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A Contextual Process Model of Work-Life Balance Negotiation among Female Entrepreneurs in Male-Dominated Industries: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Shama Sadaqat

PhD Scholar, Hasan Murad School of Management, University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore, Pakistan

Email: shamasadaqat1981@gmail.com

Naveed Yazdani

Professor, Hasan Murad School of Management, University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

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Corresponding Author:

Shama Sadaqat

Email:

shamasadaqat1981@gmail.com

Work-life issues for women entrepreneurs are not just about the competing demands of work and family, but also a matter of working in a male dominated industry. Gendered socio-cultural norms, institutional structures, industry expectations and the constant challenge to gain legitimacy in the entrepreneurial ecosystem are part of their experiences. While work-life balance is a topic that has received a large amount of attention in entrepreneurship research, existing literature has largely taken a variable-oriented perspective on the concept, focusing on the end state of work-life balance and little attention is paid to the processes women engage in to manage multiple roles in a developing country setting. In an attempt to fill this gap, the present study examines the lived experiences of 29 female entrepreneurs in industries that are considered male-dominated in the city of Lahore, in Pakistan. The study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) guided by the paradigm of Interpretivism with an aim of analyzing in-depth semi-structured interview data. The results show that work-life balance is not a fixed and final state, but a recursive, contextually situated negotiation process that consists of five dimensions: contextual conditions, competing role expectations, adapting negotiations practices, reflective meaning making and entrepreneurial outcomes. The priorities, roles, and personal conceptions of balance were constantly redefined by participants as they experienced changes in their respective personal, entrepreneurial, and institutional lives. Based on these findings, the study proposes the Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN), which builds on the concept of Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory to provide an understanding of the interaction between structural conditions and the individual around the course of women's entrepreneurial careers. The study broadens the entrepreneurship and work-life balance literature and provides insights for policy makers, entrepreneurial support organizations, and an initiative designed to build resilience in entrepreneurs, and enriches it with practical implications.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, the role of women entrepreneurs has become ever more prominent and significant due to their impact on economic development, innovation, job creation and inclusive growth. Women entrepreneurs are also a key component of improving entrepreneurial ecosystems, increasing household income, providing jobs and making a contribution to sustainable development in both developed and developing countries. However, women have still been underrepresented in entrepreneurship, and face constant structural impediments to business creation, development and viability. While access to

finance and markets constitute an important part of the barriers, other institutional obstacles, socio-cultural expectations, gender stereotypes and unequal entrepreneurial opportunities strongly influence women's entrepreneurial experiences in unique ways (Brush et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2021; Bosma et al., 2024).

The difficulties are greater in industries that have tended to be male. Other industries like construction and real estate, manufacturing, engineering services, logistics and supply chain, information technology and telecommunications still reflect the idea of masculinity in leadership, technical skills and entrepreneurial ability, which are often attributed to the male gender. This means that women business owners in these areas will need to face the challenge of establishing and running a business as well as repeatedly proving their credibility and negotiating for legitimacy, while simultaneously challenging gendered assumptions about their business skills and capabilities (Acker 1990, 2006; Ahl 2006; Gupta et al. 2009; Henry et al. 2021). Entrepreneurship in these contexts is then a negotiated process in which social and institutional issues and requirements are as much a part of the business owners' everyday routine as they are of his or her business.

Resolving a work-life balance is one of the most enduring issues arising from this situation. Entrepreneurship, unlike working in an organization, does not usually have clear boundaries in terms of work and time; work life is seldom stable and the day-to-day hours spent in the work place are not set in stone. Owning a business involves ongoing decision making, investments, relationship building and being responsive to market trends. For women entrepreneurs, these entrepreneurial needs are interlaced with the culturally internalized roles of care taker, household manager and family provider. Work and family are not separate spheres, but rather often intertwined and women are faced with conflicting role expectations and needs throughout their entrepreneurial lives (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Jennings & McDougald, 2007; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Kelliher et al., 2019).

While work-life balance has emerged as a valuable focus for entrepreneurship research, much of the current work on this subject focuses on whether an entrepreneur reaches or falls short of a work-life balance. Thus, the studies conducted so far have focused on work family conflict, role overload, entrepreneurial stress or on work life balance, as measured by work life satisfaction, in a variable-oriented analysis. Although these studies have largely yielded fruitful results, they do not offer a complete picture of women's negotiation of competing demands across time. The importance of work-life balance is now well understood, and the quest for it is a process that is dynamic and influenced by the evolving nature of work and the family, institutional contexts, and individual perceptions. There are, however, few empirical accounts of the negotiation process, especially as it pertains to women entrepreneurs in gendered entrepreneurial environments (Kossek et al., 2014; Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2017; Henry et al., 2021).

Sociological and institutional dimensions, which often differ significantly from western sources, are especially relevant in the context of developing economies and the need for understanding of such an environment when considering entrepreneurship. The family system of Pakistani society is strongly influential in entrepreneurial activities, traditional gender norms, unbalanced access to entrepreneurial resources for women entrepreneurs and inadequate institutional support for women entrepreneurs. Female entrepreneurs in traditionally male-dominated fields of work must then deal with the layers of work, social and family expectations. While the participation of women in entrepreneurship has been slowly increasing, previous studies have been more concerned with the barriers for women entrepreneurs, access to finance, or business performance and have comparatively little focused on how women experience and negotiate work-life balance in these complex environments (Roomi & Rehman, 2012; Henry et al., 2021; Bosma et al., 2024).

The research in this domain has been dominated in terms of method from quantitative research examining the relations among the predefined constructs. Such methods benefit theory testing but are less successful at capturing the lived experiences in which women make sense of entrepreneurial roles, manage and reconcile conflicting demands, and make sense of work-life balance. To overcome this, a number of qualitative studies have started to focus on this issue, but most of these are descriptive in nature, and the conclusions are often presented in terms of thematic classifications rather than in the construction of explanatory frameworks that can account for the dynamic interplay between contextual influences, competing role demands, adaptive practices, reflective meaning-making, and entrepreneurial outcomes over time. Consequently, theory-building qualitative research based on the dynamic entrepreneurial process that explains work life balance negotiation is still rather limited.

In order to be able to fill these gaps, this study uses an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the lived experiences of 29 female entrepreneurs from male dominated industries of Lahore, Pakistan. The research presents a theoretical approach based on a combination of Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory and focuses on how women interpret, negotiate and constantly reconstruct the work-life balance to meet the shifting demands of the entrepreneurial, family and institutional context. The study does not seek to conceptualize work-life balance as a fixed endpoint, but instead suggests the Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN), an empirically-based model of work-life balance as

a recursive process that involves negotiating a balance between a set of competing role expectations, adapting one's negotiation process, reflecting on and making sense of one's experiences, and entrepreneurial outcomes, which is embedded in a set of contextual conditions. This process model advances entrepreneurship, gender and work-life balance research in two ways: by presenting a process model grounded in the context of a developing country, and by providing rich empirical evidence from a developing country context.

Literature Review

Women Entrepreneurs in Male-Dominated Industries

The importance of women's entrepreneurship for economic development, innovation, employment creation and social inclusion has made it an important field of entrepreneurship scholarship from being a 'side-line' area of research. There is growing recognition of the importance of institutional, cultural and industrial environments as influences on women's entrepreneurial trajectories in addition to women's individual attributes (Brush et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2021; Bosma et al., 2024). Entrepreneurship is therefore viewed as a social construct and the opportunities and constraints that entrepreneurs encounter, are created in a social process.

While there has been an increase in women's involvement, women continue to be under-represented in entrepreneurial activities especially in traditionally male dominated activities globally. Male dominated organizational cultures, occupational segregation and the perception of men as more competent leaders continue to be evident in sectors like construction, engineering, logistics, manufacturing, information technology, and telecommunications. Women who enter these industries often have limited access to influential business networks, less credibility and more exposure to their business decisions than men do (Acker, 1990, 2006; Ahl, 2006; Gupta et al., 2009). These challenges have an impact on business functions as well as women's experience as entrepreneurs and their professional identity building.

Legitimacy is one of the ongoing problems in such contexts. Women in male dominated industries may need to prove their competence multiple times before they receive acceptance from customers, suppliers, investors and other stakeholders, as compared to gender-balanced industries where women's competence is expected. So credibility for a professional is gained through the sustained entrepreneurial performance, not by the position of occupation. Consequently, entrepreneurship entails making business decisions as well as gendered institutional decisions at the same time (Marlow & McAdam, 2013; Thébaud, 2015).

The types of experiences vary greatly from one developed economy to another. Entrepreneurship is deeply rooted in socio-cultural contexts of many developing countries, where family-based patriarchal power structures, traditional gender norms, and access to entrepreneurial resources, are all inequitable. So, often women have to deal with a conflict between work goals and expectations related to child rearing, home management and family responsibilities. Such demands are interdependent and result in a unique setting for entrepreneurship that requires a different approach in terms of evidence produced mainly in Western societies (Henry et al., 2021; Bosma et al., 2024).

While there are important contributions in the literature that have advanced the knowledge base on women entrepreneurs' involvement and the structure obstacles that they face, there is comparatively less focus on how women actively engage with these obstacles as they travel their entrepreneurial path. Previous studies have tended to examine and report the barriers that confront women entrepreneurs, or to make comparisons on the outcomes of entrepreneurship, but less attention has been given to the processes by which women entrepreneurs constantly adjust to their evolving work and life demands. This restriction offers a valuable background to explore the negotiation of work-life balance from an interpretative and process Perspective.

Work-life Balance in Entrepreneurship

Research in both the field of organizations and entrepreneurship has made work-life balance one of the most widely discussed concepts to date. The first studies on balance tended to focus on the conflict between the work and family roles and have identified a situation in which the demands of the work and family roles are incompatible so that participation in one role hinders participation in the other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This viewpoint sparked much research on the issues of conflict, stress, overload, and psychological wellbeing in various work contexts.

Conflict is an integral part of work-life experiences, but is more of a complex reality for entrepreneurs than for conventional employment. There are unpredictable hours, risk of finances, emotional investment and constant responsibility for making

decisions for the organization when you own a business. Thus, work and life boundaries can sometimes be hard to create. Work and family are often intertwined for entrepreneurs, particularly for female entrepreneurs, and need to be constantly prioritized and adapted (Jennings & McDougald, 2007; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011).

There is increasing scholarship in recent years that work-life balance is not about an equilibrium that every individual will reach in their working life, but is a process that will change over a person's lifespan. People do not try to be equal in all areas, but constantly shift their focus as their working, family and personal goals change. The process approach is particularly useful in the field of entrepreneurship, as the business demands and family responsibilities vary through time (Kelliher et al., 2019; Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2017).

Work-life balance is more than just about time for women entrepreneurs. The roles of the entrepreneur(s) overlap with expectations of families and caregivers in the culture. Thus, the negotiation of a balance between work and personal life is an activity that demands multiple elements of negotiated identities, responsibilities, and social expectations to be engaged at the same time. Past studies have found that these competing demands impact the well-being of entrepreneurs, their business sustainability, and their entrepreneurial engagement in the long term. But much of this work-life balance evidence still frames the work-life balance as an outcome in terms of conflict or satisfaction, and offers little insight into how women actively work towards balancing their lives in the course of their entrepreneurial lives.

The restriction is felt more strongly in developing country settings where social and cultural values and institutional structures have a significant impact on the entrepreneurial journey. Thus, to comprehend work-life balance, one must go beyond outcome-based explanations to approaches that can reveal how women experience, engage in, and continue to negotiate and create an "out of" a work-life balance in dynamic and evolving entrepreneurial settings.

Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory

Understanding work-life balance negotiation requires theoretical perspectives capable of explaining both individual experiences and the broader contexts in which those experiences occur. The present study relies on the theories of Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory as they offer complementary explanations on how women are able to negotiate multiple roles in a business in male dominated industries.

The Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964; Biddle, 1986) helps in understanding how the person is seen in a particular role and the expectations and responsibilities that go along with that role. Often women entrepreneurs assume multiple identities such as being entrepreneurs, their leaders, spouses, mothers, caregivers and citizens. Such job roles are seldom autonomous; they are interdependent, constantly influencing and being influenced by one another, and so the people who hold them need to learn to prioritize, adapt and negotiate often conflicting expectations. Work-life balance does not, therefore, mean the absence of role conflict per se, but rather a co-existence of various roles in a process of management.

Gendered Organization Theory builds on this, by elaborating on the assumption of organizations and institutions about leadership, competence, authority and entrepreneurship (Acker, 1990, 2006). In industries where men are more prevalent, the functions of women entrepreneurs may be perceived as masculine. In male dominated industries, the functions of women entrepreneurs may be perceived as masculine, and they may also be faced with institutional expectation that deems entrepreneurship a masculine activity. The entrepreneurial skills are not, however, the only key to professional legitimacy; the ability to maneuver gendered norms and power structures in the organization are also important.

These theoretical perspectives can be combined to facilitate an understanding of work-life-balance as an individual as well as a contextual phenomenon. Role Theory explains how women experience competing responsibilities, whereas Gendered Organization Theory explains why those responsibilities emerge within particular institutional environments. Together, they provide the conceptual foundation for examining work-life balance as a recursive process shaped by the interaction between individual agency and structural conditions rather than as a purely personal or organizational issue.

Research Gap

There have been considerable advances in the knowledge of women entrepreneurship, challenges faced by entrepreneurs and work-life balance in the literature. However, there are four key areas of uncertainty.

First, in the academic literature, the concept of work-life balance is mostly theorized as an outcome, which is often assessed in terms of work-family conflict, role overload, stress or well-being. Such views help to analyze the outcomes of competing

demands but offer relatively little insight into how competing demands are being negotiated by women as their roles as entrepreneurs and family members change over time. As a result, the concept of work-life balance continues to be poorly understood, particularly as it relates to a dynamic and recursive process.

Secondly, research into entrepreneurship has been mainly focused on the problems that confront women entrepreneurs such as limited access to finance, entrepreneurial networks, institutional support and leadership opportunities. Though these studies have added to the body of knowledge, they tend to describe what problems entrepreneurs have faced and the ways in which they have responded to those problems in a particular way, and do not explain how over time women have responded, interpreted, and adapted to these problems. Consequently, there is limited knowledge of the strategies women employ as they constantly manage numerous business and personal obligations.

Third, a significant portion of the evidence available comes from developed countries, and the institutions, social policies and gender norms are quite different in developed and developing countries. In the Pakistani context, entrepreneurship is rooted in the patriarchal family system, collectivist social system and institutional environment which are still influencing the opportunities and constraints of women entrepreneurs. The findings presented are not easily transferable across contexts, as there are significant differences between contexts, especially in relation to the West.

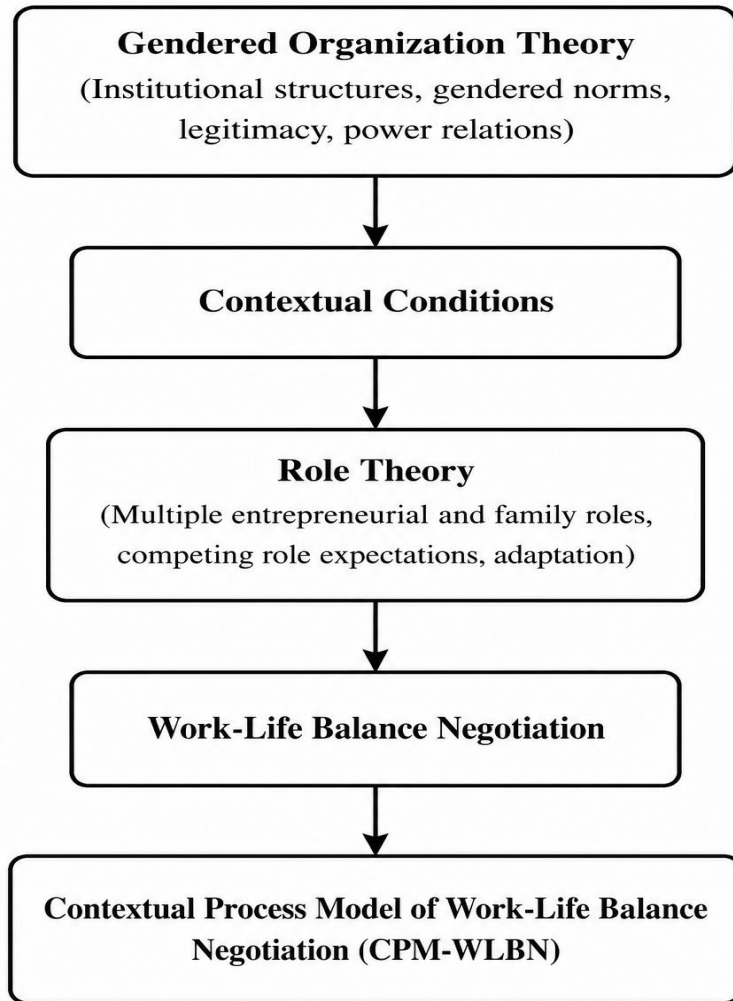
Last, there are some methodological issues in the literature. Most research into entrepreneurship and work-life balance has been quantitative, focusing on relationships between pre-selected variables that provide little information about what it is like to be a participant to the study and the participants' sense of meaning. Despite the growing number of qualitative studies conducted in recent years, relatively few have embraced Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to develop models that emerge from entrepreneurs' lived experience that explain the situation. Thus, the extent to which there is theory building research that explains the interaction of contextual influences, competing role expectations, adaptive practices, reflective interpretation and entrepreneurial outcome along women's entrepreneurial journey is limited.

These gaps, conceptual, contextual, theoretical and methodological, need to be met by an interpretative approach that is able to account for the complexity of women's life experiences and to go beyond the descriptive thematic accounts. Therefore, the interpretation of this research is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which will be used to find out the experiences of 29 female entrepreneurs of male dominated industries of Lahore in Pakistan. The study is based on the participants' experiences, and the study proposes the Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN) that suggests a different perspective of work-life balance as a process, a recursive process, and a contextually embedded process rather than as a static entrepreneurial outcome. The study therefore enriches the fields of entrepreneurship, work-life balance and gender scholarship in providing a process model in a developing country context that is grounded in the empirical.

To build theory supporting the study, a cross-fertilization model of the two theories Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory is presented in Figure 1, which explains the nature of work-life negotiation of female entrepreneurs in male-dominated fields.

Figure 1

Integrated Theoretical Framework



Purpose of the Study

In light of the gaps identified, this study aims to explore the experience of the female entrepreneurs in negotiating 'work-life balance' while working in male dominated industry. This research does not examine the outcomes of work-life balance, but rather examines what types of meanings women give to their entrepreneurial experiences and how they are constantly balancing work and life.

The study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to create an empirically derived explanation on the lived experiences of 29 entrepreneurs, female participants in Lahore, Pakistan in relation to work-life balance negotiation. The study combines both Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory to offer a Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN) which proposes a process-oriented explanation of the inter-relationships between contextual conditions, competing role expectations, adaptive negotiation practices, reflective meaning-making and entrepreneurial outcomes throughout the entrepreneurial journey.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design approach, specifically the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to gain insight into the strategy that female entrepreneurs use when they enter a sector dominated by males and work to create a balance between their work and life. IPA is especially suited to exploring complex lived experiences as it aims to draw out the meaning and interpretation of individuals to the important event(s) in their personal and socio-cultural context (Smith et al., 2022). This does not involve analyzing relationships between pre-set variables but allows for a rich exploration of participants' interpretation of these experiences, in which theory is generated.

The choice of IPA is related to the aim of the study, which is to gain insight into the work-life balance negotiation as a dynamic process with a context sensitive character. Its idiographic orientation allows that each entrepreneurial journey is unique and then attempts to seek out the interpretive pattern among the various participants. The development of the Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN) is a result of this analytical process. Table 1 below summarizes the key features of the research design, and provides an overview of the methodological approach.

Table 1

Overview of the Study

Component	Description
Research paradigm	Interpretivist
Research design	Qualitative
Methodology	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
Participants	29 female entrepreneurs
Sampling	Purposive sampling
Study setting	Lahore, Pakistan
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews
Data analysis	Idiographic IPA and cross-case interpretation
Outcome	Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN)

Participants and Data Collection

Information rich, in-depth interviewees were selected using purposive sampling, as they were people who had direct experience of negotiating work-life balance in male dominated industries and were operating businesses. As in IPA, the selection of participants was based on experiential relevance, rather than on gaining statistical representativeness (Smith et al., 2022; Patton, 2015). Participants included women entrepreneurs who had owned and managed their businesses in the above-mentioned sectors of activities, known as traditionally male dominated, for a minimum of two years.

The study was conducted with 29 female entrepreneurs. While participants were drawn from a variety of entrepreneurial industries, they experienced the business environment at the same time as they took care of their families and had to deal with gendered institutional environments, which, while sufficient for the IPA, still provided a meaningful context for the variation.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to gather data from March to May 2026. Interviews were 45 to 90 minutes long and addressed the participants' entrepreneurial experiences, experiences with work-life balance, family responsibilities, coping, and perceptions of work-life balance. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, verbatim and anonymised by using the codes of the participant (P1-P29). To contextualize the empirical findings, Table 2 presents the distribution of participants across the industries represented in the study.

Table 2

Participant Distribution by Industry (N = 29)

Industry	Participants
Construction & Real Estate	5
Information Technology	10
Education	1
Logistics & Supply Chain	1
Manufacturing & Industrial Production	8
Textile & Apparel	2
Telecommunications & Engineering Services	2
Total	29

Data Analysis

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPC; Smith et al., 2022) procedures were used to analyze data. To get to know participants' narratives, all the transcripts were read repeatedly. Prior to emergent themes being generated for each participant, initial descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments were recorded. This idiographic approach led to an independent interpretation of each entrepreneurial experience before looking at larger patterns of interpretation.

Inductive and iterative approaches were used for coding. Statements were primarily identified and coded as significant statements then grouped into experiential statements and emergent themes. Cross-case comparison then revealed cross-cutting patterns of interpretation among the participants that led to five higher-order dimensions that explain work-life balance negotiation. The Dimensions were used as a foundation for building the Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN).

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Engaging with the data, interpreting it as it unfolded, using a reflexive memo and comparing participants' stories with the developing interpretations supported the credibility of the study. The analytical choices made in order to find out the data were accurately documented and followed for the entire research process for improving transparency and dependability. Reflexive practice also reinforced confirmability as it ensured that the interpretations were tied to the lived experiences of the participants.

Prior to the collection of data ethical approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee was obtained. Prior to participating, participants were given in-depth information regarding the study and then signed a written informed consent agreement. To ensure confidentiality, participant codes (P1-P29) were used and the recording of interviews and transcriptions were kept in a secure place and only used by the researcher.

Findings

The twenty-nine interviews were analyzed with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach that showed work-life balance is not a static state or something that can be achieved but a constant process of negotiation that is affected by the varying entrepreneurial, family and institutional situations. The participants were drawn from a variety of different entrepreneurial backgrounds and industries, but their lives' stories showed a pattern of constantly building, breaking, redefining, and rebuilding balance as they left one industry, entered another, and went on to become entrepreneurs.

Instead of work-life balance being a harmonious division of work and family, participants perceived it as a dynamic process and something that is constantly changing and needs to be adjusted to the different demands. There was interplay between entrepreneurial responsibilities, the expectations of family members, the development of the business and the socio-cultural norms, with participants having to redefine priorities, adjust strategies and redefine success as time went on. As such, 'work-life balance' became a process rather than an end goal, and was a part of the participants' everyday entrepreneurial experiences.

Cross-case analysis identified five interrelated interpretative dimensions explaining this process. These dimensions were not experienced as independent stages but as interconnected components that continuously influenced one another. Contextual conditions shaped participants' role expectations; competing roles prompted adaptive negotiation practices; these experiences encouraged reflective meaning-making, ultimately influencing entrepreneurial outcomes that, in turn, altered future contextual conditions. This recursive relationship formed the basis of the Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN).

Cross-case interpretation generated five interconnected dimensions that collectively explain how female entrepreneurs negotiate work-life balance. These dimensions are summarized in Table 3 before being discussed in detail.

Table 3

Interpretative Dimensions of the Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN)

Interpretative Dimension	Central Interpretation
Contextual Conditions	Entrepreneurial experiences are shaped by socio-cultural norms, institutional structures, family expectations, and industry characteristics.
Competing Role Expectations	Women simultaneously negotiate entrepreneurial, leadership, caregiving, and family responsibilities.
Adaptive Negotiation Practices	Participants employ flexible strategies including prioritization, delegation, support mobilization, and boundary management.
Reflective Meaning-Making	Experiences are continuously interpreted and redefined, reshaping perceptions of balance and entrepreneurial success.
Entrepreneurial Outcomes	Continuous negotiation contributes to resilience, business sustainability, personal growth, and evolving understandings of work-life balance.

Contextual Conditions

The work-life balance was always mentioned as an integral part of the working context where entrepreneurship took place by participants. They did not see the issue of balance as a personal one, but rather as the result of the interplay between socio-cultural expectations, institutional structures, family context and industry-specific context. The contextual influences provided the context for entrepreneurs' decision-making and negotiation with their partner over work-life.

There was a strong theme of traditional gender expectations throughout the participants' stories. Many of the participants said entrepreneurship wasn't in place for them to give up their domestic duties, but it was another duty added to their list of existing responsibilities. While they had their own businesses to run and so were successful, they were also largely responsible for running their households, caring for children and family duties. Entrepreneurship rather, then, replaced traditional responsibilities, but grew instead.

As P7 explained:

"Running a business never meant that my responsibilities at home became less. I had to manage both because everyone expected me to fulfill my family role first."

This case study shows that there was interplay of entrepreneurial involvement within a long-standing socio-cultural set of expectations of women's roles. Participants did not discuss separate work and family spheres as they were more likely to discuss the intermingling of responsibilities, which were integral to family and community norms.

The institutional environment also affected entrepreneurial experiences of participants. Organizational cultures that assumed that organizational competence and authority were masculine as well as leadership are very common across several professions, including women who were working in the construction, engineering, logistics, manufacturing, and technology industry sectors. It was thus critical to continually demonstrate professional competence in order to gain credibility.

Reflecting upon her entrepreneurial experience, P3 stated:

"Clients often assumed I represented someone else's company rather than owning the business myself. I had to prove my knowledge before they accepted my decisions."

These experiences are indicative of the nature of entrepreneurial relationships in everyday life in institutions. Legitimacy was not guaranteed to be professional; rather it had to be achieved over and over again through performance and demonstrated ability.

The characteristics of the industry also affected the negotiation for the work-life. The industries that need extensive travel, have irregular hours, project deadlines or need to engage with their clients constantly presented extra challenges for balancing the entrepreneurial and family responsibilities of the participants. The business needs often came as a surprise and as a result, the participants had to change their work schedules and family lives.

Family environments appeared to be both nurturing and challenging environments. Though a few participants reported emotional support from partners or their extended families, few reported that their partners' support removed competing responsibilities. Rather, the relationship with the family was a constant reminder to women of the options they had in tackling entrepreneurial and domestic obligations.

Together, these findings indicate that negotiations for work-life balance start in the context of broader situational factors and not just in the context of the individual's choice. Multiple responsibilities are negotiated within a socio-cultural environment where norms, institutional expectations, entrepreneurial environment and family relationship all contribute to the context in which women negotiate their responsibilities.

Competing Role Expectations

On this basis, the phenomenon of entrepreneurship was described by participants as the interaction of several social and work roles, which was highlighted in each of the answers. They weren't just mothers, entrepreneurs, spouses, daughters, caregivers, employers, mentors or community members, they were all those things. These roles did not stand in isolation, but were constantly to be negotiated and one's expectations were continually undermined by the other.

In general, participants did not see role conflict as being related to entrepreneurship. But the conflicts arose, as expectations linked to various roles often coincided. Customers' needs, work opportunities, family needs and household needs were competing for participants' time and attention and they had to decide which ones needed to be given priority.

As P14 reflected:

"Every day involves different priorities. Sometimes my business needs immediate attention, while on other days my family becomes more important. There is never a fixed formula."

This quotation serves to show that there were competing expectations in the role, which were not fixed. Participants constantly reviewed their priorities in the light of changing entrepreneurial and family situations rather than following routine.

One of the most prevalent subjects in the work life negotiation that was discussed was motherhood. The people who had young children talked about how they had to deal with the challenges of growing their business, as well as caring for their child, going to school and looking after their emotions. These responsibilities did not seem to be mutually exclusive to them; they were looking to ways in which they could combine both in their lives.

Likewise, those in leadership roles at their companies spoke of the balancing act between a sense of responsibility towards employees and towards customers and responsibilities to family. Entrepreneurial leadership was thus more than just making business decisions; it was also a responsibility for emotions with respect to various groups of stakeholders.

Importantly, there was no tendency by participants to talk negatively about competing roles. While many women felt that the multiple demands of their work was stressful. There was a sense that these experiences increased their adaptability, organization and resilience. Accordingly, competition was seen as a way to grow and develop as well as a challenge.

The findings further challenge the traditional definition of role conflict as an organizational stressor by showing that competing role expectations are not only felt as a stressor in the organization, but also influence the individual's extreme job demands.

Rather, they are elements of women's entrepreneurial journeys that can be seen as inseparable and continuously evolving as women's understanding and experience of work-life balance.

Adaptive Negotiation Practices

In spite of the ongoing difficulties with balancing being an entrepreneur and taking care of family, participants never sought a long-term solution of work-life balance but were all capable of adapting. They shared that a balance was achieved by ongoing adjustment and re-prioritization of priorities, responsibilities and expectations as things changed over time. Participants did not use one specific strategy, but several adaptive strategies were used, which were flexible with the needs of the business, family, and support available.

Prioritization was one of the most common strategies to be reported. Participants noted that the demands of entrepreneurship, as well as family, often didn't have the same urgency and they had to constantly decide where to allocate their time, attention, and emotional resources. Prioritization was thus perceived as a continuous process of decision making, and not a set time table.

As P11 explained,

"There are days when the business has to come first because clients are depending on me, and there are days when my family needs me more. Balance means knowing which responsibility is more important at that particular moment."

This is a reflection that shows that participants were not deceived that if they didn't find a temporary equilibrium, then they failed. Rather, they embraced shifts in priorities as a matter of course in the life of an entrepreneur. Time was no longer the only factor in negotiating a successful work-life balance. Flexibility rather than equal distribution of time was a new characteristic of successful work-life negotiation.

The other important adaptive practice mentioned by the participants was boundary management. But, the entrepreneurship activities often spilled across the lines of the household and the business, as in normal organizational situations work and household life can be physically divided. This meant that participants formed flexible and not rigid boundaries between entrepreneurial and family activities which enabled an entrepreneurial activity to be carried out throughout the day.

For example, P18 reflected,

"I learned that strict boundaries are impossible in business. Sometimes I attend to family matters during office hours, and sometimes I respond to business issues at home. What matters is managing both responsibly."

Participants wanted the blend of work and family to be more of integration, rather than a removal of overlap between both, and they wanted to have it in a way that doesn't disrupt either.

Delegation was another key strategy that was employed. As businesses grew, people began to realize that they couldn't handle all their business activities by themselves since it was inefficient and unsustainable. Delegate operational responsibilities to trusted employees, family or business partners so that more flexibility was created without diminishing business operations.

One participant explained,

"Earlier I believed I had to supervise everything myself. Over time I realized that trusting my team allowed me to focus on decisions that really required my attention." (P22)

Delegation, as such, was an operational and psychological adjustment, which showed an increase of trust in the leadership of the organization among the participants.

Participants also emphasized on the need of mobilization of supports. During times of heightened entrepreneurial stressors, family, marital, friend, colleagues and networks were often sources of practical and emotional support. Participants also noted that support did not alleviate competing responsibilities, but that it helped them to manage these responsibilities better.

Support didn't always go one way: for many women it was a two-way street. When looking at family and business needs, family members adapted to the demands of entrepreneurship and at the same time, participants adapted their business schedules to the family needs. This balance was mutually negotiated and not a personal one, as seen through this reciprocal adaptation.

A key one of these themes was strategic flexibility. Participants shared their experiences that the planning of their businesses had to be constantly adjusted given changes in the market, the wants of customers, business opportunities and family life. Successful entrepreneurs weren't caught up in standard operating procedures but were able to be responsive to new situations and still have long-term business goals.

These adaptive practices all illustrate that work-life balance isn't the result of perfect time management, nor complete work and family separation. Rather, the women entrepreneurs negotiated the changing circumstances on an ongoing basis, and were able to make use of prioritization, flexible boundary management, delegation, mobilization of support, and strategic adjustment. The practices created the conditions for the participants' response to competing role demands in dynamic entrepreneurial contexts.

Reflective Meaning-Making

Participants also constantly discussed work-life balance as a reinterpretation of experiences and a redefinition of personal success, in addition to behavioral adaptation. Reflection helped them to understand better the problems of entrepreneurship reconsider the importance of their activities and gained new perspectives on balance that moved with them as they built their ventures and their relationships. Thus, there was not only practical negotiation, but also on-going changes of what the participants experienced based on their negotiation.

One thing that was common to all the participant stories was the evolution of a rejection of traditional notions of work-life balance. Many of the entrepreneurs had the notion that it takes balance - between work and family life - to be successful when they first started out. But, entrepreneurial experience taught them otherwise, however, as they came to understand what they could expect, could not conceive the business realities within the uncertainties of being an entrepreneur.

As P25 explained,

"At the beginning I thought balance meant giving equal attention to everything. Later I realized that balance means making the right decision for the situation you are facing."

The quotation is a good reflection of the change in participants' conception of balance. Instead, they made clearer the definitions of entrepreneurship as they were adapting to the evolving realities of entrepreneurship, but not in the sense of perfection.

Reflection also helped participants to reframe entrepreneurial problems as looking at and seeing them as opportunities to learn and grow instead of failures. Straining situations in the business, lack of money and conflicting duties were often cited as being worthwhile experiences that increased confidence and decision making.

Reflecting on her entrepreneurial journey, P9 stated,

"Looking back, the difficult periods taught me much more than the successful ones. Every challenge changed the way I approached both my business and my family."

The interpretative process created new, more resilient notions about entrepreneurship, and helped participants to make learning from adversity their own.

The participants also shared their views about the changes in views on success as a result of entrepreneurial experience. Financial success continued to be important but increasingly personal success, family wellbeing, continuity of business enterprise and opportunities to others were included.

For P17, success became,

"Being able to manage my business without losing the relationships that matter most to me."

This expanded awareness illustrates entrepreneurship beyond the monetary aspects and into more comprehensive assessments of personal and professional success.

In addition, the process of reflection was a factor in reconstructing identity. As participants went through their entrepreneurial journeys, they mentioned that they became more confident, independent and able to make tough decisions. Importantly, these

changes were not perceived as different from WLB, but as being the result of on-going negotiations of entrepreneurial and family responsibilities.

The findings show that 'meaning making' is an important mechanism of interpretation in WLBN. Participants' experiences in their behavioral adaptation cannot be explained. Instead, work-life balance is constantly remade, rethought, re-learned, and reinterpreted as to what success looks like, and new priorities are established.

Entrepreneurial Outcomes

The overall impact of the contextual factors, conflicting role expectations, negotiating for adaptation, and meaning-making in relation to reflection was displayed through various entrepreneurial results that did not just focus on business performance. These outcomes were repeatedly viewed by participants as ongoing goals, and not as end goals, which emphasized the recursive of work-life balance negotiation.

Entrepreneurial resilience was the most common outcome reported. They described how they had grown more resilient to respond to future challenges constructively by having to deal with situations where they were continuously subjected to uncertainty, competing demands and institutional barriers. Resilience was not so much a natural personal trait, but rather a skill that arose from ongoing negotiations of entrepreneurial and family burdens.

As P21 reflected,

"Entrepreneurship has made me stronger because every challenge required me to find another way forward."

Work-life negotiation was also linked to sustainability of the business by participants. They were able to adapt and change their decisions, delegate effectively and continuously learn, allowing them to keep on going with the business in the face of the market's fluctuations and their own responsibilities. Many of those participating did not think that becoming successful as an entrepreneur meant growing quickly – they valued long-term sustainability in addition to family health.

An additional important result was personal development. All participants reported a development of their confidence, independence, leadership and decision making skills in response to their entrepreneurial experiences. These changes were personal, affecting not only business activities, but also relationships, hopes and careers as entrepreneurs.

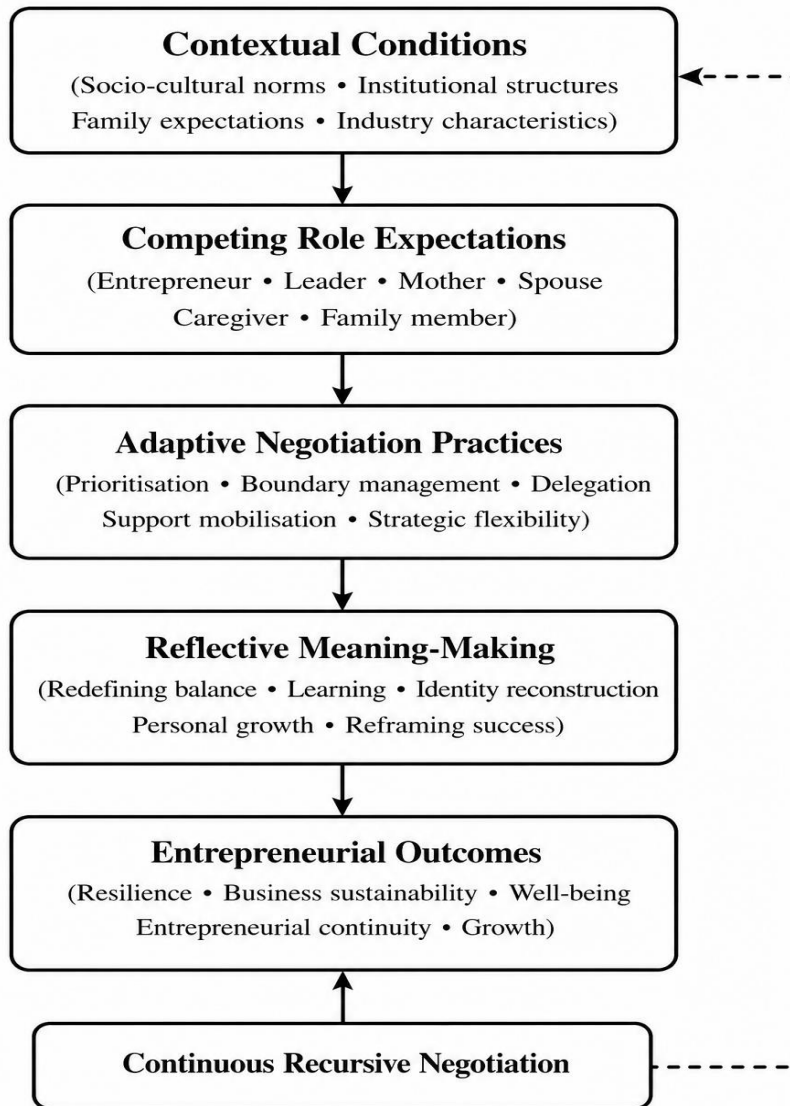
In fact, participants did not relate the concept of work-life balance to a point that is ultimately achieved after tackling entrepreneurial obstacles. Rather, they saw negotiation as a life-long, ongoing aspect of entrepreneurship. For the business, new responsibilities emerged as it grew as well as family situations kept changing; expectations within the institutions were dynamic. As a result, new contextual conditions emerged with each entrepreneurial outcome, which also started new rounds of negotiations.

This recursive relationship demonstrates that work-life balance is best understood as a continuous process rather than a final state. Entrepreneurial outcomes simultaneously represent the consequences of previous negotiation and the starting point for future adaptation. It is this continuous movement between context, roles, adaptation, reflection,

The integration of the five interpretative dimensions resulted in the development of the Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN). As illustrated in Figure 2, work-life balance is conceptualized as a recursive and contextually embedded process through which women continually negotiate entrepreneurial and family responsibilities.

Figure 2

Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN)



The model demonstrates that that work-life balance does not proceed in a linear fashion towards achieving balance but rather is a process that is reiterated as entrepreneurial outcomes continually redefine the contextual conditions for further negotiations. Women have multiple rejections of priorities, changes in strategies and re-constructs of the meaning of balance throughout this process as their entrepreneurial and family situation changes.

Discussion

Theoretical Discussion

The results illustrate that for women entrepreneurs' working-life balance can be viewed as an ongoing negotiation process, rather than the state of balance. Previous entrepreneurship literature has focused mainly on work-life balance as the outcome variable (for example, work-family conflict, role overload, stress, and satisfaction), with a few studies looking at the proximal causes of the dichotomy (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Kossek et al., 2014). These views highlight the impact of the competing demands, but they offer little understanding of the processes that women use to constantly interpret, negotiate and reconstruct balance in the dynamic of their entrepreneurial contexts. This limitation is overcome by the current study, which revealed that work-life balance is continually produced through the interaction between the contextual conditions, various role expectations, adaptive practices, reflective meaning making and entrepreneurial outcomes. These dimensions combine to create the

Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN), which places a shift in the concept of balance from a dispositional construct to a dynamic entrepreneurial process.

The first contribution is with respect to the importance of context for entrepreneurial experiences. The studies that have been conducted in the past recognize the role of socio-cultural norms and institutional environment in the process of women entrepreneurship (Brush et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2021), but often they have been conceptualized as outside constraints. The present results indicate a more complex dynamic interaction. The influence of the contextual conditions went far beyond affecting entrepreneurship; they took on a role in shaping the meaning participants gave to responsibilities, prioritization of competing demands, and the way they dealt with everyday problems. It is clear that gendered expectations, industry norms, institutional practices and family expectations were always present and continue to influence the choices that the participants made and how they make decisions; work life balance is inextricably linked with the contexts in which entrepreneurship happens. This further confirms Gendered Organization Theory by showing that the gendered institutions are still interwoven into the everyday lives of entrepreneurs, even after they have started their business, and that both opportunities and responsibilities to work and manage the home are negotiated through them (Acker, 1990, 2006).

The other contribution is an elaboration on Role Theory that shows that entrepreneurial and family roles are not necessarily in conflict, but are continually negotiated. The traditional focus of Role Theory has been on role conflict, role overload and competing role expectations (Kahn et al., 1964; Biddle, 1986). Participants often found they had to deal with a variety of competing demands, but did not tend to see these situations as ongoing conflict. Rather, entrepreneurial and family duties were seen as flexible duties that needed to be continually adapted to meet with the changing circumstances. Balance, then, was established as a continuous process of prioritization, instead of a process of elimination of role demands. The discovery suggests a dynamic approach to the concept of role conflict and confirms an alternative process perspective on which role negotiation is seen as an adaptive and continual entrepreneurial competence.

The studies also enriches the entrepreneurship literature by yielding evidence that as an adaptation process itself is the key to keeping women engaged in entrepreneurship. Previous studies have found coping mechanisms to be flexibility, delegation, and social support (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Kelliher et al., 2019). But such strategies are often the only ones that are mentioned or those that come in the wake of work-family conflict. The current results suggest adaptive practices take place as the system of continuous negotiation. Participants constantly changed priorities and made adjustments to their routine, to mobilization, and to the way they carried their business, all to accommodate changing entrepreneurial and family demands. Thus, adaptation became more than simply a reaction to imbalance; it was an intrinsic trait of entrepreneurial life.

Reflective meaning making is an important theoretical insight that has been gained from the study. The current literature on work-life balance has tended to emphasize on behavioral change and psychological outcomes, and received less attention on the re-interpretation process of entrepreneurs over time. As their entrepreneurial journeys unfolded, participants repeatedly shared their experiences of changes in their perception of what constituted success, is which bears responsibility, and how this impacts on the balance of the business. They don't seek a balance between work and family life, but rather began to establish some more nuanced and satisfying definitions of entrepreneurial success. Through this process of interpretation participants were able to help themselves to understand and turn negative experiences into learning, resilience and growth opportunities. Therefore, work-life balance was not just about the behavioral adaptation and continuous cognitive and emotional reconstruction of entrepreneurial experiences.

The CPM-WLBN is the main theoretical contribution of this study. Conceptualizations often view work-life balance in a linear fashion, with work demands, family demands and individual outcomes being related in a linear fashion. The proposed model, however, suggests that entrepreneurial outcomes are at the same time the context for negotiating emerging entrepreneurial realities. The changes in the family, institutional environments, and business growth come with new duties, needs, and opportunities and pose new challenges and limitations. Work-life balance is thus a process that is repeated and cycles through each negotiation, changing entrepreneurial experiences in the process. The model changes the nature of the relationships conceptualized as recursive, not sequential, thus providing a more holistic picture of entrepreneurial life in gendered institutional frameworks.

The findings also help build on the rapidly expanding research on the relevance of context in the theory of entrepreneurship. A substantial amount of the existing evidence that has been produced to date to inform entrepreneurship and work-life balance has been produced in high-resourced developed countries that have more gender-inclusive workplaces, and fairly different family structures. This study has shown that without an understanding of the socio-cultural contexts in which entrepreneurial behavior takes place, then it is not possible to have a full understanding of entrepreneurial behavior. In Pakistan, entrepreneurs' decision making was more than just business decisions as norms of a patriarchy, family structures of collectivism and gendered

institutional expectations influenced their entrepreneurial decision making. The study thus adds to the recent calls to look at entrepreneurship research from a context-sensitive perspective and also confirms empirical findings from the context of a developing country, which is largely underrepresented in international scholarship (Henry et al., 2021; Bosma et al., 2024).

In addition to theoretical implications for understanding entrepreneurial resilience, the findings of this research has implications for policy makers and practitioners. This research has implications for policy makers and practitioners as well as theoretical implications for understanding entrepreneurial resilience. Resilience was not reported as a personality trait that participants felt they had in their past, prior to starting a business. Rather, resilience it is the result of multiple interactions with uncertainty, multiple demands, and institutional difficulties. The participation in each negotiation cycle led to a higher level of confidence, decision-making power and readiness of the participants in meeting the potential future needs of entrepreneurs. This work builds on the current resilience research and places resilience on the "product side" of the continuum, rather than the "predispositions side. This work contributes to current resilience research by situating resilience as a result of ongoing negotiation rather than a precondition for entrepreneurial success. The main theoretical findings of the study are summarized in Table 4 below which shows how the proposed CPM-WLBN builds on the current literature on entrepreneurship and WLB.

Table 4

Theoretical Contributions of the Study

Existing Perspective	Contribution of the Present Study
Work-life balance viewed as an outcome	Work-life balance conceptualized as a recursive negotiation process
Individual-centered explanations	Interaction between individual agency and contextual conditions
Role conflict emphasized	Continuous role negotiation and adaptation emphasized
Static conceptualizations of balance	Dynamic and evolving process model (CPM-WLBN)
Behavioral coping strategies examined separately	Adaptive practices conceptualized as an integrated negotiation mechanism
Limited evidence from developing economies	Empirical process model grounded in Pakistan's entrepreneurial context
Independent application of theories	Integration of Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory

Overall, the study moves away from considering the concept of work-life balance to the idea of women's ongoing negotiation of work-life balance. CPM-WLBN synthesizes and extends existing research on women's entrepreneurship and existing entrepreneurship, gender and work-life balance theories and scholarship by combining contextual factors with role and interaction with others, adaptive practices, reflective interpretations and entrepreneurial outcomes within a recursive process.

Practical Implications

This research not only has an impact on the theory, but it also has several practical implications for entrepreneurial policies and practices. The findings suggest that interventions that only focus on financial support and/or business development are not enough to support women entrepreneurs. Since the work-life balance was found to be a process in which a woman's experience of entrepreneurship was embedded in her working context, it is recommended that policies should not only target development of the woman's capacity, but also the working context in which she goes about her entrepreneurial activities, as the latter is influenced by the institutional and socio-cultural conditions.

Entrepreneurship support groups can help enhance the sustainability of ventures by providing them with mentoring, leadership development opportunities, networking and resilience building activities, among other things, in addition to the traditional business training. Throughout, participants consistently showed that it was not just technical skills that were important to entrepreneurial success but the skill of negotiation of the changing responsibilities of the family and of the business. Creating supportive structures that acknowledge the role demands of entrepreneurs may benefit the continuity of entrepreneurship and their well-being.

Findings also have implications for industry associations and policy makers interested in boosting the participation of women in male-dominated industries. Creating and expanding professional networks for inclusivity, increasing access to

entrepreneurial resources and questioning gendered notions about leadership and political engagement can help decrease institutional obstacles that remain an impediment to women's entrepreneurial opportunities. They work together to foster entrepreneurial ecosystems in which the concept of 'work-life balance' is not an individual female issue, but a core part of sustainably entrepreneurial work.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is restricted to the entrepreneurs in male dominated areas of Lahore, Pakistan and women entrepreneurs. The results reveal very interesting aspects of the negotiation of work-life balance in this context, but experiences can vary from region to region, industry to industry and institutional setting to institutional setting. In future, the model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN) can be applied in other developing and developed countries; longitudinal designs can be used to explore the changes in the negotiation process over time; and comparative studies can be conducted on work-life balance negotiations of entrepreneurs in various sectors and at various stages of entrepreneurial development.

Conclusion

The work-life balance of female entrepreneurs is more of a negotiation process, rather than a state of achieving a balance, as shown in this study. Based on the life experiences of twenty-nine female entrepreneurs, a Contextual Process Model of Work-life Balance Negotiation (CPM-WLBN) was developed that portrays the interaction of contextual factors, competing role expectations, adaptive practices, reflective meaning-making and entrepreneurial outcomes in a recursive process across women's entrepreneurial lives. The study combines the strengths of Role Theory and Gendered Organization Theory, thereby enriching the existing entrepreneurship and work-life balance literature and offering contextually-specific evidence on the topic from Pakistan. The proposed model provides a process explanation to the entrepreneurial women experiences and can help in theory building and practice in the gender entrepreneurial context.

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