



Constructing Entrepreneurial Identity through Work-Life Balance Negotiation: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Female Entrepreneurs in Male-Dominated Industries

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: June 22, 2026 Revised: July 06, 2026 Accepted: July 20, 2026 Available Online: August 05, 2026	Women entrepreneurs who work in traditionally male dominated industries have entrepreneurial journeys where the socio-cultural and institutional context is continually influencing their role as entrepreneurs and their identity as women. Despite the growing body of research on entrepreneurial identity, there has been a dearth of studies looking at identity in relation to work-life balance and a predominance of Western-based views on identity. As a result, little is known about how women entrepreneurs in developing economies create their entrepreneurial identities amidst various personal, professional and gender related expectations. To fill this lacuna the present study aims at exploring lived experiences of 18 female entrepreneurs involved in male dominated industries of Lahore in Pakistan. This study used guided an interpretivist paradigm and in-depth semi-structured interviews that applied Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as analysis method. The analysis resulted in four themes that interrelate with each other: (1) Becoming an Entrepreneur: Redefining Self beyond Traditional Roles; (2) Negotiating Legitimacy in Male-Dominated Industries; (3) Negotiating Work-Life Balance through Adaptation; and (4) Identity Transformation through Resilience. The results highlight the fact that entrepreneurial identity is not something that is fixed when a venture was founded, but rather, it is a dynamic process and continuously changing as a result of the interaction among family responsibilities, entrepreneurial demands, gendered institutional expectations and the personal meaning-making. Participants did not see work-life balance as a fixed goal, but as a process of adaptation and negotiation that was ongoing as entrepreneurial identity was continually re-negotiated and re-constructed. The study combines the two theories: Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory, and thus builds upon the previous work of entrepreneurial identity by providing a contextual explanation of the construction of entrepreneurial identity in a developing-country context. The results also offer practical policy, entrepreneurial support and leadership development programs seeking to increase women's participation and sustainability of their businesses in traditionally male-dominated sectors.
Keywords: <i>Entrepreneurial identity; Work-life balance; Female entrepreneurs; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Role Theory; Gendered Organization Theory; Male-dominated industries, Pakistan.</i> Corresponding author: Shama Sadaqat Email: shamasadaqat1981@gmail.com	

Introduction

Women's entrepreneurship has become an increasingly important area of entrepreneurship research because of its contribution to economic growth, innovation, employment generation, and social inclusion. Women entrepreneurs are a significant part of entrepreneurial ecosystems all over the world, as highlighted by Bosma et al. (2024); not only do they create ventures, but they also contribute to the wellbeing of their families and communities, as proposed by Brush et al. (2019). Despite this, women's representation in entrepreneurship is still low and they face structural, institutional and socio-cultural barriers that affect the growth of their businesses and their entrepreneurial career. Henry et al. (2021) argue that such difficulties are part of larger gendered institutional systems which remain to influence entrepreneurial opportunities and experiences.

These barriers are especially apparent in sectors that are known to have a lower proportion of women, such as construction, engineering and manufacturing, logistics, information technology and telecommunications. In this context, women entrepreneurs often work in an organizational environment where leadership, technical knowledge and entrepreneurial skills have a masculine connotation. Acker (1990) referred to these institutional set-ups as gendered organizations where gender inequalities in organizations are reproduced by organizational structures and practices. More recently, Acker (2006) suggested that these inequities are perpetuated in the day-to-day workings of organizations and women need to prove their professional legitimacy other than by being competent business workers. Similarly, one found that gender stereotypes remain prevalent in the perception of entrepreneurial ability (Gupta et al., 2009), and Henry et al. (2021) noted that women entrepreneurs may have to negotiate credibility with their regular business tasks.

Such experiences have given rise to increased research interest in the notion of entrepreneurial identity. Modern research on entrepreneurship does not consider identity as a personal attribute, but rather as an interactionism process: entrepreneurs (re)make meanings about their identity and their business in their day-to-day practice. Fauchart and Gruber (2011) have suggested that entrepreneurs build up special identity orientations which influence entrepreneurial behavior, while Navis and Glynn (2011) have emphasized the process of entrepreneurial identity formation in terms of interactions of people and their social context. Building on this, Lewis (2013) suggested that entrepreneurial identity is ever evolving and is not just created at the point of the venture formation. Thus, identity is a dynamic, rather than static characteristic of entrepreneurs.

The process of constructing identity goes beyond the management of business activities for women entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial wants often overlap with socially mandated roles related to caregiving, family management and leadership, which can lead to conflicts between different identities. Sometimes, entrepreneurial aspirations conflict with socially imposed roles of caregiving, family management and leadership, which can result in multi-conflicts between different identities. While Marlow and McAdam (2013) asserted that it is not just individual agency that creates entrepreneurial identities, but also the broader nature of gender relations, Thébaud (2015) showed that status beliefs were established and remained a significant influence on perceptions of the entrepreneurial legitimacy of women. The results indicated that entrepreneurial identity is not a standalone phenomenon but a phenomenon that is created in the wider institutional and socio-cultural context.

One of the factors that plays a significant role in this process, but is not often discussed in detail, is the effect of work-life balance. Previous research mostly focused on work-life balance as a result, measured as work-family conflict, role overload or psychological wellbeing. For instance, Greenhaus and Allen (2011) studied balance in terms of conflicting work and family demands, while Kossek et al. (2014) studied organizational strategies that promote employees' well-being. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, is a context that is quite distinct: Work and personal life are often intermingled. With this distinction in mind, Kelliher et al. (2019) suggested that entrepreneurial work-life balance is a balance that is more dynamic and fluid than one typically observes in a traditional work-life balance. Similarly, Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault (2017) proposed that work-life experiences undergo transformation as a result of transformations in the social and institutional context. The views expressed suggest that the issue of work-life balance could be a key determinant of the formation of entrepreneurial identity over time.

This connection between entrepreneurial identity and work-life balance comes to the fore in a developing economy. Entrepreneurial activities in Pakistan are deeply rooted in the patriarchal family system, collectivist values and institutions, which still influence women's entrepreneurial experiences. Women entrepreneurs often negotiate their entrepreneurial ambitions with culturally given family duties (Roomi and Rehman, 2012); and institutional and socio-cultural factors are under-researched when compared to other streams of entrepreneurship research in developing countries (Henry et al., 2021). Women entrepreneurship has grown tremendously in Pakistan, but past research mainly focused on entrepreneurial barriers, access to finance or business performance has not offered insights into the nature of entrepreneurial identities as created in everyday entrepreneurial experiences.

Methodologically, the entrepreneurial identity research has been dominated with quantitative approaches or qualitative approaches focused on examining the relatively stable construct of identity. There are relatively few studies that have used interpretative methods that will allow for exploration of how entrepreneurial identities are constructed and enacted based on lived experiences, and, especially, among women entrepreneurs in male dominated industries. It is particularly apparent in the context of developing countries, where institutions and social-cultural contexts are very different from what is considered in much of the literature.

To fill these conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps, the present study utilizes Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to gain insights into the entrepreneurial identity processes of 18 female entrepreneurs who are operating in male dominated industries in Lahore, Pakistan with issues of work-life balance. The study draws on the concepts of Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory to represent the entrepreneurial identity as an ongoing and contextually-oriented process that is negotiated between entrepreneurial tasks, family tasks, institutional roles and meaning-making. The study builds on the existing body of work regarding entrepreneurial identity, by offering a specific lens to explore how entrepreneurial identity is continuously negotiated and reconstructed in the context of a developing country and through the lens of work-life balance.

Literature Review

Women Entrepreneurs in Male-Dominated Industries

In the last two decades, the number of women involved in entrepreneurship has risen greatly, and this is an individual result of the changes taking place in the overall economy, education and society in developed and developing countries. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor shows that women's new business entry rate is growing and they are playing a significant role in the creation of innovations, jobs and sustainable economic growth (Bosma et al., 2024). Even though this progress has been made, there are still irregularities in entrepreneurial activity by sector of the industry. Women are more likely to be involved in industries like education, healthcare, retail and personal services, while under-represented in sectors like construction, engineering, manufacturing, logistics, information technology and telecommunications (Henry et al., 2021).

We know that male dominated industries are not only industries that exclude women, but also industries that have historically emphasized masculine forms of leadership and expertise and their institutional practices, norms and cultures. Acker (1990) suggested that gender is embedded in organizations, as the structure, routines and informal practices within an organization reflect gender inequalities. Acker (2006) later expanded this view by showing how these disparities are taken for granted in typical organizational practices, which include recruitment and promotion, authority and decision-making. As a result, in the fields where women are entering that are dominated by men, they often find that there are obstacles to their entry into entrepreneurship much deeper than the technical side.

Entrepreneurship in these contexts then entails the creation of a business and a professional legitimacy. Gupta et al. (2009) found that entrepreneurial competence is still measured on the basis of gender stereotypes and that women are expected to display their competencies at a higher level than men to prove their competence. Likewise, Th  baud (2015) proposed that entrepreneurship is still considered predominantly male, which may pose further legitimacy issues for women entrepreneurs because they are still stereotyped as possessing masculine characteristics like assertiveness, authority and risk-taking. Women are not always given the credit they deserve as business leaders; they often have to fight for expectations to be met before their business skills and knowledge are valued.

These expectations of the institutions have multiple effects on entrepreneurial experiences. Aside from running a business, women also have to deal with issues regarding their access to professional networks, suppliers, investors, customers and industry associations, all of which are traditionally dominated by men. Based on these findings, Brush et al. (2019) propose that studying entrepreneurial ecosystems without considering gender is impossible as gender influences the opportunities that are available to women during the entrepreneurial process. Similarly, Henry et al. (2021) noted that women's entrepreneurial experiences do not occur in isolation of the larger institutional environments, but through interaction between the institutional level, and women's individual experiences.

Issues around a male dominated industry are exacerbated within developing economies. Entrepreneurship in Pakistan is deeply rooted in the patriarchy of the family, the collectivistic culture norms and institutional settings which are still affecting women entrepreneurship. Bearing in mind the cultural requirements on women to manage their family responsibilities, Roomi and Rehman (2012) concluded that women entrepreneurs are often torn between entrepreneurial goals and cultural directives for managing their families and also dealing with issues of professional legitimacy. While recent research has identified issues that affect women's

entrepreneurial activities in terms of finance, institutional support, and business growth, less focus has been paid to their interpretation of these issues and how they shape women's entrepreneurial identity over a period of time.

Existing research has thus significantly advanced our understanding about the structural obstacles that women entrepreneurs face but comparatively little explanation on how women develop entrepreneurial identities in the context of these gendered entrepreneurial contexts. To grasp this process, going beyond mere description of the barriers to exploring the lived experience, interpretation and negotiation of entrepreneurship amongst women is necessary.

Entrepreneurial Identity: A Dynamic Process of Becoming

Researchers have noticed that the entrepreneurial process is far more than the creation and management of a business, and have since begun to focus on the field of entrepreneurial identity. It is also a way in which people make sense of their experiences, gain a sense of self and engage in social and institutional discourses. The concept of entrepreneurial identity is not a stable, individual attribute but is now generally considered as dynamic, socially constructed and ever changing (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Navis & Glynn, 2011).

Early entrepreneurship research largely portrayed entrepreneurs through stable personality traits, assuming that entrepreneurial behavior reflected inherent individual characteristics. This perspective has then slowly evolved to a new one more focused on identity explanations, and the perspective of entrepreneurship as a continuous process of self-construction. Fauchart and Gruber (2011) suggested that the orientation of the entrepreneur's identity affects the perception of the success of the business, business relationships with stakeholders and strategic decision-making. Likewise, developing entrepreneurial identity is thought to result from ongoing and dynamic relationships between people and their social contexts (Navis & Glynn 2011).

Building on this perspective, Lewis (2013) proposed that entrepreneurial identity is created and recreated again and again as a result of the entrepreneurial life experience. As businesses grow and change, entrepreneurs interpret their successes as well as their failures, and reevaluate their goals and objectives. The process of reflection and adaptation is not linear and continuous, but rather is a process of identity development that continues rather than is built through one event of entrepreneurship. This is especially salient in unstable business circumstances where the conditions of business change often, and encourage entrepreneurs to rethink their role and their identities within their respective businesses.

Gendered institutional expectations are an additional layer of complication in the process of constructing identity for women entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial identity is negotiated in the process of business operations as well as other social expectations, such as leadership, family responsibilities and professional legitimacy. The entrepreneurial identity can't be divorced from gender, and according to Marlow and McAdam (2013); gender is a part of a wider social context that influences women's opportunities and constraints in their entrepreneurial trajectory. Similarly, Thébaud (2015) showed that entrepreneurship is still linked to the masculinity stereotype, and that women must build legitimacy as they also call into question notions about entrepreneurial competency.

These gendered expectations become particularly evident in male-dominated industries where women frequently encounter skepticism regarding their authority, technical knowledge, and leadership capability. There are therefore two aspects to identity construction; one is internal, one is external, in the form of other people's perceptions of one's identity, including one's customers, employees, suppliers, investors and professional networks. As entrepreneurs go about their business negotiations, they are always dealing with how they present themselves, as well as what institutions expect of them to do and whether they get accepted as legitimate business leaders.

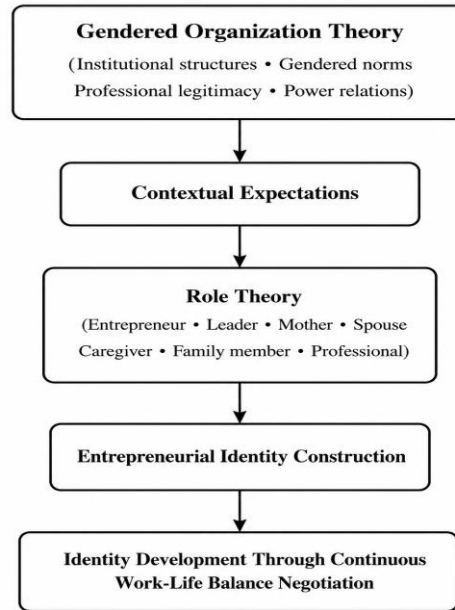
Although there is a considerable amount of theory development, entrepreneurial identity research has still been limited to and centered on the West. The literature on entrepreneurship mostly focuses on entrepreneurial motivation, leadership, identity orientation and venture development, but comparatively less research has been conducted to understand the development of identity in a socio-cultural context which has a higher level of family obligations, patriarchal norms and gendered institutional structures. In addition, much of the literature on entrepreneurial identity documents the identity as opposed to how it is experienced, negotiated and being reconstructed in day to day entrepreneurial life.

Such constraints suggest there is a need to consider entrepreneurial identity as an on-going and 'lived' process and practice, a research agenda that could be the subject of interpretative research. An examination of identity through women's stories gives opportunities for the understanding of how the entrepreneurial identity is formed through interactions between the business

responsibilities, institutional expectations and personal relationships. This is especially relevant in developing economies where the socio-cultural context of entrepreneurial experiences is still very much linked to the entrepreneurial experiences themselves.

The extant literature indicates that entrepreneurial identity is a result of ongoing negotiation between entrepreneurial agency and other institutional influences. The conceptual model for the study (Figure 1) combines two theories, namely, Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory, which can explain how the entrepreneurial identity is being shaped in negotiating multiple roles, both in the professional and personal aspects.

Figure 1: Integrated Theoretical Framework



Work-Life Balance as Identity Work

Traditionally, the study of work-life balance has focused on the organizational/human resource management literature, where it is defined as the capacity to balance work and family demands. The research conducted in the early days focused on the concept of balance in relation to work-family conflict, role overload and getting a handle on the boundaries, with a focus on the psychological impact of competing role demands (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Although these views have advanced our understanding of employee well-being they are not as well suited to understanding entrepreneurship as work and life are frequently much more intertwined in entrepreneurial endeavors than separated.

Entrepreneurs take on the roles of business development, money management, customer contact and organizational management for the business, and have to deal with both family and personal matters. As a result, temporal and/or psychological work boundaries between work and non-work are seldom allowed by entrepreneurship. This difference has been noted by Jennings and McDougald (2007) who referred to the work-family relationship of entrepreneurs as being "dualistic" due to the dual nature of entrepreneurial and family roles. Recently, Kelliher et al. (2019) proposed a perspective on entrepreneurial work-life balance as a continual process of adaptation in order to meet shifting entrepreneurial and family needs instead of a static process of reaching a balance state.

This is an adaptive perspective especially relevant for the women entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial duties often go hand in hand with culturally-embedded roles and expectations in caring for others, running the household, and supporting the family. Women don't always negotiate two distinct areas of life but instead have to make constant choices and negotiate between work and family life, and be flexible and adaptable to this negotiation. Therefore, the concept of work-life balance isn't just a matter of dividing time equally between jobs, but one of making choices in the right context at the right time that allows for entrepreneurial continuity as well as family health and happiness.

The literature on entrepreneurship has started to pay increasing attention to the issue of work-life balance, but now in a sense that goes beyond the behavioral approach to how the entrepreneur interprets and gives meaning to his experiences. The work-life experiences are said to be conditioned by the wider institutional and cultural contexts (Ollier-Malaterre, 2017) and the gendered nature of the contexts in which women's experiences take place (Henry et al., 2021). These conceptions indicate that WLB has a behavioral, relational and interpretative dimension, as both what entrepreneurs do and how they see themselves.

From this angle, work-life balance is part of the process of entrepreneur identity construction. Entrepreneurs' self-perceptions are continually evolving as decisions are made about what is important to the business, to the family, in the leadership position, and about personal goals. All negotiations between entrepreneurial and personal identities are connected to a larger negotiation of the construction, challenge and reconstruction of entrepreneurial identities. In other words, identity is not a process of formation but one of negotiation in the face of difficulties in a work/life context.

Although the connections among these points have been increasingly noted, entrepreneurial identity and work-life balance have more or less emerged as distinct fields of study. While the study of entrepreneurial motivation, legitimacy and leadership is usually a part of identity studies, the study of work-life balance is mainly oriented towards conflict, stress and coping. Very little research has been undertaken on the processes of negotiating work-life balance and how this process continues to shape the entrepreneurial subject, especially that of female entrepreneurs in male dominated sectors. This dichotomy was manifested in a theory of entrepreneurship as an experience which was very limited. This separation was reflected in a very limited theory about entrepreneurship as an experience which is dynamic and alive.

The current study tries to overcome this by moving beyond a static notion of work-life balance towards a dynamic consideration of work-life balance as a process of entrepreneurial identity negotiation. The study does not attempt to isolate the concept of balance as an entrepreneurial product, but rather investigates how women understand and deal with multiple responsibilities, how they might negotiate institutional expectations and how they build entrepreneurial identities in their day-to-day activities. This view is more comprehensive and holistic of entrepreneurship and also enriched the existing knowledge from the limited context of organizational entrepreneurship, where most of the research has been conducted.

Theoretical Foundation

The study is guided by Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory that offer a holistic framework for discussing the role construction in gendered institutional settings. According to Role Theory, people hold several social roles in their life at any one point in time and carry with them the expectations, responsibilities and norms regarding behavior of each of these roles (Kahn et al., 1964). Entrepreneurship is a role that is played by women entrepreneurs often as an entrepreneur, a leader, an employer, a spouse, a mother and a caregiver. These roles are not isolated, but rather are constantly interacting and in situations where priorities need to be negotiated and responsibilities re-interpreted. In this view, entrepreneurial identity is more of a process of role management, the process of dealing with expectations of a variety of roles that may sometimes conflict, than it is the enactment of a singular role.

From this angle, Gendered Organization Theory provides an understanding of how the organization, institutional settings and norms shape entrepreneurial experiences. According to Acker (1990), organizations can be seen as reinforcing the gender inequalities from the day to day activities they engage in, and Acker (2006) provided evidence that these inequalities are even further entrenched in the routines of activities and institutional processes in organizations. Women working in traditionally male dominated industries therefore face negotiation of issues not only of entrepreneurship but also of the legitimacy, authority and leadership.

These theories can be incorporated into a single explanation, which is more comprehensive than either theory can provide when used separately. The Role Theory is a theory of how women interact with and negotiate their multiple roles both in entrepreneurial and personal environments, while the Gendered Organization Theory is a theory which outlines why the negotiations take place in institutional environments that have unequal gender expectations. They offer a lens together which can be used to interpret entrepreneurial identity as personally constructed and socially negotiated.

Research Gap

The literature demonstrates the increasing awareness of the role and contribution of women in entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial identity and work-life balance. However, there are a number of outstanding issues that need to be addressed.

First, entrepreneurial identity has been investigated mostly in Western settings, whereas the development of entrepreneurial identity in developing countries, where entrepreneurship is influenced by the institutions and socio-cultural environment, has not been well understood. The existing knowledge thus only explains part of the women's entrepreneurial experiences, in the context of Pakistan.

Secondly, the spheres of entrepreneurial identity and work-life balance are relatively autonomous fields of research. The main research areas in identity research have been on the topics of motivation, legitimacy and leadership, while topics in work-life balance studies have focused on conflict, stress and coping. Little attention, therefore, has been paid to the ways in which negotiating work-life balance processes help to develop entrepreneurial identity.

Third, research on entrepreneurship has tended to focus on quantitative methods that establish links among variables that have been pre-stated; such methods offer relatively little in the way of understanding the nature and meaning of the entrepreneurial identity. While qualitative studies have grown, there are relatively few studies that have used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology to investigate the process of identity construction from the lived experience of women.

The conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps can only be overcome through an interpretative approach that can focus on the dynamic process of negotiating entrepreneurial identity in everyday entrepreneurial life. Hence, the present study is an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as it aims to explore the lived experiences of 18 female entrepreneurs in the male-dominated industries in Lahore, Pakistan. The study combines the concepts of Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory to provide an explanation of how entrepreneurial identity is negotiated constantly as a result of the work-life experiences, which further expands the existing knowledge on women's entrepreneurship in a developing-country setting.

Methodology

Research Design

The study was a qualitative research in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which aims to describe the process of women entrepreneurs in building their entrepreneurial identity in the process of negotiating work-life balance in the male dominated industries. IPA is a method suited to be used when studying more complex lived experiences as it aims to grasp how individuals make sense of major events in their personal and social lives (Smith et al., 2022). While other methods are based on a set of variables and then look at how they relate, IPA allows for a detailed examination of the meaning making process of the participants, thus giving rise to theory in the process of living.

The selection of IPA was appropriate given the study's aim of exploring the phenomenon of entrepreneurial identity as dynamic and situational. Entrepreneurial identity is a process of interaction between the individual entrepreneur and family members, customers, employees, institutions and society. To understand the identity construction, an approach had to be developed that explored both, the experiences of the participants and the meanings attached to the experiences. A further advantage of the idiographic approach of IPA was that it allowed explaining each entrepreneurial life in a unique manner and in terms of commonalities among the participants. Table 1 summarizes the methodological characteristics of the study.

Table 1: Methodological Overview

Component	Description
Research paradigm	Interpretivist
Research design	Qualitative
Methodology	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
Theoretical framework	Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory
Participants	18 female entrepreneurs
Sampling strategy	Purposive sampling
Research setting	Lahore, Pakistan
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews
Data analysis	Idiographic IPA followed by cross-case interpretation

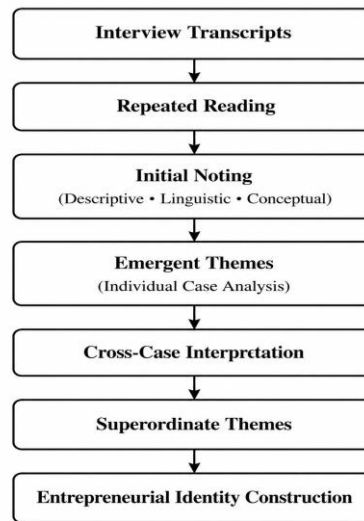
Participants and Data Collection

Using the purposive sampling technique, female participants were recruited who could give rich experiential reports on entrepreneurship in male dominated industries. This is in line with the IPA, where the individual selection of participants was based on the relevance of their experience, rather than on statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2022). The participating women were selected to participate based on the following criteria: they are women entrepreneurs who have successfully started and run their businesses in industries that are known to have lower participation of women in the workforce such as Construction, Real Estate, Information Technology, Manufacturing, Logistics, Engineering Services, Education and Telecommunications sector, and they have been in active business for 2 years or more.

In this study, there were 18 female entrepreneurs. They were from a variety of entrepreneurial industries, but they all had the experience of operating businesses and had to juggle their professional, family and societal expectations. This was an appropriate degree of similarity in experiences and difference in context which allowed for both meaningful comparison across entrepreneurial settings and an adequate homogeneity for IPA.

A series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews (March 2026 to May 2026) were used to collect data. Interviews were conducted for about 45-90 minutes, giving the respondents the opportunity to talk about the experience of their business ventures, their leadership experiences, their responsibilities towards family and their views about work-life balance. Open questions were used to invite the participants to talk in their own words, and to allow the researcher to delve deeper into areas that arise. Interviews were recorded with participants' informed consent, transcribed verbatim and anonymous using participant codes (P1-P18) which were used to ensure the anonymity of participants.

The analytical procedures followed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Figure 2 illustrates the progression from individual narratives to the development of interpretative themes.

Figure 2: IPA Analytical Process

Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) developed by Smith et al. (2022) was used as the analytical technique for data analysis. The process of analysis began by repeated reading of all the transcripts to get familiar with the participants' stories and contexts in which entrepreneurial experiences were explained. At this point, descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments were made to document the content of participants' narratives and meanings of the participants' language.

Recurring experiential patterns were then carefully studied to develop emergent themes for each of the participants. These themes were not simply summations of the content of the interviews, but rather were portrayals of interpretative understandings of how the participants were building entrepreneurial identity in everyday entrepreneurial processes. To ensure an idiographic framework of IPA, each transcript was analyzed separately, prior to comparisons being drawn between participants.

The analysis then went on to cross case interpretation and considered how the themes were related across all eighteen participants. Themes were then brought together in four superordinate themes through iterative comparison, abstraction and refinement, which explain the construction of entrepreneurial identity in various entrepreneurial contexts. The analytical process was ongoing and the themes continued to shift from participants' narratives, interpretations that were developed during the analysis and the theoretical framework, which was grounded in the participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several strategies were used for an increase in the trustworthiness of a study. Prolonged interaction with the data, analysis of the data in an iterative manner, and ongoing comparison of the stories of participants and the themes that were emerging thickened the sense of credibility. Documenting analytical decisions during the process of research with reflexive notes and analytical memos increased the dependability and transparency. Additionally, the use of Reflective Practice helped in ensuring the confirmability of the interpretations as they were always based on participants' experiences and not the researcher's assumptions. Contextual descriptions of participants and the research context are rich which makes it easier to transfer analysis to similar entrepreneurial contexts.

The ethics committee of the institution gave approval for the data collection before that. Before participating in the study, participants were given detailed information on the study and written informed consent was obtained. Participant data were anonymised by replacing any identifying details with a participant code (P1-P18). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed and the interview data, analytical records and transcripts were kept securely and only accessed by the researcher.

Findings

The results of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the interviews showed that the entrepreneurial identity was not fixed, nor set at the time of the establishment of the business. Contrary to this, participants referred to identity as a process of negotiation

and construction which is not static, but ongoing in the context of the various entrepreneurial tasks and roles, the expectations of family members, the gendered institutional contexts and lived experiences. In all eighteen interviews, entrepreneurial identity was not a fixed attribute that was always associated with being an entrepreneur, but rather it was an identity that was dynamic, interpreted, negotiated, and reconstructed throughout the interviews.

Participants came from a variety of backgrounds and from different industries but their stories were strikingly similar. Entrepreneurial identity emerged as a result of commonplace experiences of establishing the legitimacy, dealing with multiple responsibilities, responding to institutional expectations and reflecting on personal growth. These experiences were not linear, but rather all part of a process of becoming an entrepreneur.

The cross case interpretation resulted in four superordinate themes explaining the process: (1) Becoming an Entrepreneur: Redefining Self beyond Traditional Roles; (2) Negotiating Legitimacy in Male-Dominated Industries; (3) Negotiating Work-Life Balance through Adaptation; and (4) Identity Transformation through Resilience. These themes do not stand alone but, rather, are various aspects of the process of entrepreneurial identity construction. Table 2 provides an overview of the resulted super-ordinate themes that were found in the cross case analysis and their interpretative significance.

Table 2: Superordinate Themes and Interpretative Insights

Superordinate Theme	Interpretative Insight
Becoming an Entrepreneur: Redefining Self Beyond Traditional Roles	Entrepreneurship reshaped participants' perceptions of themselves beyond conventional gender expectations.
Negotiating Legitimacy in Male-Dominated Industries	Professional credibility was continuously negotiated through interactions with institutional and industry environments.
Negotiating Work-Life Balance Through Adaptation	Identity developed through ongoing adaptation to competing entrepreneurial and family responsibilities.
Identity Transformation Through Resilience	Entrepreneurial experiences strengthened confidence, leadership, and self-perception, resulting in continual identity reconstruction.

Becoming an Entrepreneur: Redefining Self beyond Traditional Roles

Throughout, the participants defined entrepreneurship as more than just a business. The decision to become an entrepreneur was a major transition in their life, and changed their perspective of themselves, their skills and their future. Participants' defined entrepreneurship as not just a business activity, but as a process, which they gradually progressed from traditional perceptions and roles, associated with the role of women. Entrepreneurship for many participants was a result of having a dream of independence, career satisfaction or an opportunity to pursue a career that was not available. Entrepreneurship thus emerged as a vehicle of self-determination, as well as a new set of expectations on women's work.

As P3 reflected,

"Starting my business changed how I saw myself. I was no longer only fulfilling family responsibilities; I was making decisions, leading people, and building something of my own."

Such a change was often slow to occur. The participants said that entrepreneurial identity came to them as they acquired more experience, took their own decisions and had to take more responsibility for the development of the business. Initial uncertainty was followed by an increasing level of confidence with the increase in experience gained through entrepreneurship.

Some participants also mentioned that entrepreneurship is growing in lieu of existing identities. Being an entrepreneur did not remove the responsibilities of being a mother, spouse or a daughter but rather participants became aware of how to incorporate entrepreneurial intentions and their traditional roles within the family. So, the entrepreneurial identity developed and emerged from other important parts of their life.

Reflecting on this process, P8 explained,

"I never stopped being a mother or a wife. Entrepreneurship simply became another important part of who I am."

This integration shows that Entrepreneurial identity was a result of the presence of more than one identity but not a single entrepreneurial identity. Participants constantly redefined themselves as they applied to the changing entrepreneurial opportunities and responsibilities.

The results of the cross case analysis suggest that changes in self-perceptions first occurred in the emergence of the entrepreneurial identity, with the external recognition of the entrepreneurial identity following. The initial steps were in developing confidence in their own capabilities, followed by professional legitimacy. Thus, this process of identity construction started with the internal reinterpretation and was always more associated to the further encounter with more extended institutional situations.

Negotiating Legitimacy in Male-Dominated Industries

Participants always faced the issue of legitimacy in the industries where leadership and technical skills are often thought of as masculine. Participants did not take for granted that the legitimacy of their businesses would come along with them and professional recognition; they talked about negotiating legitimacy as they traveled through their business careers.

Clients, suppliers, contractors and even employees at times challenged their role or felt that their role was not really significant enough for the final decision to be made by the male colleagues or family members. A high level of professional credibility was thus required, to be demonstrated again and again by the knowledge, experience and performance of the business.

As P11 noted,

"People often expected to speak with the man in charge. Once they realized I owned the company, I had to convince them that I understood every aspect of the business."

Participants did not see these moments as unusual but rather as a sign of what they felt was expected of them and others as women leaders in their respective institutions. The professional legitimacy was thus built over time, as a result of the repeated interactions, in which the existing perceptions and beliefs about women's business skills were challenged.

Some of the participants also shared that the quality of the idea of legitimacy hinged on maintaining confidence and professionalism. They needed to be careful in their communication, decision making and working relationships, all in order to show leadership and not support negative stereotypes. Therefore, the concept of entrepreneurial identity was always being constructed in the process of participants' adaptive behaviors to institutional expectations and their business choices.

For P15, legitimacy developed through sustained performance rather than formal recognition.

"Eventually people stopped questioning whether I could do the work because they had seen the results. My business became my strongest evidence."

This demonstrates entrepreneurial identity was reinforced in the day to day operation of business. The concept of legitimacy was seldom described by participants in terms of the establishment of legitimacy once and for all. Rather, trust had to be continually nurtured as business grew, markets evolved, and new working relationships were formed.

The results thus indicate that the process of identity construction was not limited to one's self-confidence. Customer, employee, supplier and professional networks were also factors that contributed to shaping how participants perceived themselves as entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial identity was then a "self-produced social negotiation.

Negotiating Work-Life Balance through Adaptation

Participants' sense of being an entrepreneur was found to be more persistent over time, but throughout, they highlighted the need to continually negotiate between entrepreneurial and personal responsibilities in order to sustain this identity. However, instead of work-life balance as a successful balancing or separation between work and family, participants viewed work-life balance as an ongoing process of balancing entrepreneurial demands, family demands and their own preferences. Entrepreneurial success was not the only determinant of Identity, but also the ability of the participants to adjust to the changing circumstances in their life.

In all of the interviews, the idea of a balance between work and life was not the one that was linked to a permanent condition. The participants gave reasons for the varying roles of entrepreneurs as the business expanded, customers' demands, market uncertainties, and family needs. Finding demonstrates that the balance between work and family life was a constantly changing process, rather than following set patterns. It was a constant balancing act, not following a pattern when it comes to work and

family life. This cyclical change was a process of entrepreneurial identity construction, further bolstering participants' confidence in dealing with uncertainty.

As P6 explained,

"There is no fixed balance. Every stage of my business requires different decisions, and my family also changes. I have learned to adjust instead of trying to make everything equal."

This is a new take on the notion of work-life balance. Participants didn't try to reach a balance but embraced the acknowledged fact that entrepreneurship is inherently unbalanced and looked at how they could make decisions that are appropriate for the context. Flexibility was thus chosen over control for a sense of entrepreneurial identity to be cultivated.

One of the more common adaptive strategies was *prioritization*. Participants reported that they had to continuously evaluate the priorities, knowing that there was a variation over time. Business deadlines, client expectations, children, family events and unexpected events all had an impact on decision making. The decisions did not seem to be attempts to lose balance, but rather part of the entrepreneurial leadership.

Likewise, participants talked about *delegation* as one of the key pillars that helps to keep businesses running and to keep them healthy. As businesses grew, many realized that they needed to trust employees, delegate tasks and take a hands-off approach to day-to-day functions in order to be a successful leader. Delegation thus seemed a managerial tactic and a crucial part of the entrepreneurial identity construction process in a context of growing confidence in their managerial abilities.

The participants also agreed that there should be *support networks*. Practical and emotional support was often provided by spouses, parents, siblings, employees and professional associates that helped participants sustain their entrepreneurial efforts when they were challenged. But the term 'challenge reduction' was hardly used to describe support. Rather, it helped to build participants' skills to balance competing responsibilities and to be committed to both their entrepreneurial and family responsibilities.

Of importance, however, was the fact that participants did not distinguish between work-life balance and the entrepreneurial identity. Their self-perceptions as entrepreneurs always changed as a result of choices they make about their business, family, and personal goals. Adaptation was thus more than simply about behavioral adjustment; it was a part of the process of identity construction. All negotiations with entrepreneurial and personal commitments helped them gain a better understanding of themselves as they became entrepreneurs.

Collectively, these findings suggest that work-life balance functions as a process through which entrepreneurial identity is continually sustained and refined. Rather than representing an independent outcome, adaptive negotiation enables women entrepreneurs to maintain coherence across multiple roles while responding to changing entrepreneurial and family circumstances.

Identity Transformation through Resilience

The culmination of participants' entrepreneurial journeys business growth was not only a part of it but it was a transformation of the way each entrepreneur saw himself. In all the interviews, the entrepreneurship was described as a process which boosted the confidence, independence, leadership capacity and resilience. The process of identity was thus an ongoing process of dealing with uncertainty, as opposed to entrepreneurial outcomes.

At the end of each entrepreneur's journey, often the participants spoke of differences between their experiences as entrepreneurs and their image of themselves. Initial uncertainty, self-doubt and dependence was replaced by increased confidence and ability in making decisions and taking leadership. Participants did not claim this change to be a result of individual achievements but rather spoke of the impact of the repeated entrepreneurial challenges which were overcome.

As P14 reflected,

"When I started, I constantly questioned my decisions. Now I trust my judgement because every challenge has taught me something about myself."

This quotation captures a sense that having to do with a personality trait is not the conception of resilience, but rather the product of entrepreneurial experience. All challenges helped to build the confidence of participants and to reinforce their commitment to entrepreneurship.

Some also cited resilience as having an impact on relationships outside of the workplace. Their entrepreneurial experiences impacted how they did business with family members, and with employees and broader professional networks. Participants became more assertive, made decisions on their own and negotiated their expectations better due to their increased level of confidence. Entrepreneurial identity was therefore more than just being an entrepreneur; it had an impact on other areas of a person's life and work.

The other constant revelations were about the definition of success changing. The entrepreneurial success was gradually less about financial success and more about one's own fulfillment, independence and meaningful work and opportunities to other people. In the process of identity transformation, professional success and personal well-being were combined into a new definition of success, one that reflected values that embraced entrepreneurship.

For P18, this transformation was evident in her changing understanding of entrepreneurship.

"Success is no longer just about business growth. It is about becoming someone who can make decisions confidently without compromising what matters most to me."

Through a cross-case analysis, it has been found that all the above themes combined were the ingredients for resilience. A redefinition of one outside of traditional roles, a legitimization in male-dominated industries and a constantly adapting to others' competing responsibilities helped to reinforce entrepreneurial identity. These processes were not experienced individually, but rather were intertwined during the entrepreneurial process of the participants, and thus caused identity construction to take place throughout the process.

Thus, the results indicate that there is no complete entrepreneurial identity. Women entrepreneurs constantly re-interpret and re-imagine themselves as they adapt to the changing context of business, family and institutional requirements, and practices. Identity is never a completed entrepreneurial accomplishment; it is being in the process of becoming.

Discussion

In the present study, the relationship between women entrepreneurs, development of their entrepreneurial identity and their negotiation of the work-life balance in male-dominated industries was examined. The results do not indicate that entrepreneurial identity is something a person has or that it is a result of the process of creating a venture, but rather that it is continually shaped by a process of interaction between entrepreneurial role and responsibilities, family roles, institutional expectations, and the creation of meaning within the personal experiences of entrepreneurs. This lens extends prior entrepreneurship studies in that it demonstrates that entrepreneurial identity is not just developed, but continually negotiated, during women's entrepreneurial processes.

Entrepreneurial Identity as a Process of Becoming

This study is important in Reconceptualizing entrepreneurial identity as a process of becoming as opposed to an entrepreneurial attribute. In recent years, the field of entrepreneurship studies has started to acknowledge the social construction of identity, with many studies having focused on the entrepreneurial motivation (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011), identity orientation (Navis & Glynn, 2011), or venture creation (Gómez-Imbañes et al., 2016; Gómez-Imbañes & Torres, 2017). The present results indicate that identity is a dynamic process that continues to develop even after the business is founded and is a result of participants' constant interpretation of entrepreneurial experiences.

The entrepreneurs rarely explained entrepreneurship as a one event transforming process. Rather, identity was a gradual process, as they became more responsible, became more confident in decision making and became more responsive to ever-changing entrepreneurial challenges. Entrepreneurial identity thus occurred as a result of the interactions with the daily experiences of business, not as a consequence of business ownership.

This is in fact an extension of Lewis (2013) who showed that the entrepreneurial identity is constantly appropriated, reconstructed and remediated through experience. This paper shows that this reconstruction is not linear or episodic, but rather participants' ongoing negotiation in their daily lives of the aspirations of entrepreneurship and the general social responsibility. Thus, identity is more an achievement of an ongoing interpretation than a self-assured entrepreneurial state.

In an important way, the participants didn't give up on their previous identities when they became entrepreneurs. They showed that entrepreneurial identity developed in parallel with the identities that were related to care-giving, marriage, motherhood, and

community participation. Entrepreneurship did not take the place of existing identities, but rather, it increased actors' understanding of themselves. The finding confirms the Role Theory proposition that people's entrepreneurial identity is the result of a process of integration rather than separation of multiple roles that they perform.

Identity Construction within Gendered Institutional Contexts

The results also suggest that entrepreneurial identity is not a standalone variable, but needs to be analyzed in the context of the institutional context of entrepreneurship. Legitimacy was an on-going process for all participants, not something that was automatically recognized. To gain credibility required to show competence over and over and answer the assumption of women's competency as an entrepreneur.

This discovery supports the Gendered Organization Theory that suggests organizations and institutional practices still perpetuate gender inequalities (Acker, 1990, 2006). In this study, however, it is suggested that the institutional arrangements as such affect the process of identity construction. This was not just a gendered organizational environment, but also one in which the participants reacted, interpreted, challenged and responded in ways that helped to (re)shape their own thinking about themselves as entrepreneurs.

Studies often represent legitimacy as a "problem from the outside. The results of the present study indicate a more dynamic relationship. External recognition went hand-in-hand with internal identity development. Participants gained industry and customer credibility, a greater understanding of their own business skills, and employee and customer trust. Instead, identity construction was both an ongoing process and a result of interdependent and ongoing relationship between self-perception and external validation.

The interaction was noticeable especially in the male-dominated industries where women were often challenged on their authority and technicalities. The experiences did not hinder entrepreneurial development, but instead sometimes served as important catalysts for reconstruction of identity. The participants' trust in the institutional barriers faced was increased and their entrepreneurial self-concept was strengthened by overcoming institutional barriers successfully.

Work-Life Balance as Identity Negotiation

The most important discovery of the study is that it serves as an instrument of entrepreneurial identity construction as part of the work-life balance. Although there is a wide range of studies on work-life balance, past research has largely conceptualized work-life balance as a result of conflict, stress, or well-being (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Kossek et al., 2014). While such views capture the implications of having multiple roles, they offer relatively little insight into the impact that work and work-life experiences have on entrepreneurial identity.

Work-life balance was not described by the participants as being a balance of commitment to work and to the family. Rather, they saw balance as a dynamic process of adaptation that was always in progress, and the prioritization of tasks always had to be continually re-evaluated as entrepreneurial and family situations shifted. All decisions related to growth, family issues, leadership and goals of participants affected their understanding of themselves as entrepreneurs at the same time.

This discovery builds on previous research on entrepreneurship and its relationship to work-life balance by focusing the discussion from a question of "work-life balance" to a question of "negotiation of work-life balance", which provides another step in the process of understanding the implications of work-life balance on entrepreneurship. Competing responsibilities did not hinder the development of entrepreneurial identity; rather it was a way of engaging with them. Thus, adaptation, prioritization, delegation, and mobilization of support were not only coping strategies, but also mechanisms which contributed to participants building up their entrepreneurial confidence and retaining their entrepreneurial identity.

Work-life balance is not the sole individual or company matter, then, but is rather a greater whole. In entrepreneurial contexts it is an interpretative process whereby women continually engage in negotiations around their identity and reacting to changing professional and personal expectations.

Resilience as Identity Transformation

The results also provide another way to think about entrepreneurial resiliency. The literature on entrepreneurship often portrays resilience as a personal trait of entrepreneurs which helps them face uncertainty and adversity. This is not the case, as this can be

deduced from the stories of the participants. There was no mention of a trait that participants had prior to creating their companies. Instead, it evolved gradually as it got the opportunity to repeatedly deal with entrepreneurial challenges.

When faced with uncertainty, overcoming the institutional challenges, and doing their best to manage multiple stressors, each of these experiences strengthened self-confidence and leadership capacity. Resilience thus speaks of an entrepreneurial identity construction process outcome instead of just the process of entrepreneurial success itself.

The presentation offers an entrepreneurial identity scholarship perspective, since it shows that transformation of entrepreneurial identity is not a result of a single entrepreneurial accomplishment, but the result of a cumulative learning process. Through the difficult times participants always saw opportunities to grow themselves personally and professionally as entrepreneurs, indicating that entrepreneurial identity is developed as a result of reflection rather than performance.

It also showed that the success of the enterprise itself was also redefined during participants' journey. It was a traditional belief that success meant that the business survived and was financially stable. However, as time went on participants began to see success as independent, confident, purposeful and being able to combine goals with values. Identity transformation thus included both re-construction of self-perception as well as re-construction of self-concepts of entrepreneurial success.

Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

There are three interrelated theoretical contributions to be made from the study. First, it continues to build the entrepreneurial identity scholarship by showing that identity is a process rather than a product of the creation of a venture. The entrepreneurial identity is not an intrinsic property of entrepreneurs, but rather is a dynamic process of continual interpretation of entrepreneurial experiences. Second, by combining two theories, i.e., Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory, the study gives an insight into how entrepreneurial identity is constructed. While the latter reveals how institutional environments influence the negotiations, the former reveals in which ways women are negotiating their multiple entrepreneurial and family responsibilities. Combining these views creates a more comprehensive view of entrepreneurial identity than is available from each of the theories alone. Third, the study does not conceptualize work-life balance as an entrepreneurial outcome, but rather as a work-life balance process of identity construction. This view helps bring in the content of entrepreneurship literature by providing an insight into how daily negotiation between entrepreneurial and personal roles is affecting the "self" of the entrepreneurs.

These findings are also relevant in the practical aspect. Entrepreneurship support programs have to do more than teach women a business competency it's about recognizing the problem of identity which women have in male dominated industries. Entrepreneurship confidence building, leadership development programs, and professional networks can help build confidence in entrepreneurship and help to manage institutional expectations.

Conversely, policymakers need to be aware of the need to tackle institutional and cultural factors that inhibit women entrepreneurship as well as providing financial and technical assistance. Improving entrepreneurial ecosystems to be more inclusive is likely to help improve business performance and the sustainability and development of women entrepreneurs in the long term.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations need to be noted to interpret the findings. The study started with 18 women entrepreneurs from Lahore, Pakistan working in the male dominated industries. This context allowed for an in-depth look at the construction of an entrepreneurial identity; however, the results are context specific and are meant to be an analytical rather than statistical generalization. An entrepreneur's identity can be shaped in various ways in other geographical areas, cultural contexts or industries.

Second, the study used a cross sectional qualitative design which took snapshots of the participants' thoughts at a given point in their entrepreneurial life cycles. But entrepreneurial identity is fluid and evolves over time and with the passage of a business and life. Longitudinal studies might, therefore, offer better insights into the development of entrepreneurial identities throughout the various phases of entrepreneurial activity.

Lastly, the study focused only on women entrepreneurs, in their role as entrepreneurial identity. The perspectives of spouses, workers, mentors, investors or family members could be included in future research to gain a broader perspective on how entrepreneurial identity is manifest in other social and organizational relationships. Comparative studies of various institutional settings would contribute to building the understanding of the link between gender, work-life balance and entrepreneurial identity further.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find out how women entrepreneurs develop entrepreneurial identity in the process of negotiating the balance of work and life in male dominated industries. The findings reveal that the identity of an entrepreneur is neither created at the time of the business establishment but is constantly formed in the process of interaction between the entrepreneurial responsibilities, family roles, institutional expectations and the meaning-making process of the women entrepreneurs, who are drawn from the lived experiences of the 18 women entrepreneurs from Lahore, Pakistan. The study unveiled four interwoven areas of entrepreneurial identity construction: redefining one-self beyond traditional roles, negotiating entitlement, balancing work and life, and entrepreneurial identity change through resilience. These dimensions show that entrepreneurial identity is a process, evolving continuously with the changes in professional and personal situations rather than based on the sporadic entrepreneurial accomplishments. The study provides a contribution to the research on entrepreneurial identity by combining two theories, that of Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory, in three important ways. First, it views entrepreneurial identity as a process and is relationally constructed instead of being an entrepreneurial trait. Second, it shows that identities are formed through the interplay between individual agency and institutional contexts of agency that are gendered. Third, it suggests ways to the work-life balance as a tool to negotiate entrepreneurial identity, which goes beyond the traditional focus on work-life balance outcomes. Overall, the paper strengthens the body of evidence that has been offered by providing contextual evidence in a developing economy with women entrepreneurs still operating in intricate socio-cultural and institutional environments. It emphasizes that entrepreneurship is not just about creating successful businesses, it is a process of becoming: a process in which women re-imagine their experiences, navigate through multiple identities and create meaningful entrepreneurial lives.

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