value creation and accumulation. Labour is therefore not merely an input that can be managed through technically



efficient HR practices; it is embedded within relations of ownership, control, exploitation, cooperation, and resistance. Such an approach provides an alternative basis for understanding Sustainable HRM as a process situated within the organization of capitalist production rather than as a neutral managerial instrument.

Sustainable HRM becomes particularly significant from this perspective because environmental and social objectives are increasingly translated into specific practices through which employee behaviour and performance are organized. Green recruitment, sustainability-oriented training, employee participation, green performance management, and environmentally responsible workplace practices can encourage employees to contribute to organizational sustainability, yet these practices can also extend managerial expectations into areas previously regarded as personal behaviour and values (Westerman et al., 2020; Vickneswaran, 2025). The labour-process perspective developed within critical HRM is useful for interpreting this contradiction because managerial practices are understood in relation to control, worker autonomy, solidarity, resistance, and the organization of productive activity (Omidi et al., 2023). Sustainability can therefore become both a mechanism for addressing genuine ecological problems and a new domain through which organizational expectations are incorporated into the labour process.

The ecological dimension of this problem requires attention because environmental sustainability cannot be fully separated from the organization of production, labour, technology, and resource use, particularly when ecological consequences are generated through collective production systems rather than isolated individual behaviour. Ecological Marxist scholarship conceptualizes the relationship between capitalism and nature through the disruption of the material metabolism between society and the natural environment, while contemporary labour-process research increasingly connects ecological crisis with the organization of work and production (Schaupp, 2024). Snikersproge (2024) similarly demonstrates that environmentally friendly practices can encounter structural difficulties in becoming mainstream, suggesting that individual environmental responsibility alone cannot explain the success or failure of ecological transformation. Sustainable HRM consequently requires examination not only of whether workers



behave more sustainably, but also of whether the organization of production changes the distribution of responsibility, authority, resources, and ecological consequences.

Generation Z provides an especially relevant context for extending this critical analysis because younger workers are entering labour markets shaped by digitalization, precarious employment, changing career structures, technological transformation, and increasing uncertainty concerning employment and future occupations. Research on Generation Z identifies financial security, meaningful work, flexibility, professional development, recognition, sustainability, and work-life balance among recurring work-related concerns, suggesting that contemporary younger workers evaluate employment through a combination of material and non-material considerations (Spada et al., 2024). Research concerning Generation Z also indicates that economic and organizational factors influence workplace decisions, challenging explanations that attribute younger workers' employment behaviour exclusively to generational personality or preference (Ridwan et al., 2025). A Marxist interpretation therefore asks how contemporary labour-market conditions produce the expectations commonly associated with Gen Z rather than assuming that those expectations originate from generation itself.

The relationship between Generation Z and contemporary capitalism becomes more visible when apparently contradictory work expectations are considered alongside material employment conditions that simultaneously encourage flexibility, security, meaningfulness, and continued dependence upon wage labour. Financial insecurity can constrain workers' capacity to reject undesirable employment conditions, while flexible work may provide greater autonomy in some circumstances and extend managerial access to workers in others. The search for meaningful employment can represent dissatisfaction with alienated work, while organizational actors may also incorporate purpose, identity, and sustainability into employer branding and managerial strategies. Such contradictions are consistent with labour-process scholarship emphasizing that managerial control changes in response to worker expectations and resistance rather than remaining fixed across historical periods (Omidi et al., 2023). Gen Z's work ethos can therefore be interpreted as a historically situated response to changing conditions of capitalist employment rather than as a stable set of generational characteristics.



The convergence of Sustainable HRM, labour control, ecological crisis, leadership, and Generation Z reveals a theoretical gap concerning how sustainability practices reshape the capital–labour relationship and how younger workers experience and respond to these transformations. Existing Sustainable HRM scholarship provides substantial attention to environmental responsibility, employee engagement, organizational sustainability, and stakeholder interests, while labour-process research provides a critical framework for understanding control, resistance, and workplace power (Westerman et al., 2020; Omid et al., 2023). Bringing these perspectives together allows sustainability-oriented leadership to be examined as a mediating organizational function through which broader accumulation requirements are translated into everyday expectations concerning employee behaviour, performance, responsibility, and participation. The analysis also makes it possible to examine whether Generation Z's demands for meaningful, flexible, secure, and sustainable employment challenge existing labour relations or become incorporated into new forms of managerial organization.

Against this theoretical background, this article develops a critical conceptual interpretation of Sustainable HRM through a Marxist political-economy and labour-process perspective, with particular attention to the relationship between sustainability, leadership, labour control, and Generation Z work ethos. The analysis is guided by three interconnected research questions: (1) How does Sustainable HRM operate within the capital–labour relationship? (2) How does sustainability-oriented leadership mediate labour control? and (3) How can Generation Z's emerging work ethos be understood in relation to contemporary capitalist labour conditions? Addressing these questions, the article develops the Marxist Sustainable Labour Process Framework (MSLPF) around five interconnected dimensions—accumulation, labour control, alienation, ecological contradiction, and collective resistance—which are intended to extend Sustainable HRM analysis from the management of environmentally responsible employee behaviour toward the broader social organization of labour and production.

METHOD

Research Design

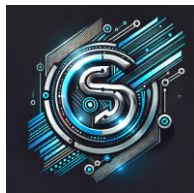


This study employed a critical conceptual analysis to reinterpret Sustainable Human Resource Management through Marxist political economy and labour-process theory, with the analytical purpose of examining how sustainability practices are embedded within relations of work, power, control, and capitalist production. A conceptual design was appropriate because the study did not seek to estimate statistical relationships or test predetermined causal hypotheses, but rather to develop a theoretically grounded explanation of contradictions that conventional Sustainable HRM research may not fully capture. The approach follows the critical orientation of labour-process scholarship, which examines organizational practices through their relationships with managerial control, worker autonomy, resistance, and the broader organization of production (Omidi et al., 2023).

The analytical material consisted of two interconnected bodies of literature that were examined through theoretical synthesis rather than treated as independent empirical datasets. The first body comprised Marxist political-economy and labour-process scholarship concerning labour-power, surplus value, alienation, managerial control, capitalist accumulation, and worker resistance, while the second comprised contemporary Sustainable HRM scholarship concerning green HRM, employee sustainability, organizational sustainability, and the changing relationship between employees and organizational performance (Braverman, 1974; Liang & Li, 2025). This combination enabled the study to examine Sustainable HRM not simply as a collection of managerial practices but as a set of organizational practices situated within historically specific relations of production.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework was constructed by connecting core Marxist concepts with the principal dimensions of Sustainable HRM identified in the literature, thereby creating an interpretive architecture capable of examining both the functional and contradictory consequences of sustainability-oriented employment practices. Marx's concepts of labour-power, surplus value, alienation, and accumulation provided the foundational explanation of the capital-labour relationship, while labour-process theory provided the analytical basis for examining how managerial systems organize, monitor, and transform work (Marx, 1990; Braverman, 1974).



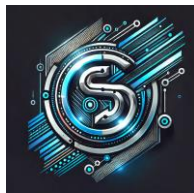
The framework subsequently incorporated ecological dimensions because the organization of labour cannot be analytically separated from the material conditions of production and ecological reproduction. Foster's (1999) concept of metabolic rift was therefore used to interpret the relationship between capitalist production, labour, and environmental degradation, allowing sustainability practices to be examined beyond individualized employee behaviour. The resulting analytical framework consisted of five interconnected dimensions: accumulation, labour control, alienation, ecological contradiction, and collective resistance.

Analytical Procedure

The conceptual analysis proceeded through an iterative process in which relevant Sustainable HRM practices were interpreted through the Marxist concepts established within the analytical framework, allowing the study to identify tensions between organizational sustainability objectives and the underlying organization of labour. Green recruitment, sustainability training, green performance management, employee engagement, flexible work, and sustainability-oriented leadership were examined according to how they potentially redistribute responsibility, authority, control, and expectations within the workplace.

The analysis then compared the implications of these practices against three research questions concerning the capital–labour relationship, sustainability-oriented leadership and labour control, and Generation Z's emerging work ethos under contemporary capitalist labour conditions. Each research question was examined through the same conceptual dimensions to ensure analytical consistency across the study. The final stage involved synthesizing the recurring relationships into the Marxist Sustainable Labour Process Framework (MSLPF) and developing conceptual propositions that explain how Sustainable HRM may simultaneously reproduce and challenge existing labour relations.

This methodological orientation treats contradiction as an analytical object rather than as an analytical error, meaning that a sustainability practice may generate environmental or employee benefits while simultaneously extending managerial control or individualizing responsibility. Such an approach is consistent with critical labour-process analysis, which emphasizes that organizational practices acquire meaning from the social relations in which they are embedded (Omidi et al., 2023). The study therefore does not classify Sustainable HRM practices as inherently



positive or negative; it examines the conditions under which their implementation may contribute either to the reproduction of existing labour relations or to their potential transformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The conceptual analysis generated three interconnected findings that explain how Sustainable HRM operates within capitalist labour relations, how sustainability-oriented leadership mediates labour control, and how Generation Z's work ethos reflects contemporary transformations in employment. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate organizational phenomena, the analysis demonstrates that sustainability practices, leadership expectations, and Gen Z work orientations are connected through the organization of labour, the distribution of responsibility, and the changing mechanisms through which work is controlled. The findings consequently extend the discussion of Sustainable HRM from a predominantly managerial concern with environmental behaviour toward a broader analysis of accumulation, control, alienation, ecological contradiction, and worker resistance.

Sustainable HRM within the Capital–Labour Relationship

The analysis of Sustainable HRM within the capital–labour relationship demonstrates that sustainability practices are incorporated into organizational systems that continue to be shaped by competition, productivity requirements, organizational legitimacy, and the search for economic value. Contemporary green HRM practices include environmental recruitment, green training, sustainability-oriented performance evaluation, employee engagement, environmental competencies, and organizational sustainability initiatives, with recent evidence indicating growing integration of these practices across organizational contexts (Efranto et al., 2024). Sustainable HRM therefore possesses an important practical capacity to influence employee behaviour and organizational sustainability, while its implementation remains embedded within organizational structures that determine how labour is utilized and rewarded.

The central analytical finding is that sustainability does not automatically transform the underlying relationship between capital and labour because organizations can incorporate environmental objectives into existing managerial systems without fundamentally changing ownership, decision-making authority, or the organization of production. Research synthesizing

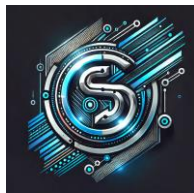


Sustainable HRM practices demonstrates that sustainability-oriented HRM can contribute to corporate sustainability through employee involvement, green behaviour, and organizational practices, yet the existence of positive sustainability outcomes does not by itself establish that workers possess greater control over the labour process (Christina et al., 2025). The critical issue therefore concerns the institutional location of sustainability: environmental responsibility can become integrated into the existing employment relationship while leaving the distribution of organizational power relatively unchanged.

The economic significance of sustainability helps explain why environmental HRM practices can expand rapidly even within organizations that remain strongly oriented toward accumulation and competitiveness, because sustainability can support organizational reputation, resource efficiency, employee attraction, innovation, legitimacy, and market positioning. Haeruddin et al. (2023) demonstrate how Green HRM can be implemented as part of organizational sustainability initiatives, particularly through practices that integrate environmental considerations into human resource management. Such developments do not invalidate the environmental value of these practices, yet they indicate that sustainability can become compatible with organizational economic objectives rather than necessarily constituting a challenge to them.

The analysis consequently identifies a distinction between greening labour and transforming labour relations, because the former changes employee behaviour, competencies, and environmental performance while the latter changes the distribution of authority over working time, production, technology, investment, and ecological decision-making. This distinction is important because an organization may successfully create environmentally conscious employees while retaining centralized control over production decisions and organizational resources. Sustainable HRM can therefore improve the ecological efficiency of existing production without necessarily changing the social relations through which production is organized.

The Indonesian and Global South context provides an especially important illustration of this contradiction because sustainability initiatives can coexist with unequal economic structures, insecure employment, and environmental conflicts that extend beyond the boundaries of individual organizations. Fadillah and Suryadi (2024) argue that Green HRM discourse can depoliticize ecological problems when structural environmental contradictions are translated into programmes



focused primarily on individual employee behaviour. Their argument does not require the conclusion that green HRM is environmentally ineffective; rather, it indicates that incremental improvements in employee behaviour can coexist with structural problems located in production systems, supply chains, investment decisions, and broader economic relations.

The resulting interpretation of Sustainable HRM is therefore neither a rejection of sustainability nor an assumption that organizational sustainability is automatically emancipatory, because the same HR practice can generate environmental improvements while also strengthening organizational expectations concerning employee behaviour and performance. The relevant analytical question becomes whether sustainability expands worker control alongside responsibility or whether responsibility is transferred downward while decision-making remains concentrated upward. This relationship produces the following conceptual proposition:

Proposition 1. Sustainable HRM remains structurally embedded within capitalist accumulation when sustainability practices are implemented through organizational systems that preserve existing distributions of ownership, decision-making authority, and control over production.

Sustainability-Oriented Leadership as a Mediator of Labour Control

The analysis of sustainability-oriented leadership demonstrates that leadership functions as an important organizational mechanism through which broad sustainability objectives are translated into concrete expectations concerning employee conduct, performance, participation, and organizational commitment. Leadership therefore occupies an intermediary position because managers are required to communicate organizational objectives to employees while simultaneously responding to employee expectations, workplace tensions, resistance, and demands for more meaningful and sustainable work. The role of leadership becomes particularly significant when sustainability is transformed from a broad organizational principle into specific behavioural and performance expectations.

The findings indicate that sustainability-oriented leadership can operate through moralization, whereby organizational requirements are presented not merely as managerial instructions but as ethical responsibilities that responsible employees are expected to internalize. Ahmad (2024) conceptualizes this process as the moral camouflage of Green HRM, showing how



sustainability discourse can legitimize managerial control by reframing organizational expectations as moral obligations. Within this process, employees may be encouraged to view environmental responsibility, organizational commitment, flexibility, and additional discretionary effort as indicators of being a responsible or values-driven employee.

The moralization of sustainability creates a distinctive form of labour control because employees may regulate themselves even when direct supervision is limited, particularly when organizational sustainability becomes connected with personal identity, ethical purpose, and professional self-conception. The organizational demand consequently becomes partially internalized, allowing control to operate through values, attitudes, and self-evaluation rather than solely through direct supervision. Such a process is especially relevant in contemporary organizations where employees are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only technical competence but also alignment with organizational values.

Digitalization creates another layer of sustainability-oriented labour control because algorithmic HRM can expand organizational capacity to monitor, evaluate, classify, and influence employee behaviour through data-driven systems. Kamasak et al. (2024) characterize algorithmic HRM as a regime involving surveillance, legitimacy, and worker resistance, demonstrating that digital technologies can reorganize managerial authority while simultaneously creating new possibilities for workers to contest or negotiate organizational control. Within Sustainable HRM, similar mechanisms may be used to monitor environmental performance, productivity, attendance, engagement, resource consumption, and other behavioural indicators.

The relationship between sustainability and control becomes especially visible when organizations combine environmental performance requirements with digital measurement systems, because sustainability can introduce additional dimensions through which employees become observable and evaluable. Employees may previously have been evaluated mainly according to productivity, quality, attendance, or financial outcomes, while sustainability-oriented systems can also assess environmental behaviour, green competencies, resource use, innovation, and participation in organizational sustainability programmes.

The analysis therefore identifies a contradiction between participation and control, because sustainability initiatives frequently encourage employee involvement while simultaneously



expanding the range of behaviours subject to organizational evaluation. Employee participation can contribute to environmental innovation and organizational learning, yet participation does not necessarily change who possesses authority over production. The crucial distinction concerns whether workers merely provide information and suggestions or whether they possess meaningful influence over organizational decisions.

The findings support the following conceptual proposition:

Proposition 2. Sustainability-oriented leadership can expand labour control when environmental and social responsibilities are translated into moral expectations, performance indicators, behavioural monitoring, and digitally mediated evaluation.

The possibility of transformation remains present when leadership connects sustainability with meaningful worker participation and decision-making authority, because sustainability becomes structurally significant when employees can influence the conditions under which sustainability objectives are implemented. Such an approach changes the role of leadership from merely communicating sustainability expectations toward facilitating dialogue concerning working conditions, technological change, environmental investment, workload, and organizational decision-making.

The analysis consequently distinguishes between employee voice and worker power, because employees may participate in sustainability committees or propose environmental improvements without possessing authority over production targets, resource allocation, investment, outsourcing, technology, or employment security. Sustainable HRM becomes more transformative when employee participation affects decisions that determine the organization of labour rather than remaining limited to consultative mechanisms.

Generation Z Work Ethos under Contemporary Capitalist Labour Conditions

The analysis of Generation Z indicates that its emerging work ethos should be interpreted within the material and institutional conditions surrounding contemporary employment rather than treated exclusively as a fixed set of generational personality characteristics. Financial insecurity, changing career structures, digital work, work-life boundaries, sustainability concerns, and expectations concerning meaning and flexibility interact with broader changes in employment,



making Gen Z an analytically important group through which transformations in the labour process can be observed.

Financial security represents a particularly important dimension because economic insecurity affects the practical choices available to workers when they encounter undesirable employment conditions. Deloitte's (2025) survey reports that money, meaning, and well-being remain interconnected concerns among younger workers, with financial insecurity continuing to shape perceptions of work and personal well-being. From the perspective of the present framework, financial insecurity is not only an individual psychological concern because limited economic reserves can reduce the ability of workers to reject employment arrangements that they consider unsustainable.

The relationship between financial dependence and worker resistance produces an important contradiction because employees may simultaneously criticize excessive workloads, weak work-life boundaries, or organizational practices while remaining dependent upon wages for housing, consumption, social reproduction, and personal security. This contradiction helps explain why dissatisfaction does not automatically lead to withdrawal from employment. Individual workers may recognize problematic conditions but possess limited practical capacity to leave or collectively transform them.

The analysis consequently proposes:

Proposition 3. Greater economic insecurity among Generation Z workers can strengthen dependence upon wage labour and constrain individual capacity to resist employment conditions perceived as unsustainable.

The work ethos of Generation Z also reflects changing expectations concerning flexibility because younger workers increasingly encounter employment arrangements that are digitally mediated, spatially dispersed, and less clearly separated from everyday life. Flexibility can provide workers with greater control over when and where work occurs, yet the same technological infrastructure can permit organizations to extend communication, monitoring, and work demands beyond conventional working hours.

This contradiction becomes particularly important when flexible work is treated as an organizational benefit without examining who controls the boundaries of flexibility, because



worker-controlled flexibility can increase autonomy while organization-controlled flexibility can produce continuous availability. The distinction therefore concerns whether flexibility gives workers greater control over labour-time or enables organizations to obtain labour across previously protected temporal and spatial boundaries.

The analysis supports the following proposition:

Proposition 4. Flexible work can simultaneously expand worker autonomy and intensify managerial control depending on whether employees or organizations exercise substantive control over the boundaries of working time.

The concern with meaningful work represents another dimension of Gen Z's emerging work ethos because younger employees may seek employment that provides purpose, development, recognition, social contribution, and alignment with personal values. The source analysis interprets this search through the concept of alienation, suggesting that the desire for meaningful work can express dissatisfaction with employment arrangements in which workers experience limited control over the purposes and organization of their labour.

Meaningfulness can also become incorporated into organizational management when employers use purpose, sustainability, identity, and values to strengthen employee commitment without substantially altering working conditions. Such incorporation does not mean that organizational purpose is inherently manipulative; the analytical issue concerns whether meaningfulness produces greater worker autonomy or primarily functions as an additional mechanism for securing commitment and discretionary effort.

The work ethos of Gen Z can therefore be conceptualized as a form of contradictory consciousness, because younger workers may simultaneously embrace entrepreneurial self-development while rejecting excessive work intensity, seek autonomy while accepting precarious employment, demand meaningful work while depending on wages, and value sustainability while operating within organizations whose production systems may remain environmentally contradictory. This interpretation is supported by research concerning the changing nature of employment expectations and the material pressures influencing younger workers' relationship with organizations.



The analysis also identifies quiet quitting as a potentially useful example of everyday negotiation over labour boundaries, particularly when workers refuse unpaid intensification, excessive availability, or expectations extending beyond the formal employment relationship. Azizah et al. (2025) connect quiet-quitting tendencies among Generation Z in Indonesia with toxic workplaces and job insecurity, providing an empirical context for understanding withdrawal behaviours as responses to employment conditions rather than automatically interpreting them as evidence of weak work commitment.

The Marxist interpretation does not imply that all forms of quiet quitting are inherently emancipatory because individual withdrawal may remain isolated and may leave ownership structures and organizational decision-making unchanged. The significance lies instead in recognizing that apparently individual behaviours can express tensions concerning the commodification of labour-time, organizational expectations, work intensity, and the boundaries of employment.

The findings therefore establish the following proposition:

Proposition 5. Generation Z's emerging work ethos can be understood partly as a historically situated response to contemporary contradictions involving economic insecurity, flexibility, meaningfulness, digitalization, and changing expectations concerning the organization of labour.

Ecological Sustainability, Social Reproduction, and the Gen Z Labour Process

The ecological dimension of Sustainable HRM becomes more analytically significant when environmental responsibility is connected with the conditions through which labour-power is reproduced, because sustainable employment requires more than environmentally responsible workplace behaviour and depends upon housing, health, care, rest, family life, community infrastructure, and adequate material security. Bhattacharya (2017) conceptualizes social reproduction as a fundamental component of the organization of capitalist society, while Fraser (2022) extends the argument by demonstrating how capitalist accumulation can place pressure upon care, social reproduction, democracy, and ecological conditions.

This perspective changes the meaning of employee sustainability because workers cannot be considered sustainable merely because they remain productive within the workplace, particularly



when working conditions undermine the broader social conditions necessary for maintaining human life and labour-power. Long working hours, insecure employment, inadequate wages, excessive digital availability, and unstable working arrangements can transfer the costs of labour reproduction from organizations to workers, households, and communities.

The analysis therefore connects Gen Z's demand for work-life balance with a broader question concerning who bears the cost of reproducing labour-power, because flexibility without adequate wages, employment security, workload protection, and social support may simply relocate organizational pressures into workers' private lives. Digital work can make this process less visible because employees may appear to have greater autonomy while remaining continuously accessible to organizational demands.

Ecological sustainability also needs to be understood through the wider contradiction between environmental responsibility and the organization of production, because environmentally efficient employee behaviour cannot independently transform the ecological consequences generated through investment decisions, production volumes, technologies, supply chains, and consumption structures. Gerber (2025) conceptualizes the second contradiction of capitalism in terms of the tendency for capitalist production to undermine social and ecological conditions upon which production itself depends.

The analysis therefore distinguishes between individual ecological responsibility and collective ecological transformation, because asking employees to recycle, conserve resources, reduce waste, or demonstrate green competencies does not necessarily provide them with authority over production decisions that determine the scale and direction of environmental impact. Foster and Clark (2020) extend the ecological Marxist discussion by emphasizing the global dimensions of metabolic rift, showing why ecological contradictions must be examined beyond individual organizations and within wider systems of production and value.

The resulting proposition is:

Proposition 6. Sustainable HRM becomes substantively ecological when environmental responsibility is connected with working conditions, social reproduction, production organization, and worker participation rather than being reduced to individualized green behaviour.



Integrated Marxist Sustainable Labour Process Framework

The three research questions converge around a common analytical structure in which Sustainable HRM, sustainability-oriented leadership, and Generation Z work ethos are connected through changing forms of labour organization and control. The framework identifies accumulation as the structural context, labour control as the organizational mechanism, alienation as an important dimension of worker experience, ecological contradiction as the material consequence, and collective resistance as a potential pathway toward transformation.

The framework also reveals that sustainability-oriented leadership occupies a mediating position between organizational objectives and employee experiences, because leaders translate broad sustainability strategies into everyday expectations while simultaneously managing worker responses. Algorithmic management and moralized sustainability can intensify this mediation by expanding the mechanisms through which organizations influence worker behaviour and organizational identification.

The Generation Z dimension demonstrates that workers are not passive recipients of these transformations because their expectations concerning flexibility, meaning, sustainability, recognition, security, and work-life boundaries can generate negotiation and resistance. Their work ethos can therefore become an important indicator of broader contradictions within contemporary employment rather than merely a collection of generational preferences.



Figure 1. Integrated Framework

The framework suggests that Sustainable HRM becomes genuinely transformative when sustainability objectives are accompanied by greater worker influence over working time, technological change, environmental decisions, workload, organizational resources, and production priorities. Such transformation requires attention to the distribution of both the benefits and costs associated with economic and ecological restructuring.

The final conceptual proposition therefore concerns the transformative capacity of Sustainable HRM:



Proposition 7. Sustainable HRM can contribute to transformative labour relations when sustainability practices strengthen worker participation, protect social reproduction, reduce harmful forms of labour control, and connect ecological responsibility with substantive influence over the organization of work.

The resulting framework does not suggest that every sustainability practice reproduces exploitation or that every organizational sustainability programme is merely symbolic, because the analysis recognizes the possibility that environmental initiatives can produce genuine benefits for employees, organizations, and ecological systems. The critical contribution lies in demonstrating that such benefits should be evaluated together with questions concerning who controls the labour process, who bears sustainability responsibilities, who receives the gains from productivity and ecological transformation, and whether workers possess meaningful collective capacity to influence organizational decisions.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable Human Resource Management should be understood not merely as a managerial approach for improving environmental performance and employee sustainability, but as an organizational practice embedded within historically specific relations between capital and labour. The analysis demonstrates that sustainability initiatives operate within organizational structures shaped by accumulation, productivity requirements, managerial authority, and employment dependence. Green recruitment, sustainability training, environmental performance management, employee engagement, and sustainability-oriented practices can generate substantive environmental and social benefits, yet these practices do not automatically transform the distribution of power within organizations. Sustainable HRM may therefore simultaneously contribute to ecological improvement and reproduce existing labour relations when responsibility for sustainability is transferred to individual employees without corresponding influence over production, technology, investment, working conditions, and organizational decision-making.

Sustainability-oriented leadership represents a critical mediating mechanism within this relationship because leadership translates broad organizational sustainability objectives into concrete expectations concerning employee behaviour, performance, commitment, and participation. The findings indicate that sustainability can expand labour control when environmental responsibility becomes connected with moral expectations, performance indicators,



behavioural monitoring, and algorithmic systems. Participation consequently needs to be distinguished from substantive worker control because employees may contribute ideas to sustainability programmes without acquiring meaningful influence over decisions governing the organization of work. Transformative sustainability requires leadership practices that connect environmental objectives with employee voice, collective participation, protection of working conditions, and meaningful influence over organizational decisions.

The analysis also demonstrates that Generation Z's emerging work ethos should be interpreted within contemporary capitalist labour conditions rather than reduced to fixed generational preferences. Their concerns with financial security, flexibility, meaningful work, sustainability, recognition, and work-life balance reflect broader transformations in employment characterized by digitalization, economic insecurity, changing work boundaries, and evolving forms of managerial control. These expectations contain significant contradictions because flexibility can provide autonomy while extending organizational control, meaningful work can challenge alienation while becoming incorporated into employer branding, and sustainability concerns can encourage ecological responsibility while remaining compatible with existing organizational accumulation. Gen Z therefore represents an important site through which changing labour relations and emerging forms of worker negotiation can be examined.

The study proposes the Marxist Sustainable Labour Process Framework (MSLPF), consisting of accumulation, labour control, alienation, ecological contradiction, and collective resistance, as a conceptual contribution to Sustainable HRM scholarship. The framework shifts analytical attention from individual green behaviour toward the broader organization of labour, social reproduction, ecological responsibility, and workplace power. Sustainable HRM becomes substantively transformative when environmental and social objectives are accompanied by greater worker participation, protection of labour conditions, recognition of social reproduction, and meaningful influence over decisions affecting production and employment. Future empirical research can examine the framework across industries, employment arrangements, and national contexts through qualitative case studies, comparative research, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches to determine how sustainability practices affect worker autonomy, managerial control, ecological outcomes, and collective forms of resistance.



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