

Career Sustainability among Dutch and Pakistani Women Managers: A Narrative Analysis

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Abstract

Although a growing body of research addresses the obstacles to women's sustainable careers, little is known about how women managers build sustainable careers. This research contributes to the sustainable career framework by conceptualizing the career sustainability of women managers as a narrative accomplishment. The study includes interviews with eighteen women managers, nine Pakistani and nine Dutch. Five narrative approaches to career sustainability are identified: *reinventing*, *proactive*, *self-made*, *devoting*, and *realigning*. Each narrative approach provides a unique perspective on careers based on meaning-making, work-life balance priorities, and the degree of context dependence, resulting in distinct challenges to career sustainability. We also discuss implications for future research and practice.

Keywords: Sustainable Careers, Women, Netherlands, Pakistan, Narrative inquiry

Introduction

Career sustainability is a means of achieving sustainable development goals, including good health and well-being, decent work, and economic growth. It facilitates the development of a person's identity, personal fulfillment, way of life,

income, family, and retirement. Nonetheless, a career is a unique journey (Dany, Mallon, & Arthur, 2003). To sustain themselves throughout their careers, individuals must choose from various options. Their decisions are influenced by what they consider essential at any given time and their degree of freedom of choice. They must reduce their work responsibilities while remaining happy, healthy, and productive (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020). In this regard, family obligations, particularly motherhood, make it more challenging for women to sustain their careers (Herman & Lewis, 2012). Even though many women can overcome these obstacles and attain executive leadership positions, most women compromise their ambitions and settle for less. In light of these challenges, the literature offers various alternative ways to address them, including drawing motivation from the professional challenges (Buse, Bilimoria, & Perelli, 2013), intrinsic motivation (Schmitt & Wilkesmann, 2020), self-identification with their profession (Cech et al., 2011), support from partners (Herman & Lewis, 2012) and support from coworkers (Fernando, Cohen, & Duberley, 2018), particularly for the women.

Career research is an interdisciplinary field that incorporates multiple disciplines and perspectives. Numerous disciplines have contributed to our understanding of vocational behavior and career development, including psychology (e.g., Holland (1997)), sociology (e.g., Granovetter (2018)), economics (e.g., Becker (1993)), and management (e.g., Arthur and Rousseau (2001)). This multidisciplinary nature of career research reflects the diversity and dynamism of careers as individuals navigate an ever-changing labor market and pursue their distinctive career paths. Although a sufficient number of studies have addressed the barriers to women's sustainable careers, little is known about how women managers construe a sustainable career. Most research focuses on women's challenges in managerial careers and how they overcome them. However, they do not emphasize how women construe sustainability of their careers. Career theories have evolved to recognize that women's careers are non-linear, affected by interruptions, and adaptive to their typical contexts (Datta & Agarwal, 2017). Literature suggests that women approach their careers from a relational perspective as their values and preferences shift from career-focused to family-focused in response to changing work-life conditions (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). At various career stages, a

woman may derive meanings differently than others. For example, a person may compromise her career goals by reducing her workload (Hall et al., 2012), taking a break (Bröckel, 2018), or even subordinating her career to that of her partner.

Since a sustainable career involves achieving both work and life domain goals (De Vos et al., 2020), and people adhering to different work-life ideologies have different perspectives on their work and life goals (Leslie, King, & Clair, 2019), it is important to understand how women view the sustainability of their careers in the context of their overall lives. Is this compromise or settling for less upsetting to every woman? Is it more important for a woman to realize her full professional potential or to feel a sense of accomplishment? By understanding how women managers construe the sustainability of their careers, this study contributes to the existing knowledge on sustainable careers. In addition, examining this phenomenon from the perspective of women managers from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as the Netherlands and Pakistan, may provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

This study employs a narrative approach to investigate how women managers in the Netherlands and Pakistan construe their careers' sustainability. This approach focuses on the deliberate efforts of individuals toward their career-related meaning-making (Christensen & Johnston, 2003; Cochran, 1990; Cohen & Mallon, 2001) and their understanding of themselves and their actions in their particular contexts (Bujold, 2004). In this investigation, we make several theoretical contributions. First, we have contributed to the sustainable career framework career by conceptualizing career sustainability as a narrative accomplishment of women managers and framing it as their subjective experience. Second, we have identified the context-dependent nature of these narratives and the threat they pose to the sustainability of the careers of women managers. In addition, by examining a diverse group of women, we have gained understanding of sustainable career framework in diverse contexts.

The structure of this study is as follows. First, we review the literature on the sustainable careers of women managers and the cultural context of the Netherlands and Pakistan. Second, we describe the analytical approach of this research. Third, we present the findings of this study. Fourth, we conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of this study and directions for future research.

Sustainable Career for women managers

Sustainable careers have broadened the traditional notion of a career by explicitly incorporating temporality and the multiple spheres of an individual's existence into its definition and assigning them equal weight in shaping a career. A sustainable career is defined by [Van der Heijden and De Vos \(2015\)](#) as "the sequence of an individual's different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing multiple social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, thereby providing meaning to the individual." According to the sustainable career perspective, a sustainable career is characterized by developing, conserving, and renewing a person's career-related resources over time ([Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015](#)). At some point in their careers, individuals may need to protect their resources by reducing their work responsibilities to remain happy, healthy, and productive ([De Vos et al., 2020](#)).

In general, women encounter greater obstacles in sustaining management careers. According to [Finkelstein \(2018\)](#), most women in the management profession undergo extensive adaptation phases due to their preferences and the surrounding environment. Women worldwide face myriad obstacles in advancing their careers. These obstacles include cultural norms, organizational policies, and personal preferences. In organizations, women face 'glass ceiling,' 'sticky floor,' and 'labyrinth' challenges ([Rath, Mohanty, & Pradhan, 2019](#)), whereas, at home, family and care responsibilities pose obstacles to their advancement ([Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2008](#)).

Based on their work-life preferences, women are divided into three categories ([Hakim, 1998](#)): the home-centered, who always prioritize their home responsibilities, the adaptive, who try to adapt to their circumstances in both domains of life and make their way accordingly; and the work-centered, who prefer to center their lives on their careers and place a premium on their careers. To create a sustainable career, each woman in a management position follows an individualized career path tailored to her circumstances and gives her a sense of purpose ([Jogulu & Franken, 2023](#)). According to [Herman \(2015\)](#), women who take career break(s) to accommodate family-related responsibilities have three options: restarting their careers at full speed if their circumstances allow, rerouting their careers to accommodate their roles outside

their work domain, or, as a last resort, retreating and abandoning their career goals for caring roles at home. Women use a variety of options and strategies to manage their situations throughout their careers. Successful career women support themselves by self-care and self-motivation (McDonald et al., 2016). At some point in their careers, the majority of women inevitably face the need to make career compromises, which may include voluntary downshifting (Schor, 1999) or customizing their careers to reduce work responsibilities (Valcour, Bailyn, & Quijada, 2007). This aids them in obtaining employment and balancing domestic obligations. In conclusion, women in management positions face unique obstacles in establishing sustainable careers, and they employ a variety of options and strategies to navigate their career paths and attain their objectives.

Cultural Context of the Netherlands and Pakistan

The cultures and social structures of the Netherlands and Pakistan are vastly distinct. According to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report (2021), the Netherlands and Pakistan are ranked 31st and 153rd, respectively, regarding gender disparity. The Netherlands is an individualistic society that ranks highly on Hofstede's (1984) femininity culture dimensions. In the Netherlands, family sizes are modest. Compared to other European nations, Dutch employees work fewer hours per week on average (OECD, 2018). Flexible work scheduling is widespread in Dutch businesses (Peper et al., 2011).

In contrast, Pakistan is a collectivistic society with a high masculinity index (Hofstede, 1984). In Pakistan, there are an average of 6.3 people per household, including 2.7 children under 16 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In collectivist societies, even the term 'family' has a distinct meaning, encompassing parents, siblings, maternal and paternal uncles, and their families (Karimi, 2008). Traditionally, women perform domestic duties. Parents are extremely protective of their adult daughters due to deeply ingrained cultural and religious values (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Shaheed, 2009). For most educated women, employment in organizations is not an easy option. In recent decades, women's participation in the labor force has increased (Hussain, Malik, & Hayat, 2009); however, the lack of family-friendly organizational policies regarding working hours and flexible timings is a significant barrier for women.

Globally, women in managerial positions face comparable family-related obstacles. In all cultural contexts, motherhood and family-care responsibilities impede women's career aspirations, despite the varying severity of these obstacles (Budig, Misra, & Boeckmann, 2016; Jogulu & Franken, 2023). Consequently, they are underrepresented in leadership positions in most industries across the globe (World Economic Forum, 2022). Examining a group of women from two distinct cultures provides the opportunity to develop a rich cross-cultural understanding and to identify shared and distinct themes among both groups of women.

In conclusion, the career strategy of a woman manager is determined by her conception of a sustainable career. She develops her sense of how her career is sustainable by creating a narrative revolving around her career and life decisions. Our investigation is driven by the following research questions:

How do women managers' narratives construe the sustainability of their careers in the Netherlands and Pakistan?

Methods

Analytical approach

In this study, we used a narrative approach to investigate how women managers construe sustainable careers. The narrative approach is appropriate for this investigation because it considers the unique context of each individual. This approach concentrates on the stories narrators tell about their life experiences, and the researcher attempts to deconstruct/reconstruct these narratives (Creswell, 2012). Narrative inquiry prioritizes narrative truth over historical truth (Spence, 1984; Wertz et al., 2011). Narrative truth differs from historical truth because it is the individual's perception and experience of reality. Individuals make narrative choices about which events to include and how to interpret them to create a reasonable and meaningful story about themselves (McAdams, 1993; McAdams, 2011). In narratives, individuals make connections between events, how they experienced those events, their decisions, and, most significantly, how time played a role in the journey (Coulter & Smith, 2009). The narrative approach allows one to comprehend an individual's story about their career experiences (Chudzikowski,

Gustafsson, & Tams, 2020). It is particularly well-suited for studying people's endeavors to sustain their careers.

This study employs the thematic approach of narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) to interpret stories by developing themes based on prior and emergent theories. The four dimensions of the sustainable career framework (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015) - *agency, meaning, social space, and time* - are used as prior theory to develop themes from our interview data. A narrative approach is considered suitable for theory development on the sustainable career framework because it inherently addresses its four dimensions (Chudzikowski et al., 2020).

Data Collection

Researchers recruited participants through the Human Resources departments of respective organizations and/or the authors' personal and professional contacts in organizations in the Netherlands and Pakistan. Through snowball sampling, we contacted the women managers willing to share their experiences.

Participants were experienced women managers with at least ten years of service. The reason for selecting such participants was that, at this stage of life, they are already exposed to both work and home demands (Demerouti, Peeters, & van der Heijden, 2012). Participants from the Netherlands were employed in the telecommunications, retail, and research sectors. On the other hand, the Pakistani participants worked in banking, manufacturing, retail, telecommunications, and consulting sectors. We interviewed 18 managers for this study, nine from each country. Ages ranged from the mid-30s to the early 50s. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' primary characteristics.

The first author interviewed each participant in person or via video/voice conversation on Skype or WhatsApp. Before the meeting, we obtained the participants' informed consent and communicated to them the scope of the study and the information we required from them. We also ensured the privacy of the data. Interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. In the Netherlands, all interviews were conducted in English. In Pakistan, interviews were conducted in Urdu or bilingually in Urdu and English. The first author transcribed them while translating them into English. Typically,

interviews were held in a conference room or the participant's office to ensure confidentiality and facilitate concentration. Using the storytelling technique, the participants were asked to recount their career histories, beginning with their family and educational background. There was a conversation about career transitions, family events, and other work and home-related matters. The interviewer posed questions at the conclusion or throughout the narrator's account to elicit additional information.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Codename	Country	Experience	Marital status	Children	Age	Education
Shumaila	Pakistan	18 years	Married	3	45	Masters
Sumaira	Pakistan	10 years	Divorced	2	35	Bachelor
Samina	Pakistan	18 years	Married	2	38	Masters
Amna	Pakistan	25 years	Divorced	2	48	Masters
Fehmina	Pakistan	20 years	Married	2	45	Masters
Aiza	Pakistan	13 years	Single	0	36	Masters
Zaryab	Pakistan	11 years	Married	1	32	Masters
Tehmina	Pakistan	17 years	Single	0	39	Masters
Sidra	Pakistan	10 years	Single	0	34	Masters
Beatrice	Netherlands	17 years	Divorced	0	43	Bachelor
Jan	Netherlands	26 years	Married	2	49	Bachelor
Hendrika	Netherlands	29 years	Married	2	51	Masters
Lina	Netherlands	18 years	Married	2	45	Masters
Philou	Netherlands	30 years	Divorced	1	50	Bachelor
Johanna	Netherlands	15 years	Married	2	43	Post-Doc
Catharina	Netherlands	15 years	Married	0	39	Masters
Elisabeth	Netherlands	29 years	Married	2	54	Masters
Anna	Netherlands	13 years	Married	2	30	Bachelor

Analysis

The analysis of primary data was conducted in four stages. In the first stage, the holistic analysis, we analyzed each interview as a unit and focused on gaining a comprehensive understanding of the story (Riessman, 2008). Unlike other qualitative methods, data is not fragmented into thematic pieces for cross analysis (Creswell, 2012). Instead, themes are developed to comprehend a single story through the lens of those themes. We interpreted each narrative using the four dimensions of

sustainable career framework – agency, meaning, social space, and time – to determine how individuals conceptualized the sustainability of their careers.

In the second phase of analysis, we compared the career narratives of each participant. As sensitizing tools, we employed the same four dimensions of the sustainable career framework. Interpretations of these dimensions varied among participants. For example, for some, the only way to sustain their careers was to reinvent themselves and adhere to their core values, whereas, for others, the key was to be proactive and maintain a work-life balance. We developed narrative themes based on the examined cases.

We iterated between theory and data (Riessman, 2001) to delineate narrative theme boundaries during the third analysis phase. At this stage, we created a description of each narrative theme through in-depth discussions and a reexamination of participant stories through the lens of the theory. In the fourth stage, we examined these themes across all participant narratives to improve our findings.

Findings

We have found five distinct narrative themes in women managers' construal of sustainability of their careers: *reinventing*, *proactive*, *self-made*, *devoting*, and *realigning* (Table 2). This section describes the sensemaking process as it filters out the themes.

Reinventing

The participants in this collection of narratives made independent decisions and refused to accept anything less than total control over their careers. There are both Dutch and Pakistani managers in this category. They regarded their careers as the most essential aspect of their lives and all others as secondary. They did not hesitate to reinvent themselves in their careers to discover their ideals. They deemed it impossible to continue with a poor decision. Amna enrolled in premedical studies and received distinction, but she could not find her connection with the medical field. She displayed her report card to her father and said:

"look, papa, these are my grades," he was incredibly happy, then I told him, "look, I am not going to be a doctor; this is not me."

Their conception of meaning was predicated on their subjective career success. They were steadfast in their commitment to authenticity and life principles. Even if it was a success according to objective standards, they were highly dissatisfied with the incompatibility between themselves and their job. Catharina described her feeling out of place, indicating her discomfort with her early career choice. She related:

I had a distinguished career, I could take the next step. They had already offered it to me, so nothing was wrong. But it just did not feel like it was me. So, it was just like a feeling here (pointing to her heart).

According to this narrative, the participants cited their families as crucial to sustaining their careers. At some point in their careers, these women received support from their parents or spouses, enabling them to make risky decisions. It greatly aided them in shaping their careers. When Catharina decided to return to college but was uncertain about the process, her spouse pushed her to take the initiative:

He said, come I want to show you something, and here what he did was, he was at etic, he made a learning room, a student home, just for me to start learning again, you know, going back to school... So, he just said, here is your place to study again. So, you do not have a ground not to do it; you do not have any reasons not to do it.

The ascent up the career ladder has no bearing on this career narrative. Rather, pausing to consider the best options was integral to this narrative. Moreover, lateral growth assisted them in rediscovering themselves. Continuing in an unsuitable occupation was perceived as threat to their sustainability. Catharina reached this conclusion early in her career, whereas Amna remained in banking for many years and endured emotional strain. Leaving that profession, entering the teaching profession, and investing in business was, for her, like a cure for a chronic illness. She declared:

I think that it (the banking career) has ended in that bank. I do not think of working in some other bank anymore.

Thus, the reinventing narrative defines career sustainability as adhering to one's life values. Objective career success criteria are meaningless if a career does not provide inner fulfillment. The careers of these managers are the focal point of their lives, and they view their families as a means to achieve their professional objectives. In this narrative, a break to rediscover one's strengths is essential to establishing a sustainable career.

Proactive

There are both Dutch and Pakistani managers in this category. The participants in this career narrative constructed their careers through proactive responses to work-life conflicts. They prioritized their work-life issues in their planning, either by delaying marriage to focus on their careers or by reducing their workload to accommodate family responsibilities. Zaryab believed her decision to pursue a career before having a child had better prepared her to manage domestic responsibilities.

I am 32, and I had my first child at 30, and by 30, I had a career for myself. I have been working for 7 years, and I am a manager... A, I am better at handling everything, and ... B, you know the opportunity cost of leaving my job is remarkably high for me, So I rather invest more in childcare, for example, because I am at that point where I can.....

They discovered meaning by maintaining a balance between work and family. For them, success meant positive spillovers from home to work and vice versa. Jan, for example, turned down a management position within her organization because she knew it would be difficult to juggle that responsibility with her childcare obligations. In contrast, Anna's spouse was not career-driven, so she could strike a balance without sacrificing her ambitions. She described her situation:

I was always passionate about my work, which is also about finding balance at home. So, I talk a lot about it with my husband; he is not that career-driven, so he says to me, you go forward, and he is trying to adjust, but at the same time, I am also trying to adjust because I still want to see my children.

Under this narrative, managers founded their decisions on the support networks in both domains. They accomplished this by sharing family roles or utilizing family-friendly organizational policies. Anna took advantage of her husband's lack of career orientation to concentrate on her work obligations. Jan and her spouse, on the other hand, utilized their workplace's flexible work policies to fulfill their domestic obligations, as she explained.

My son was born, and I became manager of another department, and I started to work for four days, so my husband was also working for four days at that moment, so we both had one day with our son and for three days, he was going to daycare.

Under this narrative, individuals can avoid the risks associated with lateral movement by staying within the same organization. By doing so, they can make long-term plans and feel secure in their surroundings. Delaying marriage or childbearing in the early stages of their careers, or reducing their workload to accommodate domestic responsibilities, also played a role in their career advancement. For example, Zaryab advanced her career by postponing the birth of her first child until she could better manage her life.

Thus, according to the proactive narrative, achieving career sustainability involves proactively addressing work and family issues. Women who adopt proactive narratives build sustainable careers by proactively managing their work and personal circumstances. They maintain a balance between their work and personal lives through strategic planning of life and career events, such as delaying marriage/children or avoiding uncertainty by refraining from lateral movements to other organizations.

Self-made

Under this narrative, as the name suggests, women managers build their careers by embracing challenging work in the early phases of their careers and exerting great effort to overcome the obstacles. This category contains both Dutch and Pakistani managers. They devoted time to continuous learning and accepting challenging assignments early in their careers. Aiza, who attained a management position in her early 30s, was the oldest of her siblings and grew up with ailing parents. Early in her life, she found herself in a position of significant responsibility. This difficulty strengthened her, and she resolved to utilize her maximum capacity to overcome all obstacles. She explained how she immediately assumed responsibility for her career.

"How I got admission in college, how I got into university, my parents don't know, did all that on my own, to go and to find and meet people. So, things were going in that way."

These managers derived meaning from continually challenging themselves. They valued autonomy and professional advancement by engaging in demanding work in their respective professions. Sidra, who was in her 30s and a co-partner at a strategic consulting firm, delightedly described the difficult nature of her work.

"We are helping a company develop its strategy. In strategy development, we did all their environmental scans and the study, and we understood that they needed to close 4 out of 11 factories. It's a running business, a 400 (Rs.) crore company.... out of 11 factories, we are asking them to close 4, and we also must help them shut down those factories. How stressful will it be if that decision we convinced them to make goes bad, who will be responsible? "

Their careers dominate their lives as they leverage their extensive professional networks to advance and acquire new skills. They strongly identify with their professions rather than with their organizations. The majority of these women were either unmarried or divorced. For some, family responsibilities served as a source of career motivation, and domestic financial issues motivated them to dedicate more time and energy to their careers to overcome their challenges at home. For instance, Sumaira aspired to advance her career to support her children after experiencing a troubled marriage. In other cases, career advancement was deemed so crucial that some women made sacrifices in their personal lives. Such as Sidra's description of her problematic relationship:

"my mind frame changed a bit towards life. I said why should I be dependent on a person... That sort of isolated me. There was exponential growth as a professional, but after that experience, I never bothered about that aspect of my personal life. I am living an independent life."

Early life challenges or a difficult start to a career assisted this group of women in assuming responsibility for their careers. Early experiences shape the career paths of individuals. They did not prioritize continuity within the same organization; instead, lateral movement contributed significantly to their professional development. Before her divorce, Philou's early career was filled with difficulty as her husband wanted her to be a housewife, and she struggled to find work that aligned with her situation. Her journey from a massage therapist to a human resources consultant was marked by various obstacles.

...so, I got back into the business, first as a secretary and then three years as a commercial assistant, as an accounts manager, and a lot of commercial jobs I have done, and then at a certain point at about 10 years ago, I joined human resources.

Thus, according to the self-made narrative, sustaining a career requires taking complete responsibility for one's life. The individuals who follow this narrative construct their careers in rather distinct ways. In the early phases of their careers, they challenge themselves at every level for maximum achievement. Developing pertinent competencies and skills and establishing a professional network are the keys to success in this narrative. Vertical growth is the optimal condition for sustaining their careers, but commitment to a single organization is preferred only if it offers them growth opportunities.

Devoting

Only Dutch managers have been identified in this category. The individuals in this career narrative chose professions they were passionate about, which led to a fulfilling career path. They were not concerned with promotions or competition. Possibly because of this, they did not make any long-term plans. They continued to enjoy themselves. As Johanna expressed about her career:

I have to admit, I don't have so much as goals in my career.

These individuals were motivated by authenticity. They derived meaning from their professional achievements, not organizational advancement. Elizabeth explained the motivation behind her career choices.

I always choose what I like. I never thought that doing business management would get me a better job than if I did political science. For me, it was never important to have a very well-paid job.

They had a close relationship with their workplace and coworkers. They preferred working together with their coworkers over competing against them. They preferred coaching over management positions because it allowed them to avoid the competitive environment. Johanna, a scientist, expressed satisfaction with her workplace.

...then I found a genuinely respectable job in another area focused on yeast research, a post-doc, but the pleasant thing about the yeast community is that it's much more collaborative. I think science should be about collaborating because then you progress fast."

Delaying marriage and childbearing responsibilities enabled these women to establish their careers more firmly. In addition, attaining their desired profession early in their career was considered significant. Elisabeth's dedication to her job prevented her from concentrating on acquiring relevant new skills for the future job market, and she found it challenging to maintain her career in her 50s due to the changing nature of the job market.

I worked a lot, but I didn't invest enough in myself. Of course, I had a more complicated job, so I learned on the job but didn't do any extra studies.

According to the devoting narrative, authenticity and pursuing one's passion are the keys to a sustainable career. The individuals who follow this narrative prefer collaborative environments over competitive ones. This can occasionally lead to problems, as an excessive commitment to the current position can inhibit growth in dynamic work environments.

Realigning

In this career narrative, the women began their careers with strong initiative and a focus on their professional paths. However, after marriage and the assumption of domestic responsibilities, they redirected their careers and accepted that their careers were secondary to those of their husbands/partners. This resulted from their heavy domestic responsibilities, where they had to devote much time to childcare, etc. As a result of their spouses' higher salaries, the wives decided to take career breaks, reduce their workload, and decrease their management responsibilities. Realizing they might be unable to bridge the gap readily, they accepted their permanent status as secondary earners due to their extended absence from work or reduced workload. Despite cultural differences, both Dutch and Pakistani women experienced similar consequences for their careers. Samina, who had embarked on a promising career at a multinational bank, described how her life changed after marriage.

When I (re)started my job, it was terrible because previously, I did it from my parent's home. Doing that from my in-laws' home was like that.... it was so impractical behavior that they used to call you whenever there were some guests, cook food for them, and do this and that.

For these women, the most important aspect of life was to balance work and home and contribute to their family's stability, which they accomplished by sacrificing their career ambitions for the sake of their families. Lina was quite content after having two children and maintaining a mediocre managerial career:

I get into another balance between work and your personal life, so then it kind of goes ...less steep ... so I stayed on the level of manager, which is fine for me, and was mainly able to balance my professional life with my personal life.

These women cared more about their families than about their careers. They were over-committed at home and unable to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by their organizations. Hendrika, realizing that she may not be able to fully commit to work after the birth of her first child, voluntarily proposed to her manager that she be demoted, and the proposal was accepted. She was permitted to determine how things would function for her.

I said if you don't want me on that job, that's good. I can understand that because I am not around, and my focus is now on my child.... he was understanding and said, " ok, just let's see how it works out.

Family obligations severely interrupted an otherwise auspicious start. This transition compelled them to seek reduced responsibilities and workloads to maintain their careers. They sustained their careers by relinquishing management duties and averting organizational promotion timelines. Lina was quite content in her mid-40s because she had sacrificed a portion of her career to appreciate the 'whole life.'

It is better at this stage to be in the mid-40s almost than be in the mid-30s trying to balance everything and only wondering, in the end, a career is nice, but it's only a career.

According to the realigning career narrative, a career becomes sustainable by maintaining a low profile in the later years when domestic responsibilities increase. Women managers were able to sustain their careers by prioritizing fulfilling domestic obligations over lofty ambitions. Conversely, a greater commitment to work could be detrimental to their careers, as it may lead to physical and psychological exhaustion due to the demands of both work and life.

Table 2. Overview of Narratives

Career Narratives	Dimensions of Sustainable Careers			
	Agency	Meaning	Social Space	Time
<i>Reinventing</i>	No compromise on core life values	Meaning making through subjective success	Family as an enabler for career choices	Taking a break, reconsidering the right choices. Vertical growth is not crucial.
<i>Proactive</i>	Proactivity is the key to avoiding conflicts. Plan long ahead in both (W/H) domains to avoid conflicts.	Success means balancing work and home – positive spillovers from W to H and H to W.	Negotiate to share roles and achieve better synchronization at home and work.	Staying with the same organization can reduce problems and uncertainty.
<i>Self-made</i>	Devotion to build a career, overcome hardships in early career by taking bold decisions, continuous learning, challenging assignments	Challenge-oriented, continuous learning.	Life revolves around a career – extensive use of professional networks to learn and grow.	Early life and career challenges. Continuity with the same organization is not important. Lateral career moves facilitate growth.
<i>Devoting</i>	Devotion to the profession does not believe in competition, short-term planning.	Authenticity driven.	Strongly associated with the work environment. Collaborative attitude	Delay in motherhood. No long-term goals. Do not focus on time-based promotions.
<i>Realigning</i>	Adjusted their career to accommodate their partner's career. Accepted the role of secondary earner and reduced work responsibilities.	Meaning making by achieving balance, and contribution to the family	Relate themselves more to their family. Heavily committed at home domain, cannot fully utilize the opportunities organizations offer.	Family commitments interrupt early career growth. Settle with lesser work responsibilities.

Discussion

This paper uses a narrative approach to explain how women managers in Pakistani and Dutch organizations construe their careers' sustainability. We have contributed to the sustainable career framework by conceptualizing career sustainability as a narrative accomplishment of women managers. We have focused on comprehending their experiences through the lens of the four dimensions of the sustainable career framework: meaning, agency, time, and social space. Our analysis has identified five career sustainability narratives: reinventing, proactive, self-made, devoting, and realigning. These are five distinct ways in which women managers view the sustainability of their careers. Importantly, we found these narratives in both contexts, except for the devoting narrative, which we only found among Dutch managers.

This research contributes significantly to the sustainable career framework. First, we have found that a woman manager's perception of her career's sustainability is influenced by how she derives meaning from her early work and life experiences. This is consistent with the theory that a person's present and past experiences influence their ideological beliefs about their life and career (Leslie et al., 2019). For example, managers who encounter adversity and challenging circumstances early in their lives and careers (self-made) develop a sense of challenge and initiative, prefer independence, and continuously strive to increase their resources throughout their careers. Those who have learned not to compromise (reinvent) their core values prefer to be honest with themselves and are unafraid to take risks and reinvent themselves to find the proper career path. The key to their career sustainability is authenticity and being true to themselves. They consider their careers sustainable only when they achieve a sense of accomplishment in their own subjective ways.

Second, in narratives where work-life balance is of paramount importance, family and/or organizational support is essential for decision-making. A person must navigate her career carefully, considering the support she may receive from home and work environments. Managers who view work-life balance as the holy grail attempt to maximize their opportunities in both their professional and personal lives. The proactive approach entails planning and resolving potential conflicts to prevent any

conflict. To maintain their careers, they delay marriage/parenthood or reduce their work obligations (Hall et al., 2012). Realigning narrative takes the alternative approach of realigning with their partner's career and accepting their role as the family's secondary earner. This approach involves making sacrifices in certain career goals to avoid a complete halt in their careers and to sustain them. They recognize the importance of their careers in the context of their spouse's career. Although reducing work responsibilities may result in fewer growth opportunities and a stalled career (Dick, 2010; Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010; Gascoigne & Kelliher, 2018), from the perspective of a sustainable career, the individual must feel a sense of accomplishment in her overall life context (De Vos et al., 2020).

Third, each narrative involves a distinct level of context dependence, presenting different challenges related to social space and career sustainability. Career sustainability is intrinsically intertwined with how individuals interpret their context (Chudzikowski et al., 2020; Jogulu & Franken, 2023), and the interpretation of context varies across narratives. More context-sensitive narratives are inherently flexible and relatively more resilient. For example, the reinventing narrative interprets sustainability as a constant search for the ideal alignment between one's career and values, which may be difficult to achieve without organization and family support. In contrast, proactive and realigning narratives conceptualize sustainability by balancing work and home responsibilities, which makes them more adaptable to their context and, consequently, more readily sustainable.

Despite cultural differences, all narratives, except one exclusive to Dutch women, were shared by women from both the Netherlands and Pakistan. We were not interested in comparing contexts or cultures because, from a narrative perspective, an individual's narrative is not simply an explanation of her situations and constraints; rather, it is how a narrator experiences her agency about the conception of her social space (Bosley, Arnold, & Cohen, 2009). Our investigation centered on determining how these managers comprehend their relevant context and make sense of a sustainable career. In the proactive narrative, for instance, managers from both nations planned ahead to avoid work-life conflicts and viewed this as a sustainable career strategy.

Practical Implications

Our research findings have several implications for individuals, career counselors, and organizations. First, these five career narratives allow individuals to reflect on their careers and discover ways of leading their careers consistent with their values and preferences. Choosing a career path consistent with an individual's values and inclinations makes a career long-lasting. For instance, if a woman follows the realigning career narrative, she may feel behind others regarding career progression, but if this narrative is aligned with her values and preferences, her career may be more stable. Similarly, we have learned from the proactive narrative that career sustainability can be attained by planning proactively on both the work and life domains to avoid conflict.

Our findings can aid career counselors and advisors in organizations to help women managers identify a suitable career narrative. It is important to make them aware that a sustainable career is not a specific way of leading a career. Encouraging them to adopt a narrative aligned with their life values can facilitate them in making their careers sustainable.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study employs a qualitative narrative approach to understand the phenomenon comprehensively. However, there are some limitations to this study. First, we have employed a small sample. Future research may utilize larger samples to determine the extent to which these career narratives exist among women. Second, our participants came from diverse professional backgrounds, which may limit in-depth investigation of profession-specific career sustainability issues. Future research could focus on specific professions, such as finance, consulting, and manufacturing, to determine how women professionals in these fields view the sustainability of their careers. Third, our focus was on women in the management cadre. Future research should investigate women in non-managerial positions as well.

Conclusion

In this paper, we used a narrative approach to investigate how women managers in the Netherlands and Pakistan perceive the sustainability of their careers.

Five career narratives were identified: reinventing, proactive, self-made, devoting, and realigning. We contributed to the research on sustainable careers by conceptualizing career sustainability as a narrative accomplishment and describing it as the outcome of how women derive meaning from their early work and life experiences. We found that each narrative entails a different level of context dependence, resulting in varying levels of difficulty for a woman's career. Furthermore, we discussed the significance of these narratives for individuals, career counselors, and career coaches within organizations. Additionally, we offered recommendations for future research in the field of sustainable careers.

Availability of data and materials

The interview transcripts generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality issues. However, summaries generated during the analysis phase are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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