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The Gendered Path of Least Resistance: First Entry and Exit Behaviors of Public and Nonprofit Employees

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ABSTRACT

Public and nonprofit organizations exhibit high rates of female employment often attributed to sector structures and social roles. To better understand how individual behaviors dynamically contribute to these distinctive ratios, we deconstruct public and nonprofit employment into gendered patterns of attraction and attachment. Using duration analysis and following a cohort from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, this research finds that women demonstrate a higher attraction to their first public and nonprofit job compared to men, evidenced through a faster rate of entry into this employment. There are no significant gender differences when considering the duration of an individual's first stint in these sectors. Additional investigation finds that these sector-level patterns, when decomposed to account for gender-dominant professions, are driven by stronger female attraction to female-dominated professions while masking higher female turnover from male-dominated professions. Results inform recruitment and retention strategies for public and nonprofit organizations.

The majority of the public and nonprofit workforce are women (57% and 66%, respectively, Gallagher 2023). This feature suggests that such organizations may be “model employers,” prioritizing gender inclusive and nondiscriminatory practices (Feeney and Stritch 2019; Knies et al. 2022). Despite females' dominant presence, stubborn gender differences persist along dimensions including wages, leadership, and occupational sorting (Connell 2006; Hirsch and Manzella 2015; Hansen and Petersen 2024). The tensions between a representative workforce and persistent inequality, therefore, present an interesting contradiction. Understanding individual-level behaviors that contribute to these gender differences across sectors provides valuable evidence for discussions on representation and equity in the workforce.

Existing work provides several explanations for how and why unique gender variation persists in public and nonprofit jobs. For example, sector choice research emphasizes organizational distinctions across sectors (Korac et al. 2020; Jaclyn Piatak

2015); and this is echoed by public selection research's focuses on individual-level attributes associated with gender identities when studying compatibility between employees and sectors (Jakobsen et al. 2023; Lewis and Frank 2002; Aschhoff and Vogel 2019). These bodies of work find that women prefer public and nonprofit employment and are less likely to leave (Korac et al. 2019; Grissom et al. 2016; Lee and Whitford 2008). Complementing this, human resource management (HRM) stresses the significance of each stage in one's employment journey, including the separate phases of recruitment and retention (Van Dijk 2008; Hiltrop 1999). HRM additionally emphasizes interactions between employees and organizations, highlighting the role organizations play in shaping worker behavior (Aschhoff and Vogel 2019; Boon et al. 2011; Jakobsen et al. 2023).

A worker's employment journey, utilizing this existing literature, can be conceptualized as a dynamic path of attraction and attachment to sectors of employment influenced by an individual's identity and their experiences. This research builds

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Evidence for Practice

- Entry into public and nonprofit sectors is highly associated with gender.
- This significance of attraction to public and nonprofit work suggests that gender equity strategies in these sectors may be effective during recruitment phases.
- Public and nonprofit organizations should calibrate recruitment and retention strategies depending on the gender dominance of the professions they are targeting.
- For male-dominated jobs, women are significantly more likely to exit at any point in their careers; this shorter duration suggests organizations should implement concrete mechanisms to help counter systemic issues.

on this foundation to specifically ask whether gender is significantly related to an individual's rate of first entry (used interchangeably with attraction) and exit (used interchangeably with attachment) of these sectors. It further expands this inquiry by asking why. Drawing on social role theory, it hypothesizes that gendered patterns of entry and exit are driven by congruency between one's social identity and the gender-dominance of a profession. To answer these inquiries, the empirical analysis follows a representative cohort of millennials living in the United States from their childhood until 2019 and exploits their weekly accounts of employment history to understand patterns of entry and exit across sectors.

This research directly addresses scholars and practitioners concerned with the recruitment and retention of public and nonprofit workers. To scholars, findings suggest that gender is differentially related to attraction and attachment behaviors. This is an important nuance when considering the economy-wide statistics surrounding "feminine sectors." The deconstruction of worker behavior into the two discrete decisions of entry and exit provides fresh insight for sector difference and sector choice research. This approach helps dispel the myths of "model employers," as individuals' attraction to and attachment to a sector may be a more accurate indicator of whether it is women-friendly rather than static gender composition statistics.

For practitioners, understanding how individuals' sector choices evolve at different stages of their careers can help organizations develop more effective recruitment and retention strategies. This research finds that one's attraction is significantly related to public and nonprofit work, and this variation is further explained by women's higher attraction to female-dominated professions within these sectors. While gender is not significantly associated with public and nonprofit employees' sector exit, it shows significant relevance in reinforcing sex-based occupational segregation: women are more likely to exit male-dominated professions in public and nonprofit sectors. As such, public and nonprofit organizations should adopt different recruitment and retention strategies depending on the professions they are targeting.

1 | Theory and Hypotheses

1.1 | Gender and Sector Choice: A Dynamic Perspective

The public sector is defined as the collection of organizations that are run by the government while the nonprofit sector is the group of private organizations that provide a social benefit and do not redistribute profit to shareholders (unlike their for-profit counterparts). Variations among sectors have been extensively documented, with key differences found not only in ownership status, output, and tax criteria (Rainey and Bozeman 2000; Smith and Larimer 2018; Boris et al. 2021), but also in employment including work-time control (Powell and Cortis 2017), career expectations (Hamann and Foster 2014), and pay (Hirsch et al. 2018). These employment features attract and retain diverse types of workers, and scholars find evidence of differences reflected along dimensions including employee attitudes (Miller-Stevens et al. 2015), motivations (Buelens and Van den Broeck 2007), and behaviors (Holt 2020). An individual-level feature that often varies between sectors is gender. The public and nonprofit sectors demonstrate higher women's employment relative to their private counterparts.

Sector choice research builds off these observations to examine how and why groups of individuals, such as women, prefer certain sectors (Jakobsen et al. 2023). Beyond differing organizational components such as work-time control, studies find that government employees' ability to improve social welfare is closely linked to women's higher public service motivation (Ritz et al. 2016). Government organizations also prioritize a core principle of representation coupled with integration of minorities into jobs, creating a more appealing environment for women and other historical minorities (Jankowski et al. 2020; Riccucci 2021). The nonprofit sector provides an additional pathway for traditionally marginalized individuals to gain work experience and exposure (Nank 2010). Nonprofits are often noted for their emphasis on volunteer and philanthropic behaviors, facets closely associated with women (Wilson 2012; Mesch and Pactor 2016). Studies within the sector choice sphere find that compared with men, women are more likely to work in the public and nonprofit sectors, a pattern often linked to perceived trait alignment between women and these sectors (Korac et al. 2020; Jaclyn Piatak 2015).

Human resource management provides useful tools to frame observations surrounding sector differences and gender preferences across public, nonprofit and for-profit organizations. A helpful facet drawn from HRM is the focus on separate stages of an employee's lifecycle including recruitment and retention phases (Hiltrop 1999; Van Dijk 2008). These components suggest that employment is not a static characteristic, but rather a collection of segments that flow together in the larger story of a worker's career trajectory. Additionally, HRM emphasizes the importance of interactions between employees and organizations (Jakobsen et al. 2023). This perspective, especially in the broad person-environment fit literature, suggests that individuals hold beliefs about themselves that inform their employment decisions, while their behavior is constantly reshaped by their surroundings (Aschhoff and Vogel 2019; Christensen and Wright 2011; Boon et al. 2011). Thus, one's current sector

of employment can be reconceptualized from a static outcome to a series of dynamic choices informed by an individual's environment. Public or nonprofit employment can be hypothesized as two decisions: (1) An individual's decision to enter work in a particular sector and (2) their choice to remain in that sector. Each decision has unique characteristics that shape the overall composition of the economy.

Drawing on HRM work about recruitment and retention, this article denotes the choice to enter a sector as attraction and the decision to remain in a role as attachment. An individual's attraction is defined as preference to start employment in a specific sector. Public administration research finds intrinsic work motives (Ritz and Waldner 2011), internship exposure (Sekiguchi et al. 2023) and job advertisements that relate to mission statements of service (Somers and Desmidt 2024) influence an individual's attraction to an organization. One's attachment to a sector can be understood as the desire to remain within it. Prior research indicates several factors that contribute to duration within the public and nonprofit sector including group culture (Lee and Lee 2022), job satisfaction (Akingbola and van den Berg 2019), and economic stability (Jaclyn S. Piatak 2017).

Understanding attraction and attachment to specific sectors can be heightened by considering periods in which contextual socialization is minimal. An individual's initial entry into sector of employment is not informed by prior employment in this sector. In considering attraction and attachment and limiting the scope to the first instance of these behaviors in a sector, one can examine the relationship between these patterns and gender.

1.2 | Hypotheses I: Gender and First Entry/Exit in Public and Nonprofit Sectors

Government recruitment research has long recognized a significant relationship between gender and entering public work (Korac et al. 2019; Grissom et al. 2016). However, most studies rely on survey results or proxy attraction through one's current sector of employment. Using preferences reported in surveys, it is widely accepted that women have a higher propensity for government work (Steijn 2008; Korac et al. 2020) but some research also finds that gender commonly serves as a non-significant pre-entry control (Korac et al. 2019). Examinations of one's current sector of employment provide a deeper understanding, reinforcing that gender is closely related to masculine/feminine job advantages (Bishu and Headley 2020) and reflects societal beliefs including the division of labor (Guy 2017).

Recent scholarship has acknowledged the importance of time in analyzing gender's relationship to employment, noting gender's compounding effect across one's lifetime (Olivetti et al. 2024; Goldin 2014). Kjeldsen and Jacobsen (2013), using panel data, examine individuals' first entry relative to public service motivation, and they state that the focus on the first stint disentangles attraction and socialization. Their work concludes that women are more motivated for public work than men. Entry behavior, therefore, serves as an important lens to understand gendered public employment while first stint behavior limits the influence of sector-related influences.

Extant research on gender and nonprofit attraction echoes its public counterpart. Much of it relies on stated preferences and concludes that women, relative to men, have a higher propensity to apply for "helping" jobs (Samek 2019) or roles that serve others (Bright 2016). Jaclyn Piatak (2015) finds that female students are four times more likely than males to express a preference for nonprofit employment in a survey that does not describe further constraints. Other research relies on one's current sector of employment and hypothesizes that nonprofits are more attractive to women because gendered environments offer greater empowerment (Themudo 2009), salary growth (Lee 2014), and leadership positions (Grasse et al. 2025). To date, Fowler and Birdsall (2020) present the only study to include a time dimension, and they find that female law graduates were significantly more likely to report employment in the nonprofit sector within their career's first decade. While nonprofit research recognizes the strong presence of women in their workforce, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is no work that isolates first entry. It is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1A(B): *At all points in their life, women are significantly more likely than men to demonstrate first-time entry into public (nonprofit) work.*

The second set of movements contributing to a worker's current sector is employee attachment behavior. This behavior is a critical component of one's career journey. Public job exits are often categorized into public sector turnover research with many articles focusing on the outcome of intention to leave. Findings in this area are mixed (Grissom et al. 2016). Some conclude that women's odds of exit from public employment are lower than men's, even when controlling for organizational satisfaction, pay, and benefits (Grissom et al. 2012; Lee and Whitford 2008). Others find that women, relative to men, are more likely to express turnover intention, though these studies also note the negligible effect size (Hur and Abner 2024) and lack of overall impact (Cho and Lewis 2012). Examining turnover intention in all three sectors, Stater and Stater (2019) also fail to find a significant relationship between gender and the likelihood to look for a new job in any sector. No existing research examines exit from one's first stint in the public sector.

Research on gender and nonprofit attachment is less developed, and conclusions remain opaque. Most research highlights mission attachment but does not explicitly consider gender differences (Brown and Yoshioka 2003; Kim and Lee 2007). The nonprofit sector, additionally, is often seen as being less gender discriminatory and is assumed to provide an easier route for females to move up in rank (Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018). However, research on turnover intention fails to find significant differences between women and men (Knapp et al. 2017; Stater and Stater 2019). In one of the few studies measuring actual turnover in employees outside of the for-profit sector, Kang et al. (2015) found that women were more likely to leave nonprofit jobs and enter for-profit jobs but not public jobs. The absence of consistent findings for gender differences in exit behavior leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2A(B): *At all points in their life, women fail to show significant differences than men in exiting from their first stint in public (nonprofit) work.*

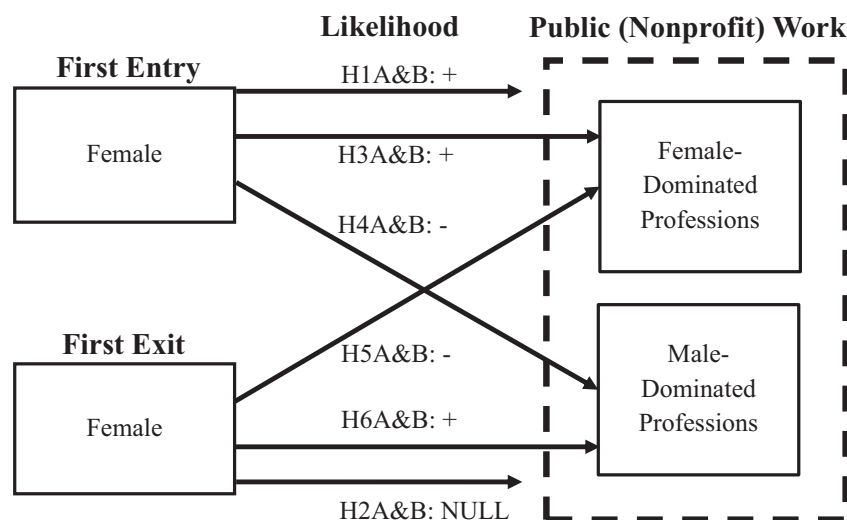


FIGURE 1 | Summary of hypotheses.

1.3 | Hypotheses II: Gender Congruency and First Entry/Exit of Public and Nonprofit Sectors

While numerous studies have explored the relationship between gender and sector employment, the underlying influences for gendered patterns across sectors remain unclear. Recent calls to expand research on gender emphasize the need to include ways in which this identity is (re)produced (Pandey et al. 2023; Holgersson and Hvenmark 2023). Gendered sector employment research should account for not only gender identity but how the masculine and feminine traits associated with this identity are observed in the sectors and reinforced through practices, culture, and norms (Connell 2006; Bishu and Headley 2020).

This article hypothesizes that gender variation in attraction and attachment to specific sectors is highly associated with the gendered characteristics of professions within those sectors, beyond traditional controls of industry and occupation. Social role theory provides a useful framework to explain the mechanism of gender-dominant professions that lead to entry/exit of public or nonprofit work. This theory emphasizes the importance of congruency between one's gender and their professional roles (Eagly and Wood 2016). Congruency refers to the agreement between one's identity and the tasks they perform. If one's gender is perceived as incongruent with their professional roles, this individual may be viewed as unqualified (Dinhof and Willems 2024; Eagly and Karau 2002). This becomes important when considering the gender-dominant professions prevalent in public and nonprofit sectors (Dinhof and Willems 2024) in addition to the feminine qualities that nonprofit and public sectors are often associated with (Lee 2014; Shields and Elias 2022).

Decisions to enter or exit a job are inherently connected to an individual's social identity, and role congruency influences this decision (Dinhof and Willems 2024). Professions, due to historical and familial ties, are associated with feminine and masculine characteristics (Guy 2017). In considering "women's work," these roles are often associated with caregiving, nurturing, and

administrative tasks, including jobs such as teachers, nurses, and office secretaries. These roles necessitate emotional labor, interpersonal skills, and empathy (Korac et al. 2020). Men, although more evenly distributed across professions, dominate jobs associated with masculine characteristics such as physical strength and agentic authority. These professions include public safety and manufacturing in addition to skilled jobs in realms of law, medicine, and science (Blau et al. 2013). The positive effects of congruency between one's social and professional roles are hypothesized to drive the connection between one's gender and entry into public and nonprofit sectors. Here, congruency means holding the social identity of woman and working in a female-dominated profession while incongruency means holding social identity of woman and working in a male-dominated profession.

Hypothesis 3A(B): *At all points in their life, women are significantly more likely than men to demonstrate first-time entry into congruent settings in public (nonprofit) work.*

Hypothesis 4A(B): *At all points in their life, women are significantly less likely than men to demonstrate first-time entry into incongruent settings in public (nonprofit) work.*

The association between "female" traits and sectors, coupled with advantages felt by women within female-dominated professions is also likely to increase attachment to such environments. Congruency reinforces the fit between an individual and their job; and such advantages contribute to worker retention (Christensen and Wright 2011; Lanfranchi and Narcy 2015). Conversely, incongruity between social roles and professional roles causes adverse labor effects, increasing exit propensity. Gender tensions necessitate an employee's expenditure of energy towards image control (Guy and Newman 2004) while also influencing organizational decisions such as initial position placement (Fernandez and Mors 2008) and pay (Hirsch et al. 2018). The incongruity between gender roles and professional roles contributes to women's subsequent exits from male-dominated professions for both public and nonprofit work. This is formalized below and Figure 1 visually summarizes the full set of hypotheses.

Hypothesis 5A(B): *At all points in their life, women are significantly less likely than men to demonstrate first-time exit from congruent settings in public (nonprofit) work.*

Hypothesis 6A(B): *At all points in their life, women are significantly more likely than men to demonstrate first-time exit from incongruent settings in public (nonprofit) work.*

2 | Methods

2.1 | Sample

To examine gender differences in attraction and attachment, this article used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). NLSY97 began in 1997 and followed a representative cohort of individuals aged 12 to 17 living in the United States. Surveys were administered annually until 2011 and biennially afterwards. Question structures enabled reconstruction of respondents' week-by-week employment history in addition to providing a rich set of covariates such as cohabitation and education. The final sample consisted of 6585 individuals with 84,308 person-time observations for 1997 to 2019. It is important to note that this sample is limited to millennials, defined as individuals born between 1980 and 1998. The focus on a single cohort mitigates unobservable variation that can occur between generations (Olivetti et al. 2024).

2.2 | Dependent Variables

This study focused on two main concepts: (1) Attraction to the public or nonprofit sector and (2) attachment to the respective sector. Attraction was operationalized as the rate of first entry, defined as the number of weeks until an individual first reported employment in the relevant sector after survey start. Separate analyses were run for entry into nonprofit and public work since these outcomes were not mutually exclusive across one's lifetime. Individuals that entered public (nonprofit) work before the first survey were removed because these respondents effectively "died" before trial start. In other words, individuals already in the public (nonprofit) sector were excluded from the sample. Attachment was operationalized as rate of first exit, or the number of weeks until leaving the relevant sector following first entry.

The analysis further disaggregated public and nonprofit sectors into female-dominated and male-dominated professions to disentangle the influence of gender-dominance in these spheres. The gender-dominant variable marked an individual's current job as male-dominated if the majority of workers in the respective grouping were male, using 2000 census data. The resulting additional outcomes were: first entry into female-dominated public work, first entry into male-dominated public work, first exit from female-dominated public work, and first exit from male-dominated public work. Four equivalent outcomes existed for nonprofit work, and a visual representation is provided by hypotheses three to six in Figure 1. Male-dominant professions included financial operations, physical sciences, protective services and others.

Female-dominant professions included education, healthcare support, and personal care.

2.3 | Independent Variables

The main variable of interest for this study was the self-verified sex/gender of the respondent. This was coded as a time-invariant binary factor. Contemporary scholarship increasingly distinguishes sex and gender while pushing back against dichotomization. The use of the words sex, female, and male comes directly from NLSY97 and, given this historical framework, sex and gender are used interchangeably while recognizing evolving distinctions. Figure 2 presents the motivation for understanding gender as an important variable in public and nonprofit employment. For each cross-sectional cut, Figure 2 shows that the percentage of females holding nonprofit and public jobs out of all working females is higher than the percentage of males reporting these jobs relative to all males. This observation aligns with other national and historic statistics on sector employment (Hirsch et al. 2018).

A saturated collection of controls was considered for rate of first entry and exit of certain sectors. Public, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors hold unique combinations of industries and occupations in addition to work environments and skill requirements. Model controls were derived from labor economic best practices in conjunction with public administration and nonprofit research.

Controls were categorized into two definitional buckets: time-invariant and time-variant. The time-invariant controls, in addition to gender, included a binary indicator for racial/ethnic identity of White (versus non-White) and numeric values for respondents' age at first interview. Time-varying controls were comprised of variables that could change in each wave of the survey such as household income and geographic location. The modeling strategy incorporated each change in these variables across survey years. For simplicity, the time-varying controls were further categorized into sociodemographic, geographic, and labor controls.

The time-dependent sociodemographic controls included numeric values for the highest grade completed, a binary control for marital status (married or not), numeric values for the number of biological children in a household, and an 8-level factor for household income. These controls reflected human capital capabilities in addition to family constraints and gendered expectations. The next variables, geographic features, accounted for local labor market conditions; controls included factor variables for census region (Northeast, North Central, South, and West), urban/rural living (urban, rural, unknown) and mean statistical area (not in statistical area, in statistical area but not central, in statistical area and central).

Lastly, labor controls proxied the differential work environments and constraints between sectors. Public and nonprofit jobs are differentially distributed across industry and occupations relative to their private counterparts (Hirsch and Manzella 2015). To address this, the model included 11- and 12-level factors for the most frequent industry and occupation per year, respectively.

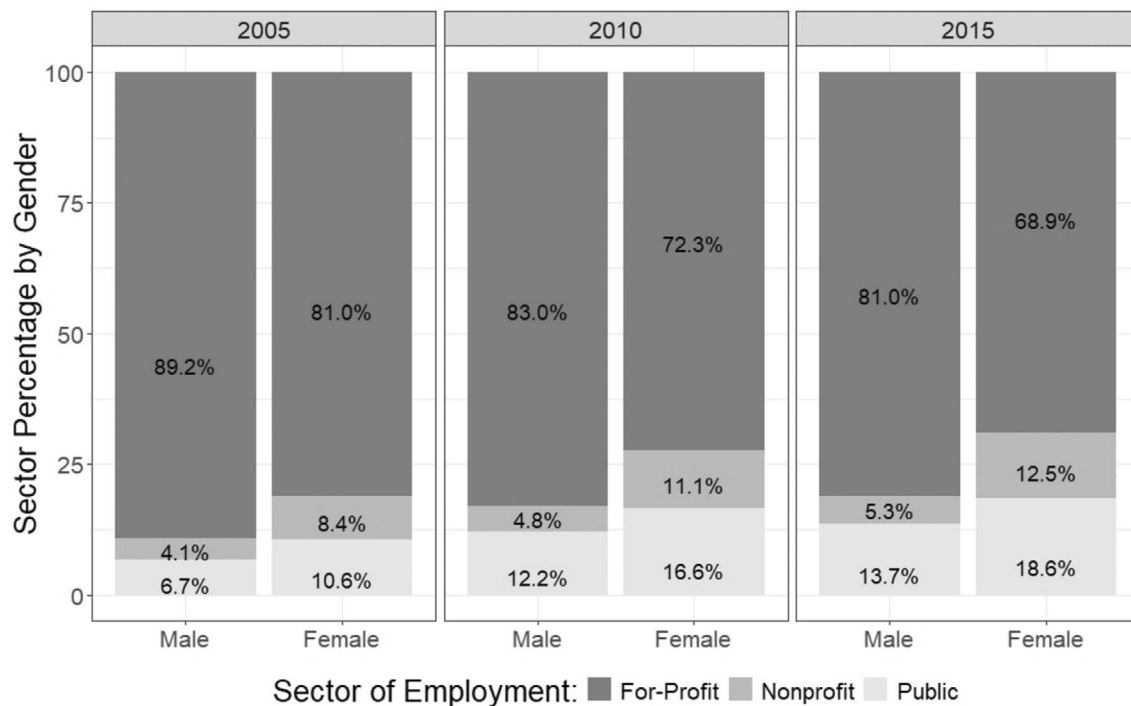


FIGURE 2 | Percentage of sectoral workers for each gender by specific years in NLSY97.

Type of work (full time, part time, not working) and an 8-level factor variable for household income were included to account for preferences in part-time participation and the possibility of secondary earners (Lee 2014).

The final time-varying labor variable was a binary measure that marked whether an individual reported prior experience in the related sector. For example, when considering a respondent's entry into public work, for each wave of the survey until entry into public work, we control for whether they previously worked in a nonprofit job. This variable accounts for the influence that nonprofit (public) sector exposure may have on future public (nonprofit) employment. Taken together, these variables represent the sociodemographic, geographic, and employment features that may contribute to an individual's propensity for public (nonprofit) employment in the next wave of their life beyond their gender.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the variable of interest (gender) in addition to controls. These statistics are for the entire sample ($n=6585$) and for subsamples of individuals that ever report working in the public ($n=2428$) and nonprofit sectors ($n=1844$). Appropriate univariate proportional tests were performed between each subsample and the full sample. For the time-invariant variables, Table 1 shows a significantly higher percentage of females in the subsample of individuals who work in the public (nonprofit) sector relative to the full sample, again reiterating this research's motivation. However, other variables such as racial/ethnic identity also display statistical differences from the full sample, motivating the use of a multivariate analysis. It should be noted that time-varying variables utilized participants' last survey values in the summary table (a choice made for illustrative purposes).

2.4 | Empirical Strategy

One way to understand cross-sectional summaries of economic activity, such as Figure 2, is to consider employee behaviors that lead into and out of these observations. This article employed Cox regression models with time-dependent covariates to study the relationship between gender and first entry/exit. Cox models are survival models that analyze the "hazard" of an event occurring, accounting for censored and non-normally distributed time-to-event data (Cleves 2008). The inclusion of time-dependent covariates addresses the proportional hazard assumption and accounts for changing variables (Zhang et al. 2018). The article's Cox regression with time-varying covariates was:

$$\lambda(t|Z(t)) = \lambda_0(t) \exp(\beta'x + \gamma'Xg(t)) \quad (1)$$

where β' and γ' were the time-invariant and time-variant coefficients, respectively. $\lambda_0(t)$ was the baseline hazard function and x and $Xg(t)$ were vectors of covariates (at time t) equal to $Z(t)$.

This model, at a high level, calculated the likelihood that an individual reported public/nonprofit entry (exit) as a function of the individual's characteristics including their gender, income, and marital status across various time points. This approach is similar to logistic regression but increases richness in the dependent variable by capturing (1) whether an event occurred and (2) how long it took for this event to occur. Cox Model assumptions also allow for the possibility that individuals may showcase entry (exit) behaviors after the survey finishes and that these individuals can hold various career paths before entering (exiting) such work. Regression coefficients

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics of relevant variables.

	Full sample		Ever work in public sector		Ever work in nonprofit sector	
	Mean or proportion	S.D.	Mean or proportion	S.D.	Mean or proportion	S.D.
Female	0.488		0.55***		0.63***	
Base = Male						
White	0.69		0.66*		0.73**	
Base = Non-White						
Age at First Survey	14.51	(1.43)	14.48	(1.39)	14.53	(1.42)
Married	0.38		0.12***		0.11***	
Base = Not Married						
Highest Grade Completed	13.54	(2.88)	12.33***	(2.53)	12.64***	(2.64)
Number of Children	0.97	(1.21)	0.31***	(0.78)	0.30***	(0.76)
Most Common Type of Work	Full Time		Part Time		Part Time	
Most Common Occupation	Health care, protective services		Food, Cleaning, Sales		Food, Cleaning, Sales	
Most Common Industry	Entertainment, Food		Entertainment, Food		Entertainment, Food	
N	6585		2428		1844	

Note: The statistical significance between individuals that ever work in public (nonprofit) employment and entire sample tested using appropriate proportional tests.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

from this model can be interpreted as the influence of each independent variable on the time it takes for an event to occur (e.g., first entry into public work).

3 | Results

3.1 | Gender and Sector Entry and Exit

This article investigated the relationship between respondents' sex and their rate of first entry into and exit from public or nonprofit work. Figure 3 visualizes an initial exploration of sector entry through the nonparametric calculation of Kaplan–Meier curves. Panel 1 of Figure 3 graphs the fraction of individuals, bifurcated by gender, who reported entering their first stint of public work across time. It shows that after the survey starts, females display a significantly higher likelihood of reporting public entry relative to their male counterparts. Panel 2 of the figure shows the Kaplan–Meier estimates for entry into nonprofits. The overall likelihood of entry is lower than entry into public work, but the observed between-gender difference for nonprofit entry is larger. There is a 14.9% difference in the likelihood of nonprofit entry between females and males by week 900. Log-rank tests for both groups and outcomes confirmed statistically significant differences between groups' incidence curves within each sector choice at the 0.001 level.

Building off the Kaplan–Meier graphs, Table 2 presents the empirical results for entry into public and nonprofit employment using Cox regression models. Observations were clustered at the individual level and results report hazard ratios (the coefficients) with robust standard errors. Hazard ratios represent the change in likelihood that the dependent variable occurs given an independent variable. Model fit statistics are significant, suggesting substantial knowledge gain relative to a null model. Full model results are reported in the appendix, Table S1. As for gender and its relationship to sector entry, a focus is first placed on public work. This column suggests that females, relative to males, had a 12.6% higher hazard of entering public work and this was significant at the 0.05 level. This confirms hypothesis H1A (at the 0.05 level) that, across time, women are significantly more likely than men to report first entry into public work. Similar to patterns observed in the Kaplan–Meier plots, the size of gender differences for entry into nonprofit work is larger than that of public work. Females, relative to their male counterparts, showcase 55.1% ($p < 0.001$) higher odds of entering nonprofit work across time even when controlling for features like part-time work and household income. This confirmed hypothesis H1B. Together, these results provide evidence that women are more attracted to public and nonprofit work than their male counterparts.

Figure 4 visualizes the Kaplan–Meier curves for rate of exit. Panel 1 shows a significant difference between male and female

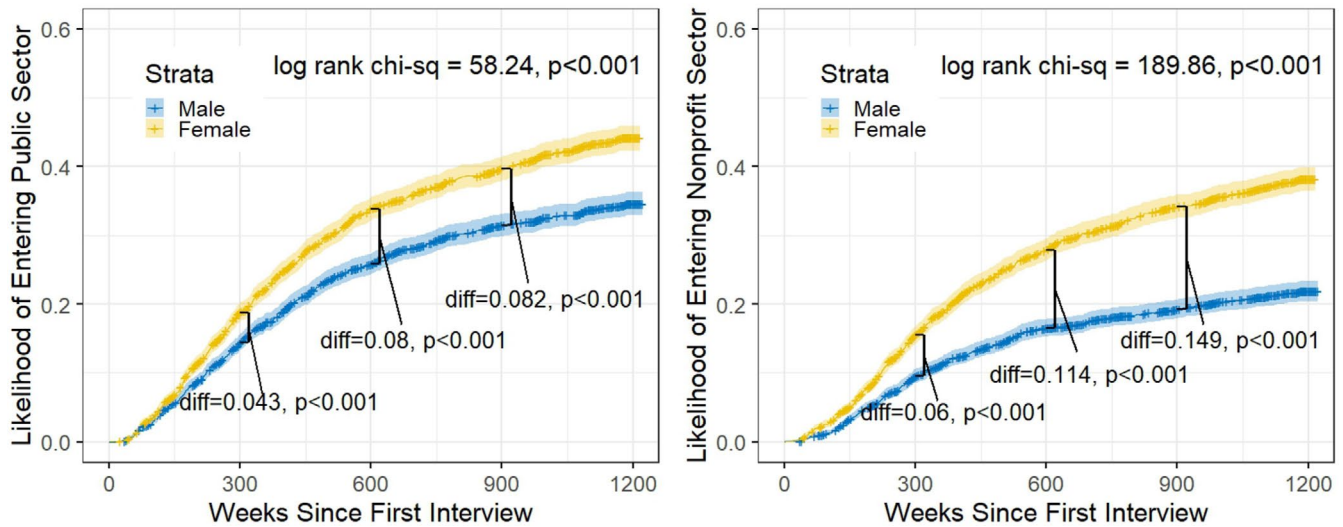


FIGURE 3 | Kaplan–Meier curves for public and nonprofit first entry by gender.

exits across time, not considering controls. Panel 2 fails to find similar conclusions for first exit from the nonprofit sector. To understand whether these relationships exist when controlling for important covariates, Table 3 reports the hazard ratio estimates for the Cox models. Table S2 in the appendix reports the full set of model coefficients. For the main variable of interest, the analysis failed to find statistically significant hazard ratios for gender given either public or nonprofit exit. As such, the analysis failed to find a relationship between gender and one's exit behavior from a sector of employment. These findings supported hypotheses H2A and H2B.

3.2 | Disaggregating Sectors by Female- or Male-Dominated Professions

One possible mechanism for the trend that females showcase a higher attraction to public or nonprofit work relative to their male counterparts is because of the higher gender congruencies that exist in these sectors. In other words, even after controlling for occupation and industry, public and nonprofit professions may attract individuals that align with the gendered nature of their work. To test the second group of hypotheses, public and nonprofit jobs are further disaggregated into female- and male-dominated professions. Female-dominated professions are defined as jobs in which females comprised 50% or more of employees within a group of occupations, using 2000 census data.

This analysis employed the same empirical strategy as before with the updated outcomes of first entry into (1) female-dominated professions in the public (nonprofit) sector and (2) male-dominated professions in the public (nonprofit) sector. Kaplan–Meier graphs are presented for each outcome in Figure 5 while Table 4 displays the coefficients on gender from each Cox proportional model. The full regression table, A3, is in the appendix.

Focusing on Table 4, the cell for the first row and column corresponds to first entry into a female-dominated profession in the public sector. For this, females display an increased hazard of 68.8% ($p < 0.001$) relative to their male counterparts.

This contrasts with a decreased hazard ratio of about 39.0% ($p < 0.001$) found in the second column, suggesting that females, relative to males, display a significantly lower hazard of entry into a male-dominated public profession. Interestingly, females display a significantly higher hazard ratio than their male counterparts when entering a female-dominated nonprofit profession (1.94, $p < 0.001$), but the analysis failed to find a significant gender difference when considering male-dominated nonprofit profession entries. This supported hypotheses H3A, H4A, and H3B. It failed to support 4B.

As a final exploration, the analysis considered job exit from female- and male-dominated public and nonprofit professions. Figure 6 presents the Kaplan–Meier estimates while Table 5 shows regression results. Focus is placed on Table 5. When considering an individual's exit rate from female-dominated public professions, the analysis failed to find a significant difference between hazard ratios relative to gender. However, in male-dominated public professions, females display about a 20.4% ($p < 0.05$) higher hazard ratio of exit. This implies that females, relative to males, have a significantly higher risk of first-time exits from male-dominated public professions. Similarly, when looking at nonprofit jobs, the model failed to find any significant difference between genders relative to first-time exits for female-dominated professions but found that females display about a 19.2% ($p < 0.05$) higher hazard ratio of exit for male-dominated nonprofit professions. Taken together, this suggests that women working in male-dominated professions in public and nonprofit sectors experience a lower attachment than their male counterparts. This supported H6A and H6B while failing to support the other hypotheses.

4 | Discussion

Public and nonprofit studies are quick to recognize the out-sized presence of females in their sectors. This article drew inspiration from sector choice and HRM studies to analyze the relationship between gender and sector employment through a dynamic perspective. Specifically, it conceptualized employment in the public (nonprofit) sector as a composition of two

TABLE 2 | Hazard ratios from Cox models for rate of first entry into public or nonprofit work.

	Public entry		Nonprofit entry	
	Exp(coef) robust(SE)	p	Exp(coef) robust(SE)	p
Woman	1.126	0.011	1.551	0.000
Base = Man	(0.047)		(0.054)	
White	0.766	0.000	1.105	0.076
Base = Non-White	(0.046)		(0.056)	
Age at First Survey	0.959	0.008	0.972	0.141
	(0.016)		(0.019)	
Highest Grade Completed	1.189	0.000	1.177	0.000
	(0.012)		(0.014)	
Married	1.004	0.958	0.824	0.035
Base = Not Married	(0.077)		(0.092)	
Number of Children	0.996	0.903	0.959	0.317
	(0.034)		(0.042)	
Family Income	Yes		Yes	
Census Region	Yes		Yes	
Urban/Rural	Yes		Yes	
Mean Stat Area	Yes		Yes	
Type of Work	Yes		Yes	
Occupation	Yes		Yes	
Industry	Yes		Yes	
Prior Work in Nonprofit Sector	Yes			
Prior Work in Public Sector			Yes	
Likelihood Ratio	897.7***		921.3***	
Wald Test	840.8***		887.4***	
Observations	70,311		75,191	

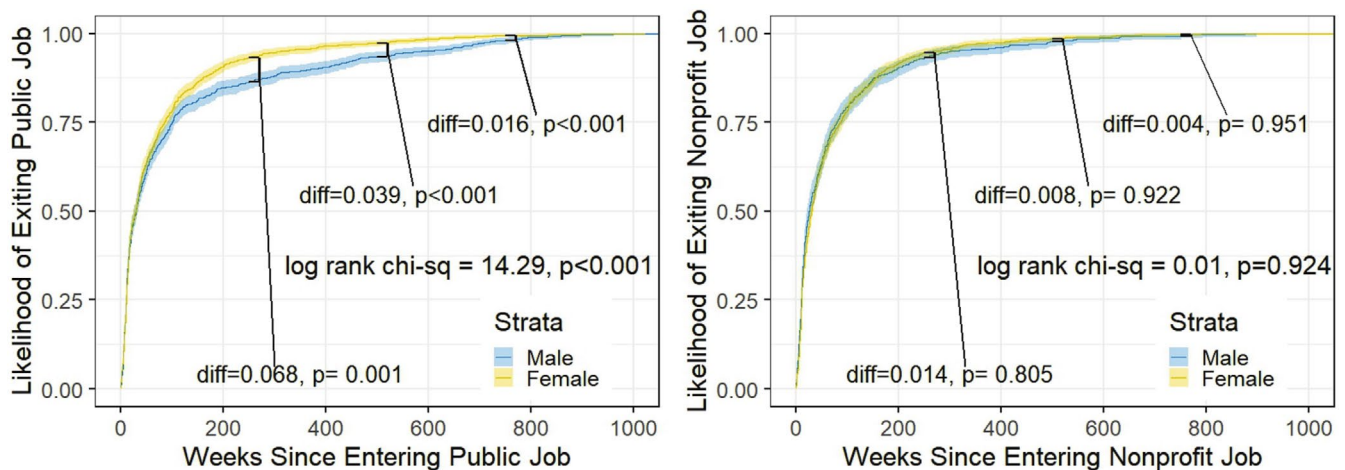
* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.01$.*** $p < 0.001$.**FIGURE 4** | Kaplan-Meier curves for public and nonprofit first exit by gender.

TABLE 3 | Hazard ratios from Cox models for rate of first exit from public or nonprofit work.

	Public exit		Nonprofit exit	
	Exp(coef) robust(SE)	<i>p</i>	Exp(coef) robust(SE)	<i>p</i>
Female	1.095	0.102	1.023	0.726
Base = Male	(0.055)		(0.064)	
White	0.995	0.930	1.189	0.016
Base = Non-White	(0.058)		(0.072)	
Age at First Survey	0.891	0.000	0.912	0.000
	(0.020)		(0.022)	
Highest Grade Completed	0.978	0.113	0.969	0.025
	(0.014)		(0.014)	
Married	1.043	0.594	0.959	0.630
Base = Not Married	(0.079)		(0.087)	
Number of Children	1.056	0.106	1.055	0.165
	(0.034)		(0.039)	
Family Income	Yes		Yes	
Census Region	Yes		Yes	
Urban/Rural	Yes		Yes	
Mean Stat Area	Yes		Yes	
Type of Work	Yes		Yes	
Occupation	Yes		Yes	
Industry	Yes		Yes	
Prior Work in Nonprofit Sector	Yes			
Prior Work in Public Sector			Yes	
Likelihood Ratio	329.0***		163.7***	
Wald Test	250.6**		134.7***	
Observations	5090		3599	

p* < 0.05.*p* < 0.01.****p* < 0.001.

components: (1) Worker attraction and (2) worker attachment. This approach, in tandem with an emphasis on first stint behavior, studied early-career individual behaviors that lead into and out of cross-sectional statistics. Mechanisms for such patterns were further analyzed by considering the phenomenon of gender-congruence that occurs in the highly gendered professions found in public and nonprofit sectors. Results concluded that females displayed a higher attraction to nonprofit and public work, and this was mainly driven by higher female attraction to female-dominated professions in these sectors and lower attraction to male-dominated public work. For attachment, models failed to find significant gender differences at the sector level, but further decomposition showed lower female attachment for male-dominated professions in both sectors. Figure 7 reports a summary of these empirical conclusions, and the following paragraphs discuss the implications of each quadrant in turn.

Female-dominated professions include teachers, social service providers, healthcare support, and others. These professions fall into the public sector when one's employer is a government organization such as a public school or veteran affairs hospital. This article's findings suggest that the higher presence of females in the public sector, especially in female-dominated professions, might be related to increased female attraction in starting these jobs. This aligns with extant research that links public job dimensions and females' traits such as higher public service motivation (Ricucci 2018) while also echoing personnel research on recruitment (Breitsohl and Ruhle 2016; Llorens et al. 2008). Interestingly, analyses failed to find gender variation in attachment to such work. There was no evidence that women's first stint in this employment lasted longer (or shorter) than men's. This could be due to several possibilities including the fact that on-the-job socialization may be similar for males and females or reward structures

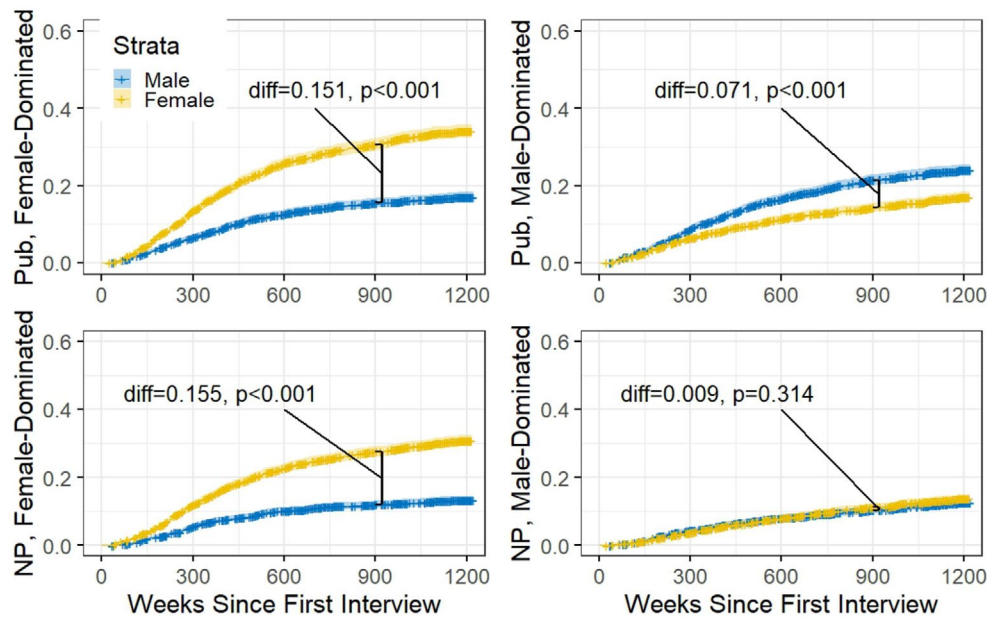


FIGURE 5 | Kaplan–Meier curves by gender for first entry into female- or male-dominated professions by sector.

TABLE 4 | Hazard ratios on gender from Cox models for rate of first entry into female- or male-dominated professions by sectors.

	Female-Dominated		Male-Dominated	
	Exp(coef) robust(SE)	p	Exp(coef) robust(SE)	p
Public Entry, Female	1.688	0.000	0.610	0.000
Base = Male	(0.060)		(0.067)	
Nonprofit Entry, Female	1.943	0.000	0.908	0.230
Base = Male	(0.064)		(0.080)	

may be more beneficial to men, increasing their attachment to the same level that females are predisposed to (ala their attraction). For practitioners concerned with workforce diversity, findings suggest that recruitment strategies during one's early-career can be consequential for achieving gender representation goals. As Hansen and Petersen (2024) note, organizational decisions significantly influence employee outcomes, making intentional diversity strategies essential.

As summarized by quadrant II in Figure 7, females were found to have lower attraction and attachment to male-dominated public jobs. This work includes protective and legal services such as policemen, military personnel, and lawyers. These conclusions reiterate the importance of recruitment strategies for achieving ideal workplace representation while also advocating for targeted support for current employees within these unique professions. The observed pattern of lower female attachment in a male-dominated public job reinforces findings in sex segregation research that purport women experience stronger

incongruity pressures in male-dominated public professions such as police officers and firefighters than men do in female-dominated contexts (Dinhof and Willems 2024; Bishu and Headley 2020; Guy and Newman 2004). Although structural inequality may be the overarching force behind the observed patterns, organizations can take actionable steps to mitigate this incongruity including professional development opportunities and cultural initiatives that support nuanced employee needs across various identities.

Conclusions about nonprofit work, summarized in quadrant III and IV, mirror that of public work with a few nuances. For female-dominated work, and similar to the public sector, attraction rather than attachment significantly varied by gender (quadrant III). Interestingly, there were no gender differences found for attraction to male-dominated nonprofit work (quadrant IV). This may be due to two opposing forces: overall female attraction to nonprofit work and specific male attraction to male-dominated professions.

Future work can expand this article by decomposing the influence of each force. It should be noted that up until now, this discussion has largely framed general observations about the female majority in public work as a feature that flows from attraction and attachment behaviors in the data. The opposite could also be true. For example, a higher female attraction could flow from a higher female-dominance observed in public work (i.e., women are attracted to being a public-school teacher because they see other female teachers). The directionality (causality) of the relationship was not investigated. In a similar vein, it has been assumed that future recruitment strategies can capitalize on the higher female attraction found in the dataset. An alternative possibility is that human resource managers are already utilizing their resources to appeal to women, and this has resulted in increased attraction. The current state of research is unable to rule out any directionality but, regardless, points to the importance of recruitment when considering gender.

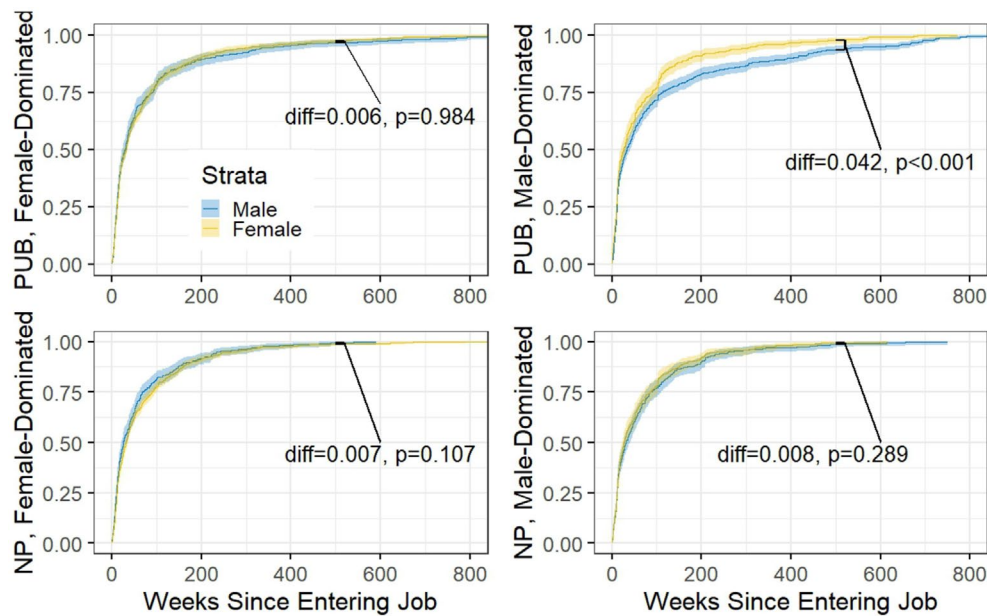


FIGURE 6 | Kaplan-Meier curves by gender for first exit from female- or male-dominated professions by sector.

TABLE 5 | Hazard ratios on gender from Cox models for rate of first exit from female- or male-dominated professions by sectors.

	Female-Dominated		Male-Dominated	
	Exp(coef) robust(SE)	<i>p</i>	Exp(coef) robust(SE)	<i>p</i>
Public Exit, Female	1.006	0.924	1.204	0.016
Base = Male	(0.068)		(0.077)	
Nonprofit Exit, Female	0.907	0.188	1.192	0.030
Base = Male	(0.074)		(0.081)	

I: Female-Dominated Public Work

Higher female attraction
No difference in attachment

II: Male-Dominated Public Work

Lower female attraction
Lower female attachment

III: Female-Dominated Nonprofit Work

Higher female attraction
No difference in attachment

IV: Male-Dominated Nonprofit Work

No difference in attraction
Lower female attachment

FIGURE 7 | Summary of empirical conclusions.

In addition to directionality, this article opens several other avenues for future inquiry and improvement. The strong relationship between gender and entry behaviors deserves further investigation, particularly regarding whether selection or socialization processes drive these patterns. This article was unable to fully control for the influence of early life socialization. Additionally, the sector-specific differences in gender-profession dynamics such as the lack of significant gender differences in entry to male-dominated nonprofit professions warrant deeper exploration of how sector contexts moderate profession-level sex segregation.

This article also contained several other limitations worth noting. The focus on first entry and exit captured only early career movements of individuals and prevented conclusions around vertical segregation. Gendered patterns in entry and exit of management roles stand to provide further insight into persistent leadership and pay gaps in the workforce. Lastly, the data presented several limitations. There was a reliance on binary gender categorization, failing to capture the full spectrum of gender identities. The limited sample size also prevented longitudinal analysis to account for within-person heterogeneity or the ability to account for the interaction between gender and race. This

focus was additionally around a single generational cohort, limiting external validity to other groups.

5 | Conclusion

This article employed Cox regression models with time-dependent covariates to study the relationship between gender and first entry/exit in sector employment. Results find that women, across time, demonstrate a higher likelihood to enter public and nonprofit work while failing to find a relationship between gender and rate of exit. Results concluded that females displayed a higher attraction to nonprofit and public work, and this was mainly driven by higher female attraction to female-dominated professions in these sectors and lower attraction to male-dominated public work. For attachment, models failed to find significant gender differences at the sector level, but further decomposition showed lower female attachment for male-dominated professions in both sectors.

Findings from this piece are relevant for scholars and practitioners concerned with the recruitment and retention of public and nonprofit workers. Results suggest behaviors that create one's career trajectory are not gender neutral. For example, women demonstrate a significantly faster rate of entry into public and nonprofit work but do not remain in these positions longer than their male counterparts. This finding furthers the field's understanding of the underlying individual-level behaviors that are related to the dominant female presence in public and nonprofit work. Furthermore, while gender differences are not observed in overall exit rates from the public and nonprofit sectors, women were more likely to leave male-dominated professions in both sectors. The decomposition of sectors into female- and male-dominant professions points to incongruity pressures that occur given one's professions. Individual behaviors in sector entry and exit provide another vantage point in making sense of the tension between a representative workforce and persistent inequality in the workplace.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Table S1:** Full set of hazard ratio estimates of cox models for entry into public or nonprofit work. **Table S2:** Full set of hazard ratio estimates of cox models for exit from public or nonprofit work. **Table S3:** Full set of hazard ratio estimates of cox models for entry into female- or male-dominated professions by sector. **Table S4:** Full set of hazard ratio estimates of cox models for exit from female- or male-dominated professions by sector.