

“It’s Alright to Want Something Different”: Exploring Women’s Narratives about Career Transitions and Sustainability

Anna Paula Visentini¹ , Angela Beatriz Busato Scheffer¹ , Camila Vieira Müller² 

¹ Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Escola de Administração, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil

² Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil

How to cite: Visentini, A. P., Scheffer, A. B. B., & Müller, C. V. (2026). “It’s alright to want something different”: Exploring women’s narratives about career transitions and sustainability. *BAR-Brazilian Administration Review*, 23(2), e250142.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1807-7692bar2026250142>

Keywords:

sustainable careers; career transitions; career development; sustainability; gender bias.

JEL Code:

M14

Received:

July 14, 2025.

This paper was with the authors for two revisions.

Accepted:

April 23, 2026.

Publication date:

May 28 2026.

Corresponding author:

Anna Paula Visentini
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Escola de
Administração
Rua Washington Luiz, n. 855, Centro Histórico,
CEP 90010-460, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil


Funding:

The authors thank the Conselho Nacional de
Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico for funding this
research (Process No. 154409/2025-1)

Conflict of Interests:

The authors stated that there was no conflict of interest.

Editor-in-Chief:

Ricardo Limongi 
(Universidade Federal de Goiás, Brazil)

Associate Editor:

Renata Peregrino de Brito 
(Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)

Reviewers:

Two anonymous reviewers.

Peer Review Report:

The disclosure of the Peer Review Report was not
authorized by its reviewers.

Editorial assistants:

Eduarda Anastacio and Simone Rafael (ANPAD, Maringá, Brazil).

ABSTRACT

Objective: this study aims to analyze the motivations behind the exit of women without children from corporate careers and how these transitions impact career sustainability. We argue that career transitions involve dynamic processes of person–career fit shaped by gendered organizational contexts, through which structural gender inequalities influence women’s perceptions of career sustainability over time. **Methods:** the research is based on 20 narrative interviews with Brazilian women who underwent career transitions. Thematic analysis was conducted using the sustainable career framework, considering the dimensions of agency, meaning, time, and context. **Results:** based on the results, we propose a processual theoretical model that highlights how career sustainability is built through transitional processes over time. The findings indicate that gender plays a significant role in shaping transitions toward more sustainable trajectories and the mobilities required to maintain employability. **Conclusions:** even among women with resources and skills to navigate the labor market, we identify what we define as ‘gendered exhaustion’ – a condition marked by emotional fatigue resulting from the persistent confrontation with gendered barriers to accessing and remaining in prestigious organizational roles.

Data Availability: The data consist of in-depth qualitative interviews that describe participants’ career trajectories and personal experiences in detail, including sensitive information such as professional history, health conditions, and accounts of discrimination. Even after anonymization procedures, the specificity of the narratives poses a high risk of re-identification, which would violate the confidentiality guaranteed by the informed consent agreement. BAR – Brazilian Administration Review encourages data sharing but, in compliance with ethical principles, it does not demand the disclosure of any means of identifying research subjects.

Plagiarism Check: BAR maintains the practice of submitting all documents received to the plagiarism check, using specific tools, e.g.: iThenticate.

Peer review: is responsible for acknowledging an article’s potential contribution to the frontiers of scholarly knowledge on business or public administration. The authors are the ultimate responsible for the consistency of the theoretical references, the accurate report of empirical data, the personal perspectives, and the use of copyrighted material. This content was evaluated using the double-blind peer review process. The disclosure of the reviewers’ information on the first page is made only after concluding the evaluation process, and with the voluntary consent of the respective reviewers.

Copyright: The authors retain the copyright relating to their article and grant the journal BAR – Brazilian Administration Review, the right of first publication, with the work simultaneously licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0) The authors also retain their moral rights to the article, including the right to be identified as the authors whenever the article is used in any form.



INTRODUCTION

Contemporary careers are constructed within progressively intricate contexts characterized by the interplay of labor markets and continuous technological innovations (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022). Moreover, various events, including economic crises (Akkermans et al., 2018; McDonald & Hite, 2018), pose challenges for individuals and organizations. When scrutinizing careers from a women's standpoint, further complexity emerges due to the identification of historical barriers that hinder their development (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018), stemming from being part of a patriarchal system (Hirata, 2018).

Careers increasingly require constant reinvention and the development of strategies to cultivate employability (De Vos et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2015; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Individuals employ strategies to maintain their employability, aiming to enhance flexibility and preserve their market worth, which may include undertaking career transitions (Chudzikowski, 2012). Transitions are a multifaceted phenomenon involving both external and internal individual changes. They may result in a change of job or profession or a change in one's orientation to work while continuing in the same job (Akkermans et al., 2024).

We assume that systemic gender-related career barriers influence women's employability, career transitions, and sustainability processes, including the forms of mobility available to them (Müller et al., 2022, 2025). Systemic career barriers include organizational policies, structures, and practices that enhance opportunities for certain groups of employees while restricting them for others (Acker, 1990, 2006). Compared to men, women tend to face more barriers in the workplace. Even with high levels of education, they currently comprise a minority in management positions and tend to accumulate more extra-organizational responsibilities than men (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

Career transitions among women have predominantly been studied in terms of women opting in and out of the workforce (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). These studies have primarily concentrated on reconciling work and family responsibilities, particularly emphasizing motherhood within gendered organizational contexts. From the standpoint of women without children, narratives of frustration concerning the absence of work-related meaning emerge alongside a perception that work engulfs their entire lives, leaving no time or energy to discover meaning in other pursuits (Wilhoit, 2014).

Within the realm of women's career transitions, while employability provides an intriguing lens for comprehending short- and medium-term career development,

an excessive emphasis on individual behavior disregards other inherent factors within the work structure that, in the long run, jeopardize career continuity (Lawrence et al., 2015; McDonald & Hite, 2018). Furthermore, individual-centered employability perspectives present an unrealistic depiction of career progression (Akkermans et al., 2018), neglecting the influence of various contexts that impede career trajectories. To tackle these concerns, the dimension of sustainability emerges within career research, focusing on "promoting and protecting (rather than depleting) human and career development" (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017 p. 43). This discussion involves a notion of continuity over time, in which present needs must be met without compromising future needs (De Vos et al., 2020).

The concept of sustainable careers is a viable approach to analyzing career transitions by highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual agency and contextual factors. It entails the concept of person-career fit, which encompasses indicators such as health, happiness, and productivity, reflecting sustainable career paths. Health pertains to mental and physical well-being, happiness relates to satisfaction within career and life domains, and productivity is associated with work performance and, in a broader sense, employability in the labor market (De Vos et al., 2020). The sustainability of careers manifests through diverse patterns that arise from contextual adaptations, giving rise to positive and negative career cycles that facilitate continuity over time (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

In Brazil, the discourse on career sustainability holds relevance due to the prevalence of informality, precariousness, and job insecurity in the labor market, intensified working hours, and the neglect of personal life resulting from organizational models characterized by high demands and control (Antunes, 2016). Currently, only 21% of the Brazilian population has tertiary attainment, with women constituting the majority among those with higher education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). In a study conducted by the Instituto Ethos (2024) on the social, racial, and gender profile of Brazil's 1,100 largest companies, women make up 42% of the workforce, 38.6% of supervisory positions, 37.3% of management roles, 27.4% of executive positions, and only 18.6% of board members. Despite being close to holding half of entry-level roles, women represent just over a quarter of top-level positions (Instituto Ethos, 2024).

These data demonstrate that, despite higher qualifications and increased female participation in the workforce, there is a hierarchical narrowing within companies, with women having less representation

in positions that carry greater decision-making power, highlighting the persistence of gender disparities. Despite these structural adversities, certain Brazilian women who have achieved prominent positions opt to depart from corporate careers and undergo career transitions, similar to the phenomenon of opting out (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016).

This situation is noteworthy because these women abandon positions within organizations where they have had successful trajectories, which is an atypical occurrence in countries marked by social inequalities, where women have limited access to managerial roles. Empirical studies conducted in the Brazilian context indicate that opting out is not an atypical phenomenon in unequal societies, but rather a possibility restricted to a specific social group of women whose trajectories and 'choices' are structurally conditioned (Monteiro et al., 2026; Reis et al., 2021).

This study aims to analyze the motivations behind the exit of women without children from corporate careers and how these transitions influence career sustainability. We argue that career transitions involve dynamic processes of person-career fit shaped by gendered organizational contexts, through which structural gender inequalities influence women's perceptions of career sustainability over time. We conducted 20 narrative interviews with women who underwent career transitions as part of the methodology.

Our study stems from gaps in the literature on career and gender. Issues related to motherhood, such as the double burden faced by women due to family demands, have frequently been cited in the literature as one of the primary reasons women leave corporate careers (Bian & Wang, 2019; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016), while other contributing factors remain underexplored (Bian & Wang, 2019). Therefore, we examined the trajectories of women without children to explore additional experiences and access other gender-related career constraints. Additionally, we found no studies on sustainable careers that address gender as a central theme. Our approach aligns with calls from prior research emphasizing the need to advance discussions on the sustainability of women's careers within and beyond organizational contexts (Van der Heijden et al., 2020).

This study contributes to career research by delving into experiences that extend beyond motherhood and encompass the phenomenon of opting out (Wilhoit, 2014; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016), as well as career transitions that involve various types of mobility beyond upward transitions (Greenhaus, 2020; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). Moreover, it addresses the empirical and contextual needs of sus-

tainable career research (Van der Heijden et al., 2020), particularly in understanding the influence of gender in the dynamic process of person-career fit adjustment (Greenhaus, 2020).

WOMEN'S CAREERS

A male perspective often shapes career definitions. For instance, the traditional understanding of a career as upward mobility, characterized by hierarchical advancement within organizational structures, mirrors the professional trajectories of men in large corporations throughout the 20th century (Acker, 1990; Tomlinson et al., 2018). Also, the contemporary definition of career as "the evolving sequence of work-related events over time" (Arthur et al., 1989) is commonly described as the new career pattern of the 21st century because of its non-linear nature, which differs considerably from traditional careers. However, this concept is not particularly new when considering women's careers, which, unlike men's professional paths, have historically been marked by interruptions and a variety of work experiences due to structural gender barriers (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2018).

Mayrhofer et al. (2007) highlight gender as a central element in the social and cultural context that impacts individual career trajectories. From this perspective, gender is a category that still requires further exploration in career research. It is essential to recognize that all members of social structures, either actively or passively, contribute to the production and reproduction of gender inequalities (Mayrhofer et al., 2007).

The barriers women face in the workplace are often rendered invisible, yet, even when unconscious, they lead to gender inequalities that affect career sustainability. For instance, Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) highlight that access to leadership positions is influenced by social and organizational practices at macro levels (e.g., societal factors that prevent women from advancing and being recognized in their careers), meso levels (e.g., the marginalization of women's roles within groups and organizations), and micro levels (e.g., individual-level barriers, including everyday interactions within organizations) (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

There is a myth that organizations are gender-neutral systems. For Acker (1990, 2006), organizational structures have been shaped based on gender differences, leading to discriminatory workplace policies, practices, and norms. Also, organizational structures were constructed by and for men, adopting their behaviors and perspectives to represent people. Thus, this gender-neutral perspective separates the structure of organizations from the individuals within them (Acker, 1990, 2006).

In Brazil and other countries in the Global South, the factors contributing to gender barriers in social relations – both within and beyond organizational contexts – are more severe than those observed in the Global North, where significant progress has been achieved in addressing these issues (Hirata, 2018). Brazilian women continue to experience lower employment rates, limited representation in high-income and high-prestige positions, persistent wage inequality compared to men, and underrepresentation in political spheres (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2024). These challenges are further compounded by structural inequalities related to social class (Antunes, 2016) and race (Hirata, 2018).

Additionally, Brazil exhibits deeply rooted cultural sexism that restricts women's social participation in multiple ways (Hirata, 2018). Women disproportionately shoulder domestic and caregiving responsibilities and are the primary breadwinners in a significant percentage of households. In an extreme manifestation of this sexist culture, Brazil ranks fifth globally in violence against women, including femicide, underscoring the most violent expressions of gender-based inequality (United Nations Women, 2023).

Literature has employed a range of metaphors to explain gender inequalities in the labor market. The obstacles women face in climbing the corporate hierarchy include the glass ceiling, glass cliff, motherhood penalty, glass escalator, sticky floor, and the labyrinth (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Although women have increased their participation in the workforce, organizational structures have remained unchanged in a process that can be described as "everything changes to remain as it is" (Tonelli, 2023, p. 2).

Women feel exhausted due to the lack of profound transformation within organizations, their lives, and their subjectivity (Tonelli, 2023). Women's exhaustion is also linked to gender micro barriers, manifested through behaviors driven by expectations surrounding their performance in organizations (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). They tend to take on an additional load of responsibility beyond what is typically required of their male colleagues, especially when aspiring to leadership positions (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). This overload reflects external pressures and an internalization of social expectations that amplify the challenges women face in the corporate environment.

Like other underrepresented groups, women are forced to adapt to corporate rules, disregarding personal life challenges and treating them as separate from work (Tonelli, 2023). In male-dominated organizational cultures, women often leave companies from mid-management positions, unable to balance their careers with

family responsibilities (Hynd & Broadbridge, 2018). Thus, there is a perception that having a family entails sacrifices in career progression (Hynd & Broadbridge, 2018). When prioritizing their careers, women tend to delay or forgo motherhood (Bhowmick, 2024). Consequently, research seeks to understand whether women choose to leave or are pushed out of corporate careers (Kossek et al., 2017; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019).

Factors that lead successful and highly qualified women to exit the workforce have been examined through the lens of the 'opting out' phenomenon, often associated with motherhood as the primary driver of career interruption (Kossek et al., 2017; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2021; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). However, research in the Brazilian context suggests a more complex and structurally embedded process, indicating that such 'choices' are frequently shaped by demanding labor market conditions, persistent gender inequalities, and a strong sexual division of labor, rather than reflecting purely individual preferences (Monteiro et al., 2026; Reis et al., 2021). This body of research further indicates that opting out in Brazil is not a universal phenomenon, but rather a socially situated possibility largely restricted to highly educated women from relatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds (Monteiro et al., 2026). Additionally, the experiences of women without children undergoing career transitions have received limited attention in the literature, leaving this empirical domain relatively underexplored (Wilhoit, 2014).

SUSTAINABLE CAREERS: CONTEXT, CONCEPT, AND DEFINITIONS

This study assumes that the concept of sustainable careers can capture the particularities of women's careers, both in terms of their development and the transitions undertaken throughout the life course. Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015) defined sustainable careers as "the sequence of different career experiences of an individual, reflected through a variety of continuity patterns over time, traversing various social spaces, characterized by individual agency, and providing meaning to the individual" (p. 7).

Sustainable careers comprise four key dimensions: agency, meaning, context, and time. Agency and meaning are intertwined, as individuals play a central role in shaping their career paths, taking responsibility for their trajectories by considering their motivations, skills, and adaptability (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). However, careers are embedded within a specific social context, influenced by various factors that impact long-term sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020). This process is systemic, where individuals

influence and are influenced by multiple stakeholders. It includes organizations, labor markets, institutions, aspects of personal life, and the family sphere, which play significant roles in influencing the direction of professional trajectories (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014), contributing to the formation of contexts that either facilitate or hinder career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020).

Career sustainability hinges on the dynamic adjustment between individual needs and contextual conditions (De Vos et al., 2020), guided by the meaning attributed to lived experiences. The notion of professional fulfillment, for instance, permeates this process of assigning significance, aligning with the individual's internal values and linking to a concept of psychological success that evolves throughout different career stages and life phases (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

The time dimension is associated with the impact of various events that shape individual trajectories, prompting actions to address prevailing contextual conditions (De Vos et al., 2020). It encompasses efforts to ensure career continuity, contingent upon the interaction between the individual and the context. Sustainability is not the ultimate desired state but rather a cyclical and self-regulating process (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

De Vos et al. (2020) propose three indicators for analyzing the degree to which a career trajectory approaches greater or lesser sustainability within a specific time frame: (1) health, which relates to individual well-being and both mental and physical health; (2) happiness, which is linked to career satisfaction and success; and finally, (3) productivity, encompassing performance within a specific occupational domain and the capacity to enhance employability. Career sustainability is thus achieved through a balance among these indicators, ensuring that they do not compromise one another or result in unsustainable excesses in the medium to long term. This balance is not linear. Metaphorically, it does not resemble the exact equilibrium of balanced plates. Instead, it is a dynamic equilibrium that involves emphasizing one dimension over another at different moments, while all three dimensions continue to coexist (De Vos et al., 2020).

The dynamic interaction among sustainable career indicators involves a continuous process of equilibrium driven by the meaning that individuals assign to their careers. De Vos et al. (2020) use the concept of person-career fit (PC fit) to understand how the construction of meaning affects an individual's focus on various indicators. PC fit refers to the compatibility between individual needs – such as expectations and personal values – and contextual conditions (Parasuraman et al.,

2000). Therefore, the sustainability of careers depends on ongoing processes of person-career fit throughout a person's lifespan.

METHOD

The research involved conducting narrative interviews with 20 Brazilian women. Our focus was specifically on women who voluntarily left their corporate careers and were not compelled to do so through dismissal. We consider corporate careers as those predominantly built through work experience in large, highly structured organizations, typically characterized by well-defined departments, clear hierarchical structures, and formalized career advancement paths. Additionally, we targeted women who did not have children during their career transition, with a preference for those in management positions. Initially, we contacted these women based on our knowledge of their transition stories. After each interview, we requested referrals to other potential participants using the snowball sampling technique. The interviews took place in 2020, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, video conferencing via Zoom was employed, with the participants' consent to record the interviews. Table 1 displays the interviewees selected for the study.

The interviewed women ranged from 31 to 44 years old, all holding higher education degrees. Among their educational backgrounds, notable fields include administration (4), psychology (4), advertising and marketing (3), and law (2). Out of the 20 participants, 16 have postgraduate degrees. On average, they worked for 14.5 years before the transition and spent seven years in their last company. Most of the interviewees (17) reside in Rio Grande do Sul, predominantly in Porto Alegre, while the others live in São Paulo, Portugal, and the Netherlands. When deciding to leave their corporate careers, most were employed by large national and multinational companies. The transitions occurred between 2013 and 2020, with the interviewees having an average age of 34. At the time of the transition, the women did not have children, and 13 were in stable relationships. Taken together, these characteristics indicate a relatively homogeneous group of highly educated women embedded in qualified corporate careers and occupying comparatively privileged social positions, with access to material, educational, and relational resources that likely facilitated the possibility of career transition.

This method allowed us to gain insight into the phenomenon by focusing on a specific event, namely, the career transition, and observing how participants constructed narratives to make sense of past experiences and their current perceptions (Riessman, 2005).

The process of making sense of narrative is not tied to the linearity of events but rather to how women interpret their lived experiences and the significance they attribute to them in the context of career transitions. Although the research primarily centered on the career transition process, the method offered a comprehensive understanding by incorporating other aspects of the participants' life stories into the analysis. The inter-

views required the participants to recount their professional trajectories, particularly focusing on their career transition experiences and subsequent developments up to the present day. Subsequently, the interviewees freely shared their stories without any intervention. The duration of the accounts ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours and 40 minutes, and each interview was transcribed in its entirety.

Table 1. Summary chart: Presentation of the interviewees.

Female interviewee	Age	Education Level	Corporate Position	Total work time until the transition	In professional terms, how do you present yourself nowadays?
I1	39	Graduate degree	HR ^a Manager	15 years	Psychologist, Human Development Consultant
I2	38	Graduate degree	Administrative Assistant	15 years	Botanical Perfumer, Craftswoman, Natural Cosmetic Maker
I3	35	Graduate degree	HR ^a Manager	11 years	HR ^a Consultant
I4	42	Graduate degree	Senior Project Manager	17 years	Entrepreneur, Project Facilitator, Multiple Person
I5	42	Graduate degree	HR ^a Analyst	23 years	A woman who is reinventing herself
I6	35	Graduate degree	Senior Specialist	13 years	Yoga Teacher, Accountant
I7	35	Graduate degree	HR ^a Specialist	10 years	Consultant, Entrepreneur in Human and Organizational Development
I8	33	Graduate degree	HOD ^b Supervisor	13 years	Psychologist
I9	42	Graduate degree	HR ^a Consultant, Course Coordinator	22 years	Teacher, Entrepreneur, Mentor
I10	31	Undergraduate degree	Marketing Coordinator	15 years	Marketing Consultant
I11	41	Graduate degree	Project Manager	15 years	Teacher
I12	36	Graduate degree	Course Coordinator	15 years	Management and Marketing Consultant
I13	44	Graduate degree	Legal Manager	12 years	Human Development Specialist
I14	40	Graduate degree	Pedagogical Supervisor	10 years	School Principal
I15	40	Graduate degree	Senior HR ^a Analyst	22 years	Creative Entrepreneur
I16	39	Undergraduate degree	Administrative Assistant	20 years	Yoga Instructor
I17	31	Graduate degree	Marketing Analyst	10 years	Organisational Culture Management Facilitator
I18	31	Graduate degree	HR ^a Coordinator and Administrative	10 years	Consulting Partner
I19	42	Undergraduate degree	Attorney	12 years	Photographer
I20	32	Undergraduate degree	Customer Service Director	11 years	Writer

Note. a Human resources; b Human and organizational development. Source: Prepared by the authors.

The thematic analysis model proposed by Riessman (2005) was utilized for narrative analysis. The focus lies on the content of the text, specifically "what" is said rather than "how" it is said, prioritizing the "told" rather than the "telling" (Riessman, 2005, p. 2). The process encompassed four stages recommended by Chudzikowski et al. (2020): (1) a thorough reading of each narrative as an independent unit of analysis, identifying passages related to the dimensions of the concept of sustainable career (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015) and their connections with employability and sustainability; (2) identification of commonalities among the narratives based on the coded passages from the previous stage, aiming to discern central themes and corresponding subthemes (refer to Table 2), with the aid of the software Atlas.ti; (3) interweaving the narratives with the theories adopted in the study (Riessman, 2005); and (4) a meticulous review of the analyses, guided by the research objective.

Table 2. Summary chart: Analysis themes and coding.

Themes: Sustainable career dimensions	Coding
Time/Trajectory	Career trajectory; career choice; mobility; parallel activities; borderline situation; construction of the transition; new work dynamics.
Context	Origin; work experience; gender; network; relationships.
Agency	Proactivity; adaptability; commitment.
Meaning	Self-knowledge; lifestyle; identity.
Indicators: productivity, health, happiness	Self-improvement; workaholism; health; purpose; success.

Note. Prepared by the authors.

We followed ethical procedures throughout the research process. Participants signed informed consent forms that explained the study's purpose and ensured the anonymity of their responses. To ensure the rigor of the research, each participant received a copy of their interview transcriptions to review and suggest changes, which were subsequently incorporated into the narratives. Recognizing the potential influence of

personal experience on knowledge production in qualitative research, three researchers (the authors of this study) analyzed the transcriptions to minimize personal biases, concluding the data analysis through consensus among them.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

The themes were identified based on the dimensions of the sustainable career concept (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). We analyzed these themes and constructed

three career patterns derived from the motivations for leaving corporate careers and the participants' career trajectories before and after the transition, as summarized in Table 3. While acknowledging the uniqueness and subjectivity of each career (De Vos et al., 2020), we chose to group the participants into typologies to analyze similarities and diversity within their narratives. The categories were named based on the participants' statements and their perceptions of the career stage preceding the transition.

Table 3. Summary chart: Career trajectories and motivations for transition.

Dimensions of analysis	"I need to take a breather"	"I want to do something else with my life"	"I can go further"
Time	Women adapt the way they work.	A rupture in the way they work.	Women expand their work possibilities.
Agency	Practices aimed at achieving a better balance between life and work.	Practices aimed at transforming competencies unrelated to corporate work into new job opportunities.	Practices aimed at achieving greater challenges at work.
Context	Middle-class family background that encourages lifelong education as a means of social mobility; strong identification with work; professional experience in prestigious positions across different organizations with high-performance-oriented cultures; need for high work performance to legitimize leadership positions; solid professional networks; and the sacrifice of family and personal life in favor of career advancement.	Middle-class family background that values education but places less emphasis on geographic mobility for career development; professional experiences concentrated in a small number of organizations; loyalty and dedication to the organizations in which they work; work-related illness resulting from intense dedication; restrained demeanor and difficulty asserting themselves in relation to men in leadership positions; loss of meaning at work; and perceptions of stagnation in personal life.	Originating from high-socioeconomic-status families in which higher education is seen as a natural and expected path rather than a major achievement; greater ease of access to corporate careers and advancement within organizations; proactive pursuit of professional experiences that enable visibility and access to prestigious positions; frequent changes in career trajectories; strong dissatisfaction with the corporate environment due to perceived gender-related injustices and political issues; robust professional networks that support the search for new opportunities; and a stronger valuation of professional independence in relation to personal life.
Meaning	Lifestyle adjustment, greater meaning in remaining in their current field of work, and having more time for themselves.	Lifestyle transformation, with a greater sense of creating a new field of work.	Lifestyle maintenance, with a greater sense of extending their field of work.
Gender barriers	Self-imposed pressure and the constant need to prove oneself in a gendered environment. Normalization of workload overload as a sign of commitment.	Seeking alignment between their personal values and work. They resist conformity to traditional models, striving to reconfigure their career paths in a more authentic way.	They recognize the power and political barriers within the corporate environment but use individual strategies to enhance their mobility in the job market.
Employability	It is intensively developed throughout the trajectory, fostered by different experiences within the same field of work. In addition, management positions increase the possibility of access to other opportunities.	It is primarily developed within the same organization, where they build most of their careers and spend most of their lives.	It is developed through experiences in different organizations and abroad, especially supported by the networks established throughout their corporate trajectories.
Career sustainability	Searched for experiences that would allow a better balance between life and career after illness resulting from intense dedication to work. They remain in the same field of work because they strongly identify with their profession but prioritize flexibility in their new career choices.	Searched for experiences that would recover personal interests set aside due to dedication to the organization. It involves a complete rupture with careers that do not match intrinsic needs for satisfaction in one's personal life.	Searched for new career challenges that contribute to employability since they are strongly career-oriented. Work is a source of meaning and self-fulfillment.

Note. Prepared by the authors.

"I need to take a breather"

Formed by four interviewees (I1, I3, I5, and I8), this group is characterized by a high career orientation, justifying their departure from corporate careers in search of a moment for themselves and to rethink their professional paths. The participants described situations that reflect a sense of exhaustion, stemming from a lifelong pursuit of experiences to increase their chances of securing a successful position in the labor market. The family has always prioritized education, "because even though my family had financially challenging moments, they nev-

er allowed either me or my sister to work" (I8). Career choice is marked by vocation and geographic mobility since their education. They entered the job market through internships, starting with smaller companies and progressing to larger corporations, with a career plan in mind: "I used to look at great job opportunities in the HR field that I could never compete for because I had no experience, and I saw everything they required in those positions, and I started taking specific courses" (I5).

All of them reached the position of HR manager, have postgraduate degrees, and invested in the continuous development of their skills: "I took a solo trip to Canada because [the company] required fluent English" (I4). Employability was intensely pursued throughout their careers and questioned at a certain point, culminating in the career transition: "I was always a workaholic, working ten, twelve hours... it was just work, and there was no personal life" (I3). Until the transition, these women did not take breaks in their careers, and after experiencing illness and exhaustion, the change reflects their aim for a new relationship with work.

"I had reached the limit of my mental sanity, and from then on, I could only continue working with medication, which for me was unacceptable... I achieved my goal, and suddenly I realized that it didn't make much sense... I wanted something, I achieved it, lived it, and now it's okay for me to want something else" (I8).

The prioritization of their careers at the expense of their personal lives is also addressed by I3 when discussing her separation: "I didn't have a life. I only had a professional life," and also by I8: "I was that friend who missed birthdays of close friends because they were on a Friday, and I was too tired" (I8).

As women progress in their careers, their exhaustion is not only associated with the belief that professional qualifications guarantee access to desirable job positions but is also intensified by persistent gender inequalities in the workplace. These inequalities are represented in the constant need to legitimize their leadership positions: "colleagues would not accept my leadership and would bypass me" (I8), and in the dissatisfaction with wage disparities: "I didn't earn the same as my peer... I earned less than him, that was one of the biggest battles I had in my negotiations" (I1).

Thus, leaving corporate careers is an opportunity to balance the personal demands set aside during the trajectory that prioritized advancement in the corporate career. After the transition, there is no complete rupture with the field. They are now entrepreneurs working as individual consultants (I5, I8) or in HR roles in companies (I1, I3), with reduced working hours and/or responsibilities compared to their previous positions. A return to the corporate world is possible if a better balance can be achieved.

There is a strong identification with the profession, and the meaning provided by work requires adjustment to achieve greater integration between work

and personal needs. Due to their experiences, they are sought-after professionals by companies, and new job opportunities arise from the networks built during their corporate period. Although their roles have greater flexibility, there is a predominance of new indefinite employment contracts.

"I want to do something else with my life"

Formed by nine interviewees (I2, I4, I6, I11, I12, I13, I16, I19, and I20), this group experienced a rupture with their work and lifestyle. Like the previous group, these women come from a middle-class background where education has always been prioritized. However, their career choices are less marked by vocation and more by convenience, with less geographic mobility. As I6 explains, "I chose accounting because it seemed like the perfect fit... it was easier to pass, and I knew I would quickly find a job."

Predominantly, they entered prominent companies in their field, advancing in the corporate hierarchy and mostly reaching management positions. They did not change employers frequently, starting their careers as interns or shortly after graduation and remaining in the same corporation until their career transition. There is a high level of loyalty to the corporations that shaped their careers, which were driven by the pursuit of opportunities.

Their high dedication to work and the company eventually led to episodes of illness: "I had a breakdown, I thought I was going to die... I no longer had the health to continue like that... I felt like I wouldn't make it to 30" (I20). At a certain point in their careers, they begin to question their lifestyle, which awakens the desire for other experiences and leads them to question their relationship with work: "I took a sabbatical year, and it was very revealing. I started reading, studying, and exploring other things... I already had different desires, a strong desire to pursue a master's degree, which I never had time for" (I11).

The narratives also reveal that these women needed to suppress aspects of their personalities to fit expectations of a more sober and restrained demeanor, traditionally associated with men in leadership positions. As I13 expressed, "I tried to hold myself back at work so that I couldn't be too cheerful or too outgoing." Thus, there is a pursuit of greater alignment between work and personal values, as noted by I20: "I started to realize that work made no sense at all," and by I6: "Today, I have redefined many things; work integrates much more with my life... I feel that work nourishes me, whereas before I felt it drained me."

This desire for authenticity is intertwined with the gender inequalities still present in the workplace, such as the glass ceiling phenomenon: “any man would get ahead of me even when I was at the top... I was already 30 and began to realize that women in the corporate world have an expiration date” (I11). Additionally, there is the perception of career stagnation (sticky floor): “They put me in a job that was very mediocre... and I felt I could do more” (I16).

In their pursuit of sustainable career paths, their agency is directed toward practices that enable the development of new skills, including transforming activities initially perceived as hobbies into new employment opportunities through entrepreneurship. For instance, participants I2 and I6 transitioned into careers as yoga instructors, I16 began working as a perfumer, I20 pursued a career as a writer, and I19 took up photography, as illustrated in her account:

“Since 2009, I had been taking photography courses because my dad bought a camera and didn’t know how to use it. While practicing law, I used the money I had, as I was earning well, and kept taking courses... I improved my skills, treating it as a hobby and investing in it” (I19).

These career transitions were only feasible for participants with financial reserves and family support to sustain their new standard of living. The departure from the corporate career is justified by the search for greater meaning in work and the need for alignment between personal and professional values. It is connected to a reflection on their lives: “My balance is my work fitting into my personal life, in the sense that I can be who I am, and I can be my authentic self” (I13). After the rupture, they create new networks, approaching groups with similar interests in living life and adapting the competencies developed during their organizational careers. Returning to the corporate environment is generally considered a last resort for this group.

“I can go further”

Formed by seven interviewees (I7, I9, I10, I14, I15, I17, and I18), this group perceives the corporate environment as limiting their potential, justifying their departure in search of greater challenges and the possibility of developing their work without the limitations imposed by organizational rules. The discourse of education as an inheritance is less prominent than observed in previous groups. Since some of the participants have parents with higher education levels, pursuing further

studies and completing a college degree can be seen as the continuation of a position already established by their parents.

They entered the job market through internships/traineeships and gradually climbed the organizational hierarchy in prominent companies. The group is characterized by actively seeking experiences that align with their career goals, demonstrating a strong focus on employability and developing skills for mobility in the job market. This includes periods of living abroad: “I applied to a program that accepts master’s students every year, a summer program at an international financial organization” (I7).

Throughout their corporate careers, these women already took a proactive approach to career development, actively engaging in internal projects: “I was the one who would say, ‘Oh, there’s a project here that nobody wants, I want it’” (I9). In most cases, there was a career redirection before leaving the corporate environment: “I don’t want to be just a journalist... I attended a career planning workshop and discovered I wanted to work in marketing... and then I started developing myself” (I10).

Motherhood emerged only marginally in the narratives, as it was not perceived as a priority within the respondents’ life contexts at the time of the career transitions. One of the few references was made by I14, who highlights her mother’s encouragement for her to pursue an independent professional career and avoid having to relinquish it, as her mother had done in the past: “My mother studied fine arts but ended up giving it up due to getting pregnant. It was quite common in the 1960s and 1970s.”

All participants mentioned dissatisfaction with corporate culture as the decisive factor for their career transitions. Situations reported included a lack of trust in their work: “this issue of lack of trust, when they started to go over my head with my team, asking things of them that I didn’t agree with” (I10); relationships with superiors: “the relationship with my manager started to deteriorate because he had a competitiveness that I didn’t have” (I15); and the feeling of being limited by organizational politics: “every company has this political game, where often your project is more about pleasing someone than about being truly important” (I7). The power dynamics within organizations, as perceived by the interviewees, can also be understood through the lens of the gendering of corporate environments:

“When I was in coordination, there was a colleague of mine, who was also a coordinator but for a small-

er course... he assumed a position that wasn't his, some stressful things for me, that I didn't need to get into that atmosphere. I can't say it was explicit but implicitly very masculine" (I9).

There are also reports of being overlooked for promotions: "my male colleague, who was my peer, ended up taking over the company's management, but people believed that I, not him, should have been given that role" (I15); and harassment: "there was someone on my team who was gay and Black, so I often heard jokes about him" (I10).

The interviewees recognize their value to organizations, acknowledging themselves as valuable resources due to the accumulated competencies that are transferred to their new work relationships, providing a sense of security during the transition: "My decision to start my own business was supported by the corporate know-how that perhaps someone who hasn't worked within a company wouldn't have" (I14).

All interviewees in this group are currently working autonomously. Interviewee I4 became an entrepreneur by founding an early childhood education school, while the others (I7, I9, I10, I15, I17, and I18) provide services as business consultants under fixed-term contractual arrangements. Their agency is focused on practices that allow them to acquire new competencies for greater mobility in the job market. Thus, there is no rupture with the field but rather an expansion of their area of expertise. Current work dynamics arise from personal and professional contacts built throughout their careers.

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that women's exits from corporate careers should not be understood merely as individual reactions to fatigue, dissatisfaction, or changing personal priorities. Rather, they reflect structurally conditioned responses to gendered organizational arrangements that progressively undermine career sustainability over time. Across participants' narratives, exhaustion emerged not simply as a consequence of demanding work environments, but as the cumulative result of repeated exposure to organizational expectations, performance pressures, and legitimacy demands shaped by persistent gender inequalities. In this sense, career transitions appear less as purely voluntary career choices and more as adaptive responses to declining person-career fit within organizational contexts

that constrain women's long-term capacity to sustain health, happiness, and professional fulfillment.

From a sustainable career perspective, the findings indicate that participants' career transitions were motivated by a progressive imbalance among the core dimensions of career sustainability. Although the women interviewed initially aligned closely with organizational expectations and dominant norms of professional success, prolonged periods of intense dedication to work increasingly compromised their health and happiness in favor of productivity. The narratives reveal that personal fulfillment had become deeply intertwined with professional achievement, often reinforced by familial influences that encouraged strong commitment to career advancement. Over time, however, the excessive emphasis on productivity and performance lost meaning, prompting participants to reassess the sustainability of their trajectories. Career transitions thus emerged as attempts to restore balance among career sustainability indicators and reclaim meaning, well-being, and fulfillment in professional life (De Vos et al., 2020; Greenhaus, 2020).

Building on this interpretation, we propose the concept of gendered exhaustion to explain how structural gender inequalities become subjectively experienced as career unsustainability. Gendered exhaustion refers to a condition specific to women, manifested in emotional depletion resulting from persistent confrontation with multiple gender barriers in the pursuit and maintenance of prestigious organizational positions. Grounded in the concept of emotional exhaustion (Lee & Ashforth, 1990), this concept extends existing understandings of exhaustion by explicitly recognizing the gendered and structural origins of depletion in women's professional experiences. Rather than representing generalized burnout, gendered exhaustion captures how repeated exposure to gendered organizational pressures progressively erodes women's capacity to sustain their careers.

Although participants' experiences varied, the three identified career transition patterns should not be interpreted as distinct phenomena, but rather as different manifestations of the same underlying structural process. In the first group, gendered exhaustion emerged through the constant need to legitimize organizational positions and prove competence in environments where women perceived their performance to be more heavily scrutinized than men's (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). This generated intensified overwork, chronic

self-monitoring, and the internalization of organizational problems. In the second group, gendered exhaustion emerged through the rejection of traditional male-defined models of professional success, as women became increasingly frustrated by organizational expectations that demanded conformity to masculinized standards of performance and ambition (Acker, 1990). In the third group, women demonstrated greater awareness of organizational power dynamics and responded strategically to these barriers by leveraging networks and external opportunities to advance professionally beyond organizational boundaries. Despite these differences, all three groups exhibit distinct responses to the same structural condition: the progressive erosion of career sustainability stemming from persistent exposure to gendered organizational constraints.

Our findings also complicate dominant interpretations of women's career transitions by showing that motherhood was not the central explanatory factor in participants' decisions to leave corporate careers. Most interviewees did not position motherhood as a primary theme in their narratives, suggesting that women's career exits cannot be reduced to family-related explanations alone. Nevertheless, the absence of motherhood should not be interpreted as evidence of unconstrained autonomy. In Brazil, where a strong sexual division of labor continues to structure women's expected social roles (Hirata, 2018), the decision not to have children may simultaneously represent both resistance to traditional gender expectations and adaptation to organizational environments in which motherhood is perceived as incompatible with professional advancement. Participants' childfree status should therefore not be interpreted solely as an individual lifestyle preference, but as a decision negotiated within broader structural and organizational constraints. This reinforces the argument that women's agency in career decisions is situated and exercised under conditions not entirely of their own making.

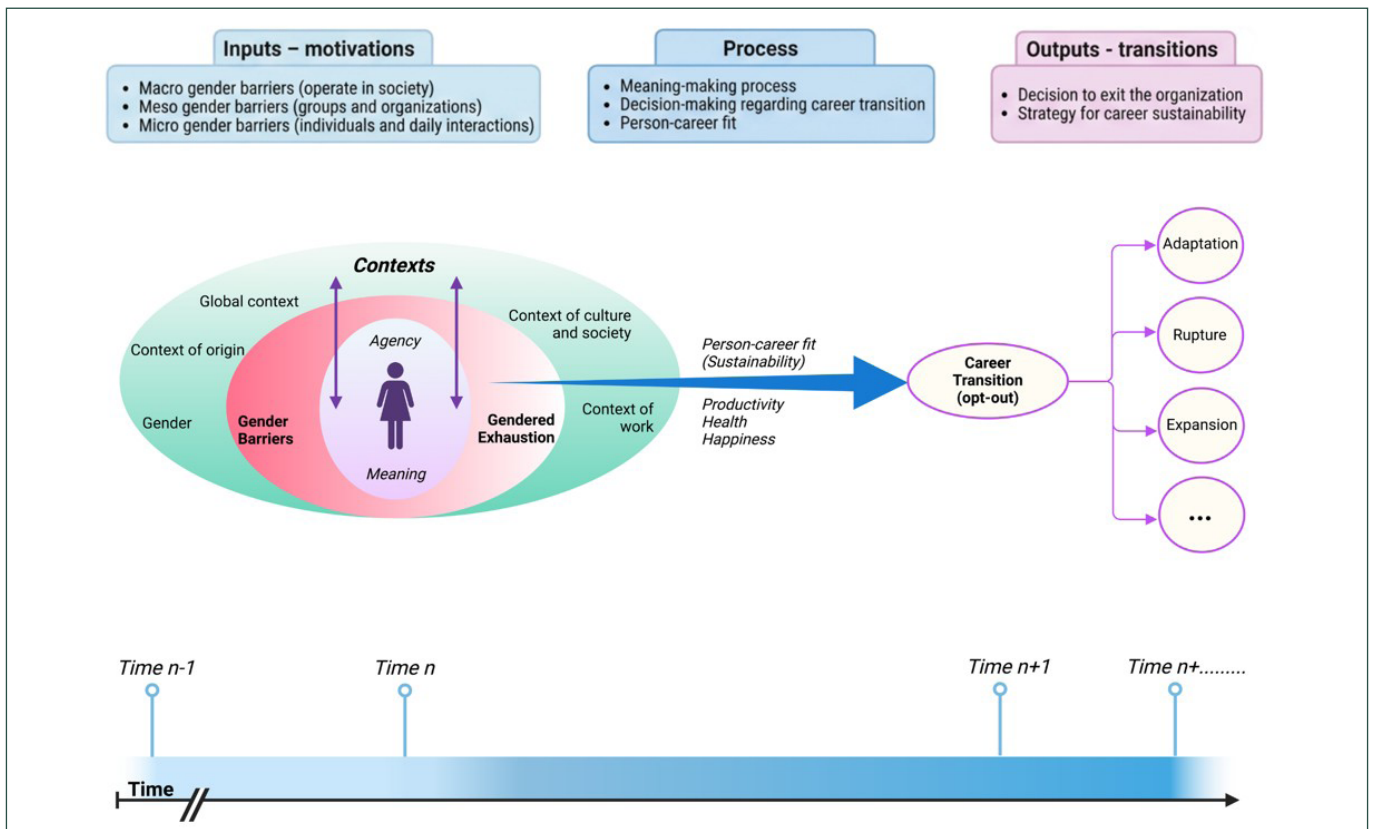
Beyond structural constraints, however, the possibility of undertaking such transitions is unevenly distributed among women. The opportunity to opt out of corporate careers should not be interpreted as universally available, but rather as a socially situated phenomenon shaped by unequal access to resources. In line with prior Brazilian research (Monteiro et al., 2026; Reis et al., 2021), our findings suggest that the women in this study occupy a relatively privileged social position, characterized by high educational attainment, quali-

fied professional trajectories, and access to economic, educational, and relational resources that make career interruption or redefinition viable. The ability to leave unsustainable organizational environments should therefore itself be understood as structurally conditioned, reflecting not only dissatisfaction with corporate careers but also the availability of material and symbolic resources that expand women's perceived alternatives. Opting out, in this sense, is not merely an individual career decision, but a socially stratified possibility available primarily to specific groups of women (Monteiro et al., 2026).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that structural gender inequalities function not merely as contextual background, but as central mechanisms shaping women's perceptions of career sustainability and motivating career transitions. Gender barriers affect not only women's experiences within organizations, but also their perceptions of what constitutes a viable and sustainable long-term career trajectory. Consequently, career transitions emerge as adaptive strategies through which women seek to restore person-career fit by pursuing trajectories that better support health, happiness, and professional autonomy. Rather than reflecting isolated acts of individual preference, these transitions should be understood as negotiated responses to organizational environments that systematically undermine women's long-term career sustainability.

PROCESSUAL THEORETICAL MODEL FOR WOMEN CAREER TRANSITIONS

Based on the research findings, we propose a processual theoretical model to explain women's career sustainability through the transitional processes experienced across their professional trajectories. The model focuses on women who decide to exit corporate careers, understood here as careers within large, hierarchically structured organizations. It builds on the sustainable career process model proposed by De Vos et al. (2020), preserving its dynamic understanding of the interaction among agency, meaning, context, and time, as well as its conceptualization of career sustainability as a person-career fit process aimed at balancing health, productivity, and happiness (Greenhaus, 2020; Parasuraman et al., 2000). Figure 1 presents the proposed model, and its dimensions are described in the following sections.



Source: Developed by the authors.

Figure 1. Processual theoretical model.

Our contribution extends this model by emphasizing that women's career transitions are not shaped solely by individual meaning-making processes, but by the interaction between personal agency and structurally gendered contextual constraints. Specifically, we argue that gender barriers constitute a critical contextual mechanism that influences how women interpret career sustainability and evaluate alternative trajectories. To strengthen the contextual dimension of the sustainable career framework, we adopt [Mayrhofer et al.'s \(2007\)](#) expanded conception of context, incorporating work, origin, societal/cultural, and global dimensions, while explicitly foregrounding gender barriers across macro, meso, and micro levels as structuring forces influencing women's career trajectories.

Importantly, agency within this model should not be understood as fully autonomous decision-making. Rather, career transitions reflect forms of situated agency, whereby women make strategic and adaptive decisions within structurally constrained environments ([Monteiro et al., 2026](#); [Reis et al., 2021](#)). Although participants actively evaluated their experiences and pursued alternative paths, such decisions were made in response to organizational and societal arrangements that progressively undermined career sustainability. Career transitions, therefore, represent constrained strategic responses rather than purely voluntary choices.

Figure 1 presents the proposed model, and its dimensions are described in the following sections.

In this process, contextual inputs shaped by women's life and work experiences over time (time $n - 1$) influence how they interpret their career trajectories and evaluate sustainability. This evaluative process leads women to reassess person-career fit and to prioritize specific sustainability dimensions — health, happiness, or productivity — within a given temporal context (time n). When perceived misalignment becomes unsustainable, women undertake career transitions as adaptive efforts to restore balance and pursue trajectories better aligned with their long-term well-being and professional aspirations.

The career patterns that emerge after transition (time $n + 1$) are idiosyncratic and context-dependent, but the findings suggest three broad transition patterns: adaptation of the mode of working, rupture with the mode of working, and expansion of work possibilities.

The adaptation of the mode of working, observed in the first group ("I need to take a breather"), refers to women who remain strongly identified with work but seek new arrangements that reduce mental exhaustion and provide greater flexibility and control over professional life ([Akkermans et al., 2018, 2024](#); [Barley et al., 2017](#)). These women typically come from highly competitive environments characterized by performance intensity and masculinized norms of legitimacy, and

their transitions reflect attempts to preserve professional identity while reducing the unsustainable pressures associated with corporate work.

The rupture with the mode of working, observed in the second group (“I want to do something else with my life”), refers to women who pursue career transitions oriented toward authenticity and personal fulfillment after perceiving that prolonged dedication to traditional models of career success has undermined their sense of happiness and meaning. These women often move toward entrepreneurial or flexible work arrangements by monetizing hobbies or activities previously associated with personal authenticity (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

The expansion of the mode of working, represented by the third group (“I can go further”), describes women who leave corporate careers because they believe their full professional and financial potential cannot be realized within organizational hierarchies constrained by gender barriers. These women pursue alternative career trajectories that offer greater opportunities for advancement, recognition, and autonomy beyond traditional organizational structures. Notably, these women often possess significant socioeconomic and educational resources, including elite education, managerial experience, and professional networks, which facilitate their transitions and expand the range of alternatives available to them.

Importantly, these patterns should not be interpreted as fixed or exhaustive categories, but as analytical starting points for understanding the multiple ways women respond to gendered career unsustainability. Additional transition patterns may emerge depending on the interaction between contextual forces, available resources, and how women perceive and navigate structural gender barriers throughout their careers.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study suggests that the career transitions experienced by women exiting corporate careers are permeated by gender-related barriers, including the exhaustion associated with these dynamics. In addition to reinforcing previous studies that highlight career transition motivations related to the pursuit of greater purpose at work, autonomy, balance, and authenticity (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018), the present study contributes to the literature by explicitly addressing health-related issues as a significant factor influencing exits from corporate careers.

Our theoretical model also contributes by emphasizing the processual influence of contextual forces that shape motivations for career transitions, with par-

ticular attention to gender barriers, while assuming that the pursuit of more sustainable careers is a key driver of these transitions. In this sense, we contribute to career sustainability studies by incorporating social, cultural, and historical specificities through the context dimension. The concept of context adopted from Mayrhofer et al. (2007), particularly regarding gender, broadens the scope of the sustainable career framework (De Vos et al., 2020) by capturing the inherent idiosyncrasies of career trajectories. The inclusion of gender barriers across macro-, meso-, and micro-level contexts (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016), together with the concept of gendered exhaustion, offers a novel perspective on the model proposed by De Vos et al. (2020).

Besides, the findings add to prior studies emphasizing that an excessive focus on productivity and employability alone is insufficient to ensure career sustainability. The narratives thus provide empirical support for theoretical models and conceptual frameworks of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2015). This is particularly relevant for analyzing career contexts in the Global South, representing a necessary advancement in strengthening research on sustainable careers (Van der Heijden et al., 2020).

As practical contributions, we suggest that organizations should foster work environments where flexibility is inclusive and free from gender-related stigmas, including reduced workloads and increased opportunities for lateral transitions. Beyond traditional diversity policies, collective alliances and structural power transformations are necessary, as isolated actions, such as mentorship programs, must be revised. Regular reporting, transparency, and accountability regarding salaries, promotions, and opportunities would create pressure for genuine progress in achieving gender equality.

The study has limitations. First, we addressed a restricted group of highly qualified women with extensive experience in organizational settings within a Brazilian context, where most of the population does not have access to higher education. Therefore, the findings may have limited applicability to other contexts and demographic groups, especially when considering race and social class perspectives. Second, our theoretical model is particularly suited to contexts where structural gender inequalities are more pronounced. Other frameworks may be more appropriate for analyses involving national contexts where women’s career agency is often facilitated, such as the kaleidoscope career concept (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). Additionally, data collection was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have reinforced narratives emphasizing well-being and meaning.

We suggest future research involving more diverse participants and considering the perspectives of other actors regarding the transitions (such as managers, colleagues, mentors, and family members, among others). We also recommend investigating human resource policies and practices that facilitate the search for meaning, health, and happiness at work, thereby promoting career sustainability.

REFERENCES

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society, 4*(2), 139–158. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189609>
- Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender and Society, 20*(4), 441–464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206289499>
- Akkermans, J., Motta Veiga, S. P., Hirschi, A., & Marciniak, J. (2024). Career transitions across the lifespan: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 148*, 103957. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2023.103957>
- Akkermans, J., Seibert, S. E., & Mol, S. T. (2018). Tales of the unexpected: Integrating career shocks in the contemporary careers literature. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 44*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v44i0.1503>
- Antunes, R. (2016). The new morphology of labour and its main trends: Informalisation, precarisation, (im)materiality and value. *Critique, 44*(1–2), 13–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2016.1173822>
- Arthur, M. B., Hall, D. T., & Lawrence, B. S. (1989). Generating new directions in career theory: The case for a transdisciplinary approach. In M. B. Arthur, D. T. Hall, & B. S. Lawrence (Eds.), *Handbook of career theory* (pp. 7–25). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625459.003>
- Barley, S. R., Bechky, B. A., & Milliken, F. J. (2017). The changing nature of work: Careers, identities, and work lives in the 21st century. *Academy of Management Discoveries, 3*(2), 111–115. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.20170034>
- Baruch, Y., & Sullivan, S. E. (2022). The why, what and how of career research: A review and recommendations for future study. *Career Development International, 27*(1), 135–159. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-10-2021-0251>
- Bhowmick, S. (2024). Career or child: Is the neoliberal working women's fertility on thin ice? *Human Resource Development International, 28*(2), 302–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2024.2388918>
- Bian, X., & Wang, J. (2019). Women's career interruptions: An integrative review. *European Journal of Training and Development, 43*(9), 801–820. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-03-2019-0040>
- Carli, L. L., & Eagly, A. H. (2016). Women face a labyrinth: An examination of metaphors for women leaders. *Gender in Management, 31*(8), 514–527. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-02-2015-0007>
- Chudzikowski, K. (2012). Career transitions and career success in the "new" career era. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 81*(2), 298–306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2011.10.005>
- Chudzikowski, K., Gustafsson, S., & Tams, S. (2020). Constructing alignment for sustainable careers: Insights from the career narratives of management consultants. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 117*, 103312. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.05.009>
- De Vos, A., & Van der Heijden, B. I. (2017). Current thinking on contemporary careers: The key roles of sustainable HRM and sustainability of careers. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability, 28*, 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2017.07.003>
- De Vos, A., Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M., & Akkermans, J. (2020). Sustainable careers: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 117*, 103196. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.06.011>
- Diehl, A. B., & Dzubinski, L. M. (2016). Making the invisible visible: A cross-sector analysis of gender-based leaders. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 27*(2), 181–206. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21248>
- Greenhaus, J. H. (2020). Employee mobility in the context of sustainable careers. In D. Tzabbar & B. Cirillo (Eds.), *Employee inter- and intra-firm mobility* (pp. 105–108). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Kossek, E. E. (2014). The contemporary career: A work-home perspective. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 1*, 361–388. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091324>
- Hirata, H. (2018). Gênero, patriarcado, trabalho e classe. *Revista Trabalho Necessário, 16*(29), 14–27. <https://doi.org/10.22409/tn.16i29.p4552>
- Hynd, M., & Broadbridge, A. M. (2018). Career issues for women in the banking sector. In A. M. Broadbridge & S. Fielden (Eds.), *Research handbook of diversity and careers* (pp. 256–270). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. (2024). Estatísticas de gênero: Indicadores sociais das mulheres no Brasil (3ª ed.). IBGE. <https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/index.php/biblioteca-catalogo?view=detalhes&id=2102066>
- Instituto Ethos. (2024). Perfil social, racial e de gênero das 1100 maiores empresas do Brasil e suas ações afirmativas. <https://www.ethos.org.br/publicacao/perfil-social-racial-e-de-genero-das-1-100-maiores-empresas-do-brasil-e-suas-aco-es-afirmativas-2023-2024/>
- Kossek, E., Su, R., & Wu, L. (2017). "Opting out" or "pushed out"? Integrating perspectives on women's career equality for gender inclusion and interventions. *Journal of Management, 43*(1), 228–254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316671582>
- Lawrence, B. S., Hall, D. T., & Arthur, M. B. (2015). Sustainable careers then and now. In A. De Vos & B. I. J. M. Van der Heijden (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sustainable careers* (pp. 432–450). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Lee, R. T., & Ashforth, B. E. (1990). On the meaning of Maslach's three dimensions of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 75*(6), 743–747. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.75.6.743>
- Mainiero, L. A., & Gibson, D. E. (2018). The kaleidoscope career model revisited: How midcareer men and women diverge on authenticity, balance, and challenge. *Journal of Career Development, 45*(4), 361–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845317698223>
- Mainiero, L. A., & Sullivan, K. (2005). Kaleidoscope careers: An alternate explanation for the "opt-out" revolution. *Academy of Management Executive, 19*(1), 106–123. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AME.2005.15841962>
- Mayrhofer, W., Meyer, M., & Steyrer, J. (2007). Contextual issues in the study of careers. In H. Gunz & M. Peiperl (Eds.), *Handbook of career studies* (pp. 215–240). SAGE Publications.
- McDonald, K. S., & Hite, L. M. (2018). Conceptualizing and creating sustainable careers. *Human Resource Development Review, 17*(4), 349–372. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484318796318>
- Monteiro, P. F. H. Q., Barbosa, A. O., Lemos, A. H. C., & Costa, A. (2026). Choice feminism and the opt-out phenomenon: Is it possible to speak of free will? *Gender, Work & Organization, 1*–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70118>
- Müller, C. V., Scheffer, A., Macke, J., & Vaclavik, M. C. (2022). Towards career sustainability: A systematic review to guide future research. *Brazilian Administration Review, 19*(4), e220108. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1807-7692bar202220108>
- Müller, C. V., Scheffer, A. B. B., Visentini, A. P., & Fraga, A. M. (2025). Barreiras invisíveis e carreiras sustentáveis: Um ensaio teórico para entender carreiras em contexto. *Revista de Ciências da Administração, 27*(67), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8077.2025.e99979>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). *Education at a glance 2023: OECD indicators*. <http://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/>
- Parasuraman, S., Greenhaus, J. H., & Linnehan, F. (2000). Time, person-career fit, and the boundaryless career. In C. L. Cooper & D. M. Rousseau (Eds.), *Trends in organisational behavior* (pp. 63–78). Wiley.
- Paustian-Underdahl, S. C., Eaton, A. A., Mandeville, A., & Little, L. M. (2019). Pushed out or opting out? Integrating perspectives on gender differences in withdrawal attitudes during pregnancy. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 104*(8), 985–1002. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000394>
- Reis, S. J., Mota-Santos, C. M., & Teixeira, M. B. M. (2021). "Joguei a toalha": A realidade de executivas que decidiram retornar ao lar: Uma discussão sobre o fenômeno opt-out. *Revista de Ciências da Administração, 22*(56), 8–26. <https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8077.2020.e77598>
- Riessman, C. K. (2005). Narrative analysis. In N. Kelly, C. Horrocks, K. Milnes, B. Roberts, & D. Robinson (Eds.), *Narrative, memory and everyday life* (pp. 1–7). University of Huddersfield.
- Sullivan, S. E., & Al Ariss, A. (2021). Making sense of different perspectives on career transitions: A review and agenda for future research. *Human Resource Management Review, 31*(1), 100727. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmmr.2019.100727>
- Tomlinson, J., Baird, M., Berg, P., & Cooper, R. (2018). Flexible careers across the life course: Advancing theory, research and practice. *Human Relations, 71*(1), 4–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717733313>
- Tonelli, M. J. (2023). No news from the front: Women in the labor market. *Journal of Contemporary Administration, 27*(5). <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-7849rac2023230210en>

United Nations Women. (2023). *UNA-SE pelo fim da violência contra mulheres e meninas*. <https://www.onumulheres.org.br/noticias/naotemdesculpa-una-se-2024/>

Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M., & De Vos, A. (2015). Sustainable careers: Introductory chapter. In A. De Vos & B. I. J. M. Van der Heijden (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sustainable careers* (pp. 1–19). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Van der Heijden, B., De Vos, A., Akkermans, J., Spurk, D., Semeijn, J., Van der Velde, M., & Fugate, M. (2020). Sustainable careers across the lifespan: Moving the field forward. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *117*, Article 103344. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103344>

Wilhoit, E. (2014). Opting out (without kids): Understanding non-mothers' workplace exit in popular autobiographies. *Gender, Work and Organization*, *21*(3), 260–272. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12034>

Zimmerman, L. M., & Clark, M. A. (2016). Opting-out and opting-in: A review and agenda for future research. *Career Development International*, *21*(6), 603–633. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-10-2015-0137>

Authors

Anna Paula Visentini 

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Escola de Administração
Rua Washington Luiz, n. 855, Centro Histórico, CEP 90010-460, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil
annavisentini@gmail.com

Angela Beatriz Busato Scheffer 

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Escola de Administração
Rua Washington Luiz, n. 855, Centro Histórico, CEP 90010-460, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil
angela.scheffer@ufrgs.br

Camila Vieira Müller 

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia
Avenida Ipiranga, n. 6682, Partenon, CEP 90619-900, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil
mullervcamila@hotmail.com

Authors' contributions

1st author: conceptualization (equal), data curation (equal), formal analysis (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), project administration (equal), resources (equal), software (equal), supervision (equal), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing - original draft (equal), writing - review & editing (equal).

2nd author: conceptualization (equal), data curation (equal), formal analysis (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), project administration (equal), resources (equal), software (equal), supervision (equal), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing - original draft (equal), writing - review & editing (equal).

3rd author: conceptualization (equal), data curation (equal), formal analysis (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), project administration (equal), resources (equal), software (equal), supervision (equal), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing - original draft (equal), writing - review & editing (equal).