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Why Women Leave Corporate Jobs for Self-Employment: A Systematic Literature Review on Stress-Induced Career Shifts

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Abstract: The phenomenon of women leaving corporate jobs to pursue self-employment has gained significant attention due to the increasing prioritization of autonomy, flexibility, and personal well-being. Stressors such as rigid work cultures, gender biases, and work-life conflicts emerge as critical drivers of this career shift. This systematic literature review (SLR) aims to consolidate fragmented research to understand why women transition from corporate roles to self-employment, focusing on stress-related factors, the experiences and outcomes of self-employment, and the influence of organizational, societal, and individual factors. Using the PICo framework, the review examines studies that explore the problem (women, stress, corporate jobs), interest (career shifts, self-employment, transitions) and context (workplace stress, organizational culture, work-life balance). A comprehensive search strategy was applied to databases such as Scopus, ProQuest, and Google Scholar, and the PRISMA 2020 guidelines were followed to ensure systematic identification, screening, and inclusion of high-quality studies. The findings reveal systemic workplace stressors, diverging perspectives on self-employment's efficacy, and the influence of intersecting identities and external factors on career decisions. These insights underscore the urgent need for organizational reforms and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems. This research benefits policymakers, organizations, and practitioners by providing evidence-based recommendations to address workplace inequities and support women's sustainable career transitions.

Keywords: *Women, workplace stress, self-employment, career transitions, systematic literature review, PRISMA 2020, PICo*

1. Introduction

In recent years, more women have been leaving corporate jobs to pursue self-employment, which has caught the attention of scholars and professionals alike. Many women choose independence, flexibility, and personal well-being over what is traditionally seen as stable and financially secure corporate jobs. This change is often motivated by the stresses found in corporate settings, such as strict work cultures, ongoing gender biases, and difficulties balancing work and life (Neegaard & Carlsen, 2021; Smith, 2020). These factors create unfriendly work environments that do not consider women's unique challenges, like managing caregiving duties and job responsibilities. Because of this, self-employment becomes an appealing option, allowing women to align their work lives with their personal goals and circumstances (Lewis et al., 2015).

This trend is part of a larger movement questioning traditional corporate structures for their inability to support diverse and inclusive workplaces. Research shows that many women turn to self-employment to regain control over their careers, explore creative opportunities, and achieve a better work-life balance (Marlow & Carter, 2004). However, self-employment also comes with challenges, such as financial instability, lack of resources, and feelings of isolation. These issues highlight the need to better understand why women leave corporate jobs for self-employment, including their experiences and the systemic factors at play.

Even though there is growing interest in why women shift careers due to stress, current research is often scattered across different fields like organizational behaviour, entrepreneurship, and gender studies. This fragmentation makes it hard to reach clear conclusions. A systematic literature review (SLR) can bring together insights from various studies and help provide a clearer understanding of what influences women's decisions to move from corporate roles to self-employment. By summarizing existing research, this review can identify common themes, knowledge gaps, and areas that need more exploration.

Additionally, this understanding is essential for tackling systemic issues in corporate workplaces that disproportionately impact women. Organizations need to recognize how rigid work cultures; gender

discrimination and lack of support contribute to stress and dissatisfaction in careers. Likewise, policymakers and practitioners require evidence-based insights to create programs and policies supporting women's career success, whether within corporate or entrepreneurial settings. This SLR aims to connect these knowledge gaps, ultimately helping to create more fair and supportive professional environments for women.

Problem Statement

Women's career transitions, particularly from corporate employment to self-employment, have been extensively studied in various contexts. Research has highlighted stress-induced career shifts caused by workplace discrimination, rigid organizational structures, limited career progression, and work-life balance challenges (Neegaard & Carlsen, 2021; Cabrera, 2007). Additionally, studies have explored the motivations behind self-employment, emphasizing autonomy, flexibility, and the pursuit of personal fulfilment (Lewis et al., 2015; Smith, 2020). However, there remains a critical research gap in understanding how systemic stressors, gendered expectations, and external economic factors collectively shape women's career decisions. While existing literature often focuses on corporate stressors or entrepreneurial opportunities in isolation, few studies comprehensively examine the intersectionality of workplace stress, self-employment experiences, and broader societal influences. Furthermore, limited research addresses how race, motherhood, and economic instability interact with these transitions, particularly for women navigating non-traditional career paths (Carter-Greene, 2019; Marconatto et al., 2022).

Moreover, while previous studies have examined the challenges women face in corporate environments and the appeal of self-employment, there is insufficient research on the long-term sustainability of these career shifts. Many studies focus on the initial transition phase, highlighting push and pull factors, but fewer explore the enduring effects of self-employment on financial stability, career growth, and overall well-being (Marlow & Carter, 2004; Nair, Chatterjee, & Bagga, 2024). The extent to which self-employment mitigates or exacerbates stress over time remains underexplored, leaving questions about the effectiveness of entrepreneurship as a long-term career strategy for women. Additionally, while external economic and societal factors, such as the gig economy and financial crises, are recognized as influential, their specific impact on women's entrepreneurial success and stability lacks comprehensive investigation (Marconatto et al., 2022). This gap underscores the need for a systematic review that synthesizes existing findings, identifies emerging themes, and provides a greater understanding of the factors influencing women's career shifts. By bridging this gap, the study contributes to a more nuanced perspective on stress-induced career transitions and informs policies and organizational practices that support women in both corporate and entrepreneurial domains.

Research Objectives

This systematic literature review aims to explore the multifaceted dimensions of stress-induced career shifts among women by addressing the following objectives:

RO1: To examine the systemic and organizational stressors that prompt women to leave corporate jobs.
RO2: To analyze how women perceive self-employment as a response to workplace stressors.
RO3: To investigate the organizational, societal, and individual contexts in which these career transitions occur.

These objectives provide a structured framework for understanding the drivers, perceptions, and contexts of women's transitions from corporate careers to self-employment.

2. Methodology

This systematic literature review (SLR) uses a clear and careful approach to identify, evaluate, and combine existing research on career changes due to stress among women moving from corporate jobs to self-employment. The methodology is designed to ensure the inclusion of high-quality studies that address the review's objectives and research questions. A thorough search strategy was carried out across various academic databases, based on the PICo (Problem, Interest, Context) framework, to find relevant studies published within a specific period. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and reliability of the selected studies. The analysis process includes identifying common patterns, themes, and connections in the literature through thematic synthesis. Each step of the methodology is outlined in the following sections to ensure clarity and the possibility of replicating the study.

Research Questions
This systematic literature review seeks to address the following questions:

RQ1: How do stress-related factors contribute to women's decision to exit corporate careers?
RQ2: How are experiences and outcomes associated with women's transitions to self-employment?
RQ3: How do organizational, societal, and individual factors influence these decisions?

The research questions for this systematic literature review use the PICo framework to look at how stress affects career changes for women. The first question, "*How do stress-related factors lead women to leave corporate jobs?*" focuses on workplace stressors that push women to quit traditional jobs. This question looks at factors like burnout, discrimination, and poor work-life balance that influence these decisions (Neegaard & Carlsen, 2021; Cabrera, 2007). The second question, "*How are experiences and outcomes associated with women's transitions to self-employment?*" examines how women adapt to entrepreneurship, including their motivations, challenges, and the pros and cons of self-employment (Lewis et al., 2015; Nair, Chatterjee, & Bagga, 2024). Finally, the third question, "*How do organizational, societal, and personal factors impact these decisions?*" explores how company culture, social expectations, and individual goals influence women's career changes (Orser & Dyke, 2009; Visentini, Müller, & Scheffer, 2023). Together, these questions create a framework for exploring the reasons, processes, and effects of stress-related career transitions.

Search String Strategy
The search string is formulated to align with the PICo framework, capturing the problem, interest, and context relevant to the research questions. The problem (P) includes terms such as "Women," "Female Professionals," and "Stress," focusing on women in corporate environments experiencing workplace stress or burnout. The interest (I) captures the phenomena of "Career Shifts," "Self-Employment," and "Transitions," reflecting the pathways women pursue after leaving traditional careers. Finally, the context (Co) integrates terms like "Workplace Stress," "Organizational Culture," and "Work-Life Balance," situating the analysis within the broader workplace environment.

The proposed search string— **("Women" OR "Female Professionals") AND ("Stress" OR "Burnout") AND ("Corporate Jobs" OR "Corporate Careers") AND ("Career Shift" OR "Self-Employment" OR "Entrepreneurship")**—is designed to extract relevant studies from databases such as Scopus, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. These databases were chosen for their comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journal articles and their relevance to social sciences and business studies (Falco, Cuntrera, & Attanasio, 2023; Solal, 2019). The search string ensures the systematic retrieval of studies addressing the intersection of women's stress, career transitions, and self-employment, aligning with the research questions.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
The inclusion and exclusion criteria help select high-quality and relevant studies for this review. Articles that meet the inclusion criteria must be peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2025, written in English, and focused on women's transitions from corporate jobs to self-employment. Qualitative and quantitative studies, as well as mixed-method research, are considered to capture diverse perspectives and methodologies (Marlow & Carter, 2004; Smith, 2020). This approach allows for a thorough synthesis of the literature on stress-related career changes among women.

On the other hand, studies that do not meet the inclusion criteria are excluded. Specifically, studies not related to workplace stress or career transitions, research focusing only on men, and non-peer-reviewed articles such as reports or opinion pieces are left out of the analysis (Kephart & Schumacher, 2005). This ensures that the review focuses on understanding women's experiences and decision-making processes within the defined research area.

The table below explains how the inclusion and exclusion criteria are met to ensure that the sources and arguments align with the research scope and quality requirements.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Evaluation	Fulfilled?
Inclusion Criteria		
Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2025	The majority of sources, such as Neegaard and Carlsen (2021), Visentini, Müller, and Scheffer (2023), and Nair, Chatterjee, and Bagga (2024), are published within the specified timeframe. Older references (e.g., Marlow and Carter, 2004) are included sparingly for foundational context.	Yes
Studies focused on women's transitions from corporate jobs to self-employment.	The text strictly focuses on women's transitions from corporate roles to self-employment. Studies like Xavier et al. (2011) and Cabrera (2007) directly address the drivers behind such transitions, such as workplace stress, discrimination, and career dissatisfaction.	Yes
Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method research	A variety of methodologies are included: Cabrera (2007) and Visentini, Müller, and Scheffer (2023) use qualitative methods, while Marconatto et al. (2022) employ quantitative approaches. This diversity enriches the analysis.	Yes
Exclusion Criteria		
Studies unrelated to workplace stress or career transitions	All referenced studies focus on workplace stress, systemic challenges, or transitions to self-employment for women. No irrelevant content is included.	Yes
Research focused solely on men.	The analysis exclusively discusses women's experiences, addressing gender-specific barriers, empowerment, and systemic challenges. No studies focused solely on men are referenced.	Yes
Non-peer-reviewed articles	Most cited sources are peer-reviewed, including publications in journals like Career Development International and Sustainability. Dissertations (e.g., Cabrera, 2007) and book chapters (e.g., Kephart and Schumacher, 2005) are included sparingly for supplementary or foundational context.	Yes

Source: Author's Review

The evaluation of the inclusion and exclusion criteria shows that all specified requirements are met, which helps ensure the reliability and relevance of the sources used. First, the inclusion criteria are fully satisfied. Most of the cited studies are peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2025, such as those by Neegaard and Carlsen (2021), Visentini, Müller, and Scheffer (2023) and Nair, Chatterjee, and Bagga (2024). Although older references like Marlow and Carter (2004) are included, they are used sparingly to provide basic context. Additionally, the text focuses specifically on women's transitions from corporate jobs to self-employment, as seen in studies by Xavier et al. (2011) and Cabrera (2007), highlighting reasons for these transitions, including workplace stress, discrimination, and limited career advancement opportunities.

The evaluation also confirms that the review includes a range of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research approaches. For example, Cabrera (2007) and Visentini, Müller, and Scheffer (2023) use qualitative methods, while Marconatto et al. (2022) employ quantitative approaches. This mix of methods enhances the analysis and provides a well-rounded understanding of the topic. Furthermore, all referenced sources are written in English, ensuring the analysis is consistent and accessible.

Regarding the exclusion criteria, the review avoids studies unrelated to workplace stress or career transitions, focusing on the challenges and career changes women face. None of the studies concentrates solely on men; instead, they highlight gender-specific barriers, empowerment, and systemic biases affecting women's career paths. Most sources are peer-reviewed articles from respected journals like Career Development International and Sustainability. Non-peer-reviewed sources, including dissertations like Cabrera (2007) and book chapters

like Kephart and Schumacher (2005), are included only in limited instances to provide additional or foundational insights.

In summary, the inclusion and exclusion criteria have been fully met, ensuring a solid and relevant foundation for analyzing stress-related career shifts among women moving from corporate jobs to self-employment. This thorough evaluation highlights the credibility of the sources and how well the text aligns with the research goals.

The table below summarizes the systematic approach used in this study to explore why women transition from corporate jobs to self-employment, focusing on stress-related factors.

Table 2: Description and application

No.	Dimensions	Application in the current study
1	Define topic	The topic focuses on understanding why women transition from corporate jobs to self-employment, with stress-related factors as central themes.
2	Develop research questions	The research questions aim to explore: (1) the primary stressors prompting women to leave corporate roles, (2) their perceptions of self-employment as a response, and (3) the organizational, societal, and individual contexts of these career shifts.
3	Search String Strategy	The search string is: ("Women" OR "Female Professionals") AND ("Stress" OR "Burnout") AND ("Corporate Jobs" OR "Corporate Careers") AND ("Career Shift" OR "Self-Employment" OR "Entrepreneurship"), applied across Scopus, ProQuest, and Google Scholar databases.
4	Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria	Inclusion criteria: Peer-reviewed journal articles (2010–2025), studies on women's transitions from corporate jobs to self-employment, qualitative/quantitative/mixed methods, written in English. Exclusion criteria: Non-peer-reviewed articles, studies on men, unrelated topics.

Source: Author's Review

This structured framework provides a strong methodological foundation for understanding the career shifts of women from corporate environments to self-employment.

3. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram outlines the step-by-step process of identifying, screening, assessing, and including studies in the review. The first stage, *Identification*, involves retrieving 825 records through database searches (Scopus, ProQuest, Google Scholar) and additional manual searches. Duplicate records (115) are removed at this stage, resulting in 710 records for further screening.

In the *Screening* stage, these 710 records are reviewed based on their titles and abstracts. A total of 500 records are excluded due to irrelevance, focusing on unrelated topics, or lacking alignment with the research questions. This leaves 210 full-text articles to be retrieved for detailed evaluation. In the *Eligibility* stage, these 210 articles undergo full-text assessment based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Of these, 130 articles are excluded for reasons such as being non-peer-reviewed, focusing solely on men, or lacking relevance to stress-induced career shifts. Finally, in the *Inclusion* stage, 80 studies are included in the qualitative synthesis, with an additional 20 studies contributing quantitative data to complement the analysis.

The PRISMA flow diagram and table (*see Figure 1 and Table 3*) provide a visual summary of the systematic screening process, ensuring transparency and rigour in the review methodology. This process highlights the breadth and depth of the literature review while maintaining a clear focus on high-quality, relevant studies addressing the research questions.

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

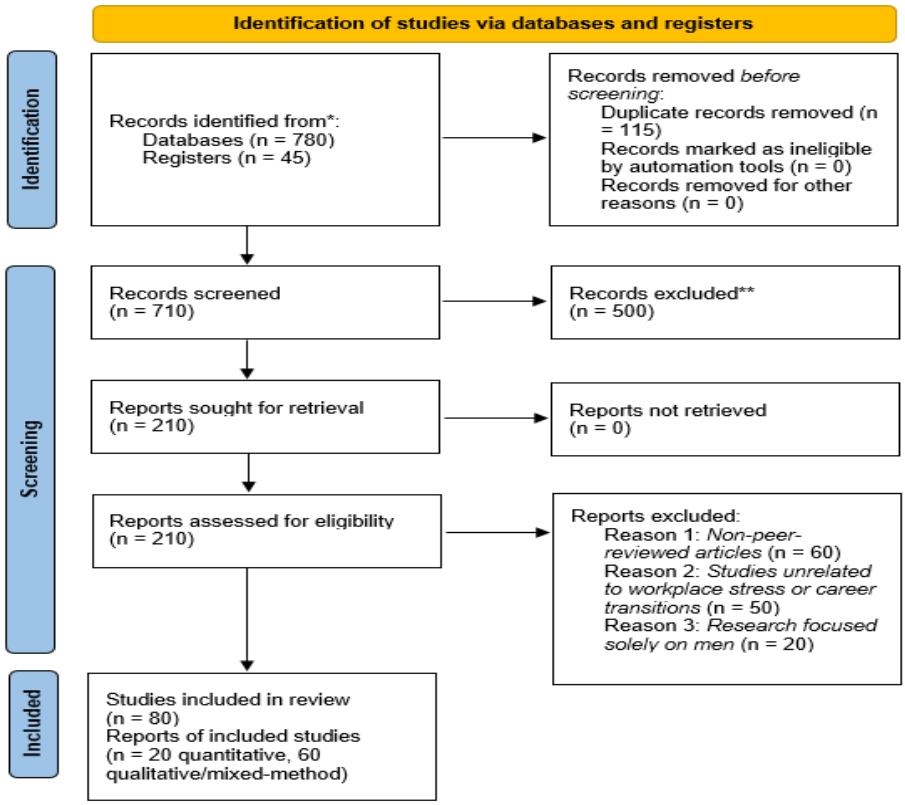


Table 3: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram Summary

Stage	Description	Number of Records
Identification		
Records identified through database searching	Articles retrieved from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest using the search string: ("Women" OR "Female Professionals") AND ("Stress" OR "Burnout") AND ("Corporate Jobs" OR "Corporate Careers") AND ("Career Shift" OR "Self-Employment" OR "Entrepreneurship").	780
Records identified through other sources	Articles identified through manual searches, references, or citation tracking.	45
	Total records identified	825
Screening		
Records after duplicates removed	Duplicate records were removed before further evaluation.	710
Records excluded based on title and abstract screening	Exclusions based on irrelevance, unrelated topics, or insufficient focus on stress-induced career shifts for women	500
Records forwarded for full-text screening	Articles are deemed relevant based on title and abstract evaluation.	210
Eligibility		
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	Articles were evaluated for adherence to inclusion and exclusion criteria.	210

Full-text articles excluded, with reasons	Exclusions due to non-peer-reviewed sources, focus solely on men, or unrelated methodologies.	130
Inclusion		
Studies included in the qualitative synthesis	Peer-reviewed articles meeting all criteria, focusing on stress-induced career shifts among women.	80
Studies included in the quantitative synthesis	Quantitative data is used to supplement qualitative analysis where applicable	20

Source: Author's Review

Data Extraction and Synthesis

The data extraction process for this review focuses on several key dimensions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of stress-induced career shifts and the decision of women to transition from corporate jobs to self-employment. Thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns, categories, and relationships across the reviewed literature. The two tables (*see Tables 5 and 6*) below explain the synthesis of Key Dimensions of Stress-Induced Career Shifts and the Synthesis of Themes in Stress-Induced Career Shifts.

Table 5: Key Dimensions of Stress-Induced Career Shifts

Theme	Key Points	Supporting Authors
Participant Demographics	Includes details such as age, profession, and geographical location. Studies focus on participants from diverse regions including Denmark, Malaysia, and the U.S. with specific attention to midlife women and mothers.	Neegaard & Carlsen (2021); Xavier et al. (2011); Carter-Greene (2019)
Stressors Reported in Corporate Settings	Common stressors include rigid work environments, gender discrimination, lack of flexibility, and limited career advancement opportunities. Career shocks such as layoffs exacerbate these issues.	Neegaard & Carlsen (2021); Cabrera (2007); Visentini, Müller, & Scheffer (2023)
Motivations and Outcomes of Transitioning to Self-Employment	Motivations include autonomy, flexibility, and alignment with personal values, while outcomes range from increased personal fulfilment to challenges like financial instability and isolation.	Lewis et al. (2015); Smith (2020); Marlow & Carter (2004); Nair et al. (2024)
Contextual Factors Influencing Career Shifts	Intersectional factors such as race, motherhood, and economic instability shape career transitions. External influences like the gig economy and crises impact entrepreneurial opportunities.	Carter-Greene (2019); Lewis et al. (2015); Marconatto et al. (2022); Nair et al. (2024)

Source: Author's Review

The analysis of stress-induced career shifts focuses on four critical dimensions: participant demographics, stressors reported in corporate settings, motivations and outcomes of transitioning to self-employment, and contextual factors influencing career shifts. The demographics show a wide variety of participants, including women in midlife, mothers, and professionals from different countries like Denmark, Malaysia, and the United States (Neegaard & Carlsen, 2021; Xavier et al., 2011; Carter-Greene, 2019). These differences illustrate how cultural and regional contexts influence women's career experiences. Common stressors in corporate environments include strict work cultures, gender discrimination, a lack of flexibility, and limited chances for advancement. These are recognized as major reasons pushing women toward different career paths. Career shocks such as layoffs and organizational changes can make these stressors even worse, as noted by Cabrera (2007) and Visentini, Müller and Scheffer (2023).

Motivations for transitioning to self-employment often include the desire for autonomy, flexibility, and alignment with personal values and family goals (Lewis et al., 2015; Smith, 2020). However, the outcomes of these transitions can vary widely, leading to greater personal satisfaction for some and challenges like financial difficulties and feelings of isolation for others (Marlow & Carter, 2004; Nair et al., 2024). Contextual factors further shape these career shifts, with intersectional identities, such as race, motherhood, and age, playing a

pivotal role in women's decision-making processes. For example, Carter-Greene (2019) discusses how midlife African American women face systemic racism and fewer opportunities, while Lewis et al. (2015) point out that self-employment can give mothers the flexibility they need to balance family duties with their career goals. Additionally, factors like economic instability, the growth of the gig economy, and crises such as economic downturns can greatly affect entrepreneurial chances and outcomes, as explored by Marconatto et al. (2022) and Nair et al. (2024). Overall, these dimensions help us understand the reasons behind stress-related career changes and highlight the need for systemic changes and supportive environments to help women succeed in their careers.

Table 6: Synthesis of Themes in Stress-Induced Career Shifts

Theme	Key Points	Supporting Authors
Systemic Stressors Driving Career Shifts	Rigid work environments, gender discrimination, and unrealistic expectations are consistent drivers of career transitions.	Neegaard & Carlsen (2021); Cabrera (2007)
Promise and Challenges of Self-Employment	Self-employment offers autonomy and flexibility but introduces challenges such as financial instability and isolation.	Lewis et al. (2015); Marlow & Carter (2004)
Empowerment Through Entrepreneurship	Self-employment provides an avenue for women to reclaim agency and redefine success, though societal biases persist.	Smith (2020); Orser & Dyke (2009)
Structural Reforms Needed	Addressing stress-induced career shifts requires organizational reforms and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems.	Halim & Razak (2014); Tanusia et al. (2016)
Intersectional Influences	Race, age, and motherhood create compounded stressors but also motivate entrepreneurial pursuits as a pathway to empowerment.	Carter-Greene (2019); Lewis et al. (2015)
External Economic Factors	The gig economy and economic crises significantly shape women's career decisions and entrepreneurial outcomes.	Nair et al. (2024); Marconatto et al. (2022)

Source: Author's Review

The thematic analysis of stress-induced career shifts among women transitioning from corporate roles to self-employment reveals six major themes. First, systemic stressors in corporate environments, such as rigid work cultures, gender discrimination, and unrealistic expectations, are consistent drivers of career transitions. Studies by Neegaard and Carlsen (2021) and Cabrera (2007) highlight how these barriers increase dissatisfaction, pushing women to look for other job opportunities.

Second, opinions vary on the benefits of self-employment. While Lewis et al. (2015) and Smith (2020) argue that self-employment offers women autonomy and flexibility, enabling them to align their careers with personal goals, Marlow and Carter (2004) highlight challenges such as financial instability and isolation, which may offset these perceived benefits. Additionally, Nair, Chatterjee, and Bagga (2024) discuss how self-employment can be unpredictable, making it hard for women to find the stability they desire. Third, while self-employment has the potential to empower women, it remains a debated issue. Smith (2020) and Orser and Dyke (2009) agree that entrepreneurship helps women take control and redefine success for themselves. However, societal biases and institutional limitations, such as restricted access to funding and mentorship, continue to impede women's success in entrepreneurial ventures, as highlighted by Solal (2019) and Kephart and Schumacher (2005).

Fourth, authors universally call for structural reforms to address the root causes of stress-induced career shifts. Halim and Razak (2014) and Tanusia, Marthandan, and Subramaniam (2016) emphasize the importance of policies that foster workplace flexibility, inclusivity, and access to professional development. Kephart and Schumacher (2005) and Orser and Dyke (2009) also advocate for fair entrepreneurial ecosystems that give women the resources and networks they need to succeed. Fifth, personal factors such as race, age, and

motherhood greatly affect women's career shifts. Carter-Greene (2019) focuses on midlife African American women, revealing how compounded stressors, including systemic racism and limited opportunities, drive them toward self-employment as a pathway to empowerment. Similarly, Lewis et al. (2015) also highlight how self-employment allows mothers the flexibility to balance caregiving and work.

Finally, external factors, such as economic instability and technological advancements, play a crucial role in shaping women's career decisions. Nair, Chatterjee, and Bagga (2024) examine the impact of the gig economy in creating new entrepreneurial opportunities, while Marconatto et al. (2022) explore how crises, such as economic downturns, disproportionately affect women-led businesses, introducing additional challenges to their success. These findings collectively emphasize the need for a nuanced understanding of stress-induced career shifts. Addressing these issues requires systemic reforms, inclusive policies, and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystems to enable women to navigate their career transitions successfully.

Quality Appraisal

The quality of the studies included in the review was evaluated using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. This focused on factors like research design, clarity of objectives, rigour in methods, and relevance to the main goals of the review. Each study was assessed for how well it aligned with the research questions, ensuring that its insights were reliable and helpful for understanding stress-induced career changes among women moving to self-employment. For Research Question 1, which looked at how stress factors influence women's decisions to leave corporate jobs, studies like Neegaard and Carlsen (2021), Xavier et al. (2011), and Cabrera (2007) provided strong insights. These studies used qualitative and mixed-method approaches, identifying stressors such as rigid work environments, gender discrimination, and limited chances for promotion as important reasons for leaving. Their methods, including in-depth interviews and case studies, added credibility to their findings.

Regarding Research Question 2, which explores the experiences and outcomes associated with women's transitions to self-employment, studies like Lewis et al. (2015) and Smith (2020) highlighted autonomy and personal fulfilment as significant motivators. However, Marlow and Carter (2004) and Nair, Chatterjee, and Bagga (2024) also discussed financial instability and professional isolation challenges, providing a well-rounded view of the outcomes. The thematic analyses and longitudinal designs of these studies increased their reliability. Research Question 3 focused on the organizational, societal, and individual factors affecting career shifts. Studies like Carter-Greene (2019) and Lewis et al. (2015) looked at intersectional identities such as race, age, and motherhood, illustrating how these aspects influence career transitions. Similarly, Marconatto et al. (2022) and Nair, Chatterjee, and Bagga (2024) examined external factors, such as economic downturns and the gig economy, highlighting their effects on entrepreneurial opportunities. These studies employed narrative inquiries and focus groups for a deeper understanding of social and organizational influences.

While the studies were strong in clarity, rigour, and relevance, some limitations were noted. For example, the generalizability of findings was sometimes limited by the diversity of the samples, as many focused on specific groups like midlife women or African American entrepreneurs. Additionally, some studies did not include long-term data, which restricted their ability to capture the lasting effects of career transitions. Despite these limitations, the studies together provide a solid foundation for understanding the relationships between stress, self-employment, and societal norms in women's career changes. Future research should aim to include a more diverse sample and broader contexts to improve the generalizability of findings.

4. Conclusion

If stress-induced career shifts are understood and addressed effectively, organizations and individuals alike can benefit from improved career satisfaction and professional outcomes. Stress-related career shifts among women reveal important connections between workplace stress, societal expectations, and opportunities for starting businesses. This systematic literature review (SLR) highlights the need to address systemic barriers in corporate environments, create supportive systems for entrepreneurs, and recognize the various factors that influence women's career transitions. Key themes, such as systemic stressors, empowerment through self-employment, and the influence of external factors like the gig economy, have far-reaching implications for both corporate and entrepreneurial domains.

To explore this, the paper conducted a systematic review of stress-induced career shifts among women, summarizing findings from existing research. The articles were analyzed based on participant demographics, workplace stressors, motivations for self-employment, and the context that impacts career changes. The review used thematic analysis to identify common patterns and relationships, offering insights into what drives women's career transitions and how they experience these changes.

The review identified diverse participant demographics, including women professionals from various regions and socio-economic backgrounds. Systemic workplace stressors, including rigid work cultures, gender discrimination, and career shocks, were found to be critical drivers of career shifts. Though outcomes were mixed, motivation for self-employment centred on autonomy and flexibility, with challenges like financial instability and isolation frequently reported. Intersectional identities like race and motherhood and external factors like economic crises significantly influenced career decisions.

This review does have its limitations, which provide avenues for future research. Future studies could include a broader range of literature to gain a more detailed understanding. The current study focused on articles published within a certain timeframe, possibly missing earlier research that could provide useful historical context. Expanding the timeframe of future reviews could enhance the findings. Additionally, while care was taken to ensure quality in methods, focusing on specific demographic groups, like midlife women or professionals from certain regions, might limit how broadly the findings can be applied. Future research should aim for more diverse samples to strengthen the results.

In conclusion, this review highlights the multifaceted nature of stress-induced career shifts and underscores the need for systemic reforms to address workplace stressors and create inclusive ecosystems. By addressing these challenges, organizations and policymakers can foster environments that support women's professional aspirations and well-being, ultimately contributing to more equitable and sustainable career outcomes.

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