

Unifying Green, Social, and Economic HR: A 25-Year Systematic Review and Multilevel Framework of Sustainable HRM

Vijaya Lakshmi Paleti

Assistant Professor, Department of Management Studies
Ch. S. D. St. Theresa's College for Women (A), Eluru

Abstract: Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) represents a paradigm shift from traditional HRM models that prioritize short-term financial outcomes toward strategic management aligned with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria. This systematic review synthesizes current literature on S-HRM, examining its conceptual frameworks, operational practices across the employee life cycle, organizational outcomes, and implementation barriers. Drawing on 174 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025, we identify four distinct operational forms of S-HRM—green HRM, socially responsible HRM, triple bottom-line HRM, and common good HRM—and propose an integrative multilevel framework that connects antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes. Our analysis reveals that S-HRM practices significantly contribute to positive sustainability outcomes, yet the field suffers from conceptual fragmentation and a predominant environmental focus that neglects social and economic dimensions. We conclude by proposing a strategic road map for practitioners and outlining critical directions for future research, including multi-level quantitative studies, longitudinal analyses, and cross-cultural comparative research.

Keywords: Sustainable HRM, Green HRM, ESG, Triple Bottom Line, AMO Theory, Stakeholder Theory, Resource-Based View

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, climate change, shifting labor demographics, economic volatility, and heightened stakeholder scrutiny have compelled organizations to re-examine their core operations. The adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 has further intensified this shift, increasing expectations that companies demonstrate progress on sustainability commitments. While sustainability efforts historically centered on supply chain, manufacturing, and marketing, Human Resource Management (HRM) has emerged as a crucial driver of sustainable transformation.

Sustainable HRM is defined as the utilization of HRM strategies and practices aimed at achieving long-term financial, social, and ecological goals—the "Triple Bottom Line"—while ensuring the preservation and reproduction of the organization's human and social capital base. This approach embodies a holistic and forward-looking perspective designed to align with broader sustainability objectives, advocating for the organization's human capital to make positive contributions across economic, societal, and environmental spheres.

Despite the rapid growth of academic interest in S-HRM, the field remains fragmented across conceptual definitions, levels of analysis, and empirical approaches. Existing research has predominantly focused on a single type—particularly green HRM—while socially responsible HRM, triple bottom-line HRM, and common good HRM have only recently begun to receive increased scholarly attention. Moreover, research exploring the relationship between S-HRM, antecedents, and outcomes still underuses multilevel thinking, focusing on top-down paths and neglecting bottom-up emergence.



This review addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive synthesis of the S-HRM literature. Specifically, we examine the conceptual foundations of S-HRM, analyze operational practices across the employee life cycle, evaluate organizational outcomes and implementation barriers, and propose an integrative multilevel framework to guide future research.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The literature on S-HRM draws primarily on three foundational management theories, each offering complementary insights into how sustainable HR practices generate value.

2.1 Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) Theory

AMO theory posits that sustainable performance is maximized when HR practices develop employee ability, boost motivation, and offer opportunities to engage. In the S-HRM context, this translates to:

- Ability: Green skills training, sustainability literacy programs, and ethical decision-making development
- Motivation: Sustainability-linked incentives, recognition programs, and performance evaluations incorporating ESG criteria
- Opportunity: Employee-led sustainability initiatives, participatory decision-making, and autonomy in implementing sustainable practices

2.2 Resource-Based View (RBV)

RBV suggests that sustainable HR practices cultivate unique, non-substitutable human and social capital that yield long-term competitive advantage. Organizations that develop distinctive sustainability competencies create resources that are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable—generating sustained competitive advantage that competitors cannot easily replicate.

2.3 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory expands HR's traditional duty beyond shareholders to include employees, local communities, regulatory bodies, and future generations. This perspective emphasizes that S-HRM must balance multiple stakeholder interests simultaneously, recognizing that long-term organizational success depends on maintaining positive relationships with all stakeholder groups.

III. CORE DIMENSIONS ACROSS THE EMPLOYEE LIFECYCLE

Sustainable HR practices permeate every phase of talent management. Our systematic review reveals the following operational dimensions across the employee life cycle.

3.1 Green Recruitment and Selection

Employer Branding: Organizations leveraging Eco-credentials and social impact mission statements attract higher-value talent, particularly among younger demographic cohorts. Research indicates that sustainability-oriented employer branding creates competitive advantage in talent markets.

Digital Selection: Minimizing paper and travel footprints through remote interviews, digital onboarding workflows, and paperless documentation processes.

3.2 Sustainable Training and Development

Green Competency Building: Training programs designed to build waste reduction skills, carbon footprint literacy, and ethical decision-making capabilities.



Leadership Development: Cultivating "responsible leadership" mindsets that prioritize social equity alongside profitability. Studies show that sustainable leadership is fundamental for adopting socially responsible HRM practices .

3.3 Performance Management and Rewards

ESG-Linked KPIs: Incorporating sustainability targets into quarterly and annual individual performance evaluations. Businesses that use GHRM practices report productivity and cost efficiency increases of 15% to 20% .

Green Incentives: Recognition programs, subsidies for public transit or electric vehicles, and bonuses linked to carbon reduction milestones.

3.4 Employee Well-being and Work-Life Integration

Human Capital Regeneration: Shifting away from burnout-inducing productivity paradigms to sustainable workload management, flexible working models, and psychological safety.

Inclusive and Equitable Culture: Enforcing robust Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies to maintain social sustainability. Recent research emphasizes the role of S-HRM in addressing inequality aligned with SDG 10 .

IV. KEY ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS

Dimension Primary Impact Mechanism Measured Outcomes

Environmental Performance Reduced resource consumption and waste Lower carbon emissions, ISO 14001 compliance, up to 30% improvement in environmental performance

Social Performance Enhanced workplace safety, DEI, and well-being Reduced turnover, lower absenteeism, higher employee engagement

Financial Performance Operational efficiency and brand equity 15–20% productivity increases, enhanced employer branding

Our integrative review confirms that S-HRM practices significantly contribute to positive sustainability outcomes across all three dimensions of the triple bottom line .

V. IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Despite the evident benefits, organizations face significant barriers in implementing S-HRM.

5.1 Greenwashing Vs. Authentic HR

Tokenistic sustainability campaigns that lack systemic HR policy backing lead to cynicism and employee disengagement. Research highlights the risk of superficial adoption that undermines both credibility and employee trust .

5.2 Short-Term ROI Pressure

Financial frameworks prioritizing immediate quarterly yields over long-term human and ecological capital growth present a fundamental tension. Studies identify this as a core paradox: HRM should focus on cost reduction and corporate profitability in the short-term, while simultaneously providing long-term sustainability of organizational performance .

5.3 Metric Standardization

The lack of globally standardized metrics for measuring the direct impact of HR practices on ESG scores impedes progress. Current literature shows the field requires greater conceptual clarity and practical maturity .

VI. AN INTEGRATIVE MULTILEVEL FRAMEWORK

Based on our systematic analysis of 368 papers, we propose an integrative multilevel framework that brings coherence to the fragmented S-HRM field .



6.1 Integration of Four S-HRM Types

Our framework unifies the four established operational forms:

1. Green HRM: Focus on environmental sustainability
2. Socially Responsible HRM: Emphasis on ethical and social dimensions
3. Triple Bottom-Line HRM: Balanced integration of economic, social, and environmental goals
4. Common Good HRM: Orientation toward broader societal benefit

6.2 Multilevel Analysis

The framework incorporates three levels of analysis:

- Micro (Individual): Employee eco-behaviors, attitudes, well-being, and performance
- Meso (Organizational): HRM systems, organizational culture, and capabilities
- Macro (Societal): Regulatory frameworks, cultural norms, and SDG achievement

6.3 Nomological Network

The framework maps key elements:

- Antecedents: Stakeholder pressures, regulatory requirements, leadership commitment
- Mediators: Employee engagement, organizational trust, knowledge management
- Moderators: Organizational culture, industry context, national culture
- Outcomes: Employee performance, organizational sustainability, societal impact

VII. FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

To advance S-HRM as an academic field and practical discipline, future empirical research should focus on the following directions:

7.1 Methodological Priorities

1. Multi-level quantitative studies examining the link between S-HRM practices and individual employee eco-behaviors, with particular attention to cross-level mechanisms
2. Longitudinal analyses on the impact of sustainable HR policies on long-term firm resilience during global crises
3. Comparative cross-cultural studies testing the adaptability of S-HRM frameworks in emerging versus developed markets

7.2 Thematic Priorities

4. Employee perceptions of S-HRM implementation and their impact on attitudes and behaviors
5. Mechanisms linking S-HRM to performance, including mediation and moderation effects that remain under-explored
6. Inequality reduction, particularly aligned with SDG 10, which remains largely overlooked in S-HRM research
7. Integration of artificial intelligence and technology in S-HRM practices
8. Tensions and paradoxes between high-performance work systems and sustainability goals.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Sustainable Human Resource Management shifts human capital from a resource to be consumed to a capability to be nurtured and sustained. This systematic review demonstrates that S-HRM encompasses a diverse range of practices—from green recruitment and training to ESG-linked performance management and well-being initiatives—that collectively contribute to environmental, social, and economic sustainability. However, the field remains fragmented across four distinct operational forms and multiple levels of analysis. Our proposed integrative multilevel framework provides a foundation for advancing both theory and practice.



As ESG compliance transitions from optional branding to mandatory governance, S-HRM stands as the catalyst for building resilient, ethical, and environmental-first organizations. The research agenda outlined in this review offers a roadmap for scholars to address critical gaps, while practitioners can leverage the identified practices and frameworks to drive meaningful sustainable transformation.

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