



Pivoting the self: Gendered identity construction of impoverished women transitioning from paid work to entrepreneurship in rural Indonesia

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Abstract

In this article we develop a situated understanding of how impoverished women entrepreneurs embark on gendered identity construction as they transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship. Drawing on self-narratives of 31 rural Indonesian women entrepreneurs previously employed as migrant domestic workers, we examine how they navigate this transition and construct their identities around entrepreneurship and socio-cultural norms. The concept of identity-pivoting work is introduced, through which women reorient themselves upon their return to structural gendered subordination embedded in their local communities. Four forms of identity-pivoting are identified and discussed – realigning, resigning, reclaiming, and reforming – which differ based on the positioning of past employment and gendered family roles in relation to current entrepreneurial activities. We conclude by explicating how our insights advance the knowledge on gendered dynamics in the construction of entrepreneurial identities upon transition from employment to entrepreneurship.

Keywords

entrepreneurial identity, transition to entrepreneurship, narratives, women entrepreneurship, rural context, patriarchy

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Introduction

In economically constrained contexts where decent or desirable employment is scarce, entrepreneurship often emerges as the only viable option to sustain livelihood (O'Donnell et al., 2024). Particularly in rural regions marked by limited state support, restricted labour markets, and pervasive poverty, individuals are frequently left with two choices: to leave their hometowns or villages in search of paid work elsewhere, or to remain and sustain themselves through self-employment (Fhlatharta and Farrell, 2017; Mueller and Pieperhoff, 2023; Somaiah et al., 2019). For many women in such contexts, traditional patriarchal expectations often shape their decisions to stay in their home communities and fulfil family household responsibilities. Even those who engage in wage labour outside their hometown or village tend to do so only temporarily before returning home due to family reasons, after which they start a microbusiness to sustain their livelihood (Anwar and Chan, 2016; Démurger and Xu, 2011). Yet, we know relatively little about how women navigate this shift from paid employment to self-employment upon their return home, especially in contexts where local sociocultural norms strongly define which forms of work are considered acceptable for women.

In explaining the transition from wage labour to entrepreneurship, scholars have predominantly drawn on an identity lens informed by a career perspective (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010; Mallett and Wapshott, 2015; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014). This approach tends to focus on continuity and development in the professional identity (Warren, 2004), even when the transition is triggered by a disruptive event such as job loss (Burcharth et al., 2022). Implicit in this view is the assumption that entrepreneurial transitions unfold along a linear trajectory from one career stage to another, with some form of progression or personal growth. However, such a simple view of transitions has been criticised for its limited relevance in contemporary career landscapes, with careers being increasingly messy and complex, frequently crossing multiple boundaries, or, in some cases, being boundaryless (Hytti, 2010; Inkson et al., 2012; Sullivan and Ariss, 2021). Further, for many individuals situated in impoverished contexts, work is rarely framed in terms of career advancement but rather in terms of necessity and livelihood (Sultana, 2023). Nevertheless, our understanding of entrepreneurial transitions remains grounded in the experiences of individuals moving from 'traditional' organisational careers, with existing studies primarily focusing on the entrepreneurial identities of former managers and professionals within relatively favourable economic environments (Burcharth et al., 2022; Mallett and Wapshott, 2015).

Less acknowledged in this narrow view of entrepreneurial transition is also how entrepreneurs are embedded in multiple contexts at the same time. Prior research has shown that women's motivation to become entrepreneurs is often shaped by non-work roles, such as roles within the family and community (Duberley and Carrigan, 2013). Local sociocultural norms have also been found to be central in shaping the decisions that women entrepreneurs make (Tlaiss, 2013; Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021), highlighting how entrepreneurial action is shaped not only by business environments but also by their prevailing social, spatial, and institutional contexts in which they are in (Welter, 2011; Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022). This is further supported by the growing calls to better understand entrepreneurship as a mundane and precarious process (Champenois et al., 2025), a form of work that is deeply intertwined with the everydayness of life. Such calls recognise that everyday aspects characterising the local contexts – such as sociocultural norms and gendered family expectations – play a key role in shaping who entrepreneurs are, how they behave, and why they do what they do (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Yet much research on identity construction following entrepreneurial transitions remains one-dimensional, focusing on business elements while ignoring or underplaying the complexities of the entrepreneur's everyday life and local context. Against this backdrop, we ask: *How do impoverished women navigate*

the transition from paid employment to self-employment, and construct their identities around entrepreneurship and local sociocultural norms?

To address this question, we adopt a narrative approach (McAdams, 1996, 2001; McAdams and McLean, 2013) and examine the identity construction of women entrepreneurs in rural Indonesia who formerly worked as migrant domestic workers (i.e. maids, babysitters, and caregivers for the elderly or disabled). In this setting, strong patriarchal norms embedded in the local sociocultural context make it expected for women to prioritise household caregiving and support their husbands as the ‘breadwinner’ (Somaiah et al., 2019; van Wiechelen, 2010). Yet, economic necessity has made it more acceptable for women to engage in economic activities through migrant domestic work and self-employment, making this an intriguing setting for developing a more situated understanding of how impoverished women experience the transition to entrepreneurship and construct their identity in relation to prior waged employment, present self-employment, and ongoing caring responsibilities. Through our analysis, we reveal how entrepreneurship enables women to reorient themselves upon returning to their home communities, a process we propose as identity-pivoting work. We identify and explain four forms of identity-pivoting – *realigning*, *resigning*, *reclaiming*, and *reforming* – that differ in terms of how waged employment and ongoing care responsibilities are positioned in relation to their identity as entrepreneurs. We conclude our article by discussing how our key findings contribute to the literature on identity construction upon transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship, particularly in light of the gendered interplay between entrepreneurial roles and waged labour when embedded in their contexts.

Theoretical grounding

Entrepreneurial identity construction upon transition from employment to entrepreneurship

In entrepreneurship studies, research on entrepreneurial identities has burgeoned in recognition of their importance for understanding who entrepreneurs are, how they behave, and why they do what they do (Baker and Powell, 2020; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Mmbaga et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial identity can be defined as the ‘individual sets of meanings and behaviours that define those individuals when acting in an entrepreneurial role’ (Murnieks et al., 2012: 1589). Research has increasingly focused on how the construction of entrepreneurial identity involves drawing on and bringing together a wide range of cultural prescriptions of acceptable behaviours within a sociocultural context (Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Lewis, 2013). This process results in the construction of self-narratives, that is, ‘a person’s internalised and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future’ (McAdams and McLean, 2013: 233).

Upon transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship, the construction of entrepreneurial identity is argued to significantly affect entrepreneurial outcomes, such as adjustment to the new role, persistence despite challenges, and venture success (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010). The salience and centrality of the entrepreneurial identity influence not only behaviour and opportunity recognition, but also the types of businesses individuals pursue and the markets they serve (see Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021 for a review). However, this process is often complex as transitions require individuals to reconstruct who they are in response to various social demands across the changing contexts (Burcharth et al., 2022; Mallett and Wapshott, 2015; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014). Individuals would need to add to, subtract from, and/or revise already established identities to incorporate their new work role (Beyer and Hannah, 2002; Hytti et al., 2017; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

To date, much of the literature on entrepreneurial identity (re)construction has mainly focused on the experiences of former managers and professionals. This emphasis on the transition from 'conventional' organisational occupations to entrepreneurship has contributed to the professionalisation of the entrepreneurial role, where being an entrepreneur is positioned as a new stage in one's career. In these studies, the emphasis typically lies on how individuals adjust to new work and business settings. For instance, research shows that former professionals often leverage their high status, skills, and professional networks in constructing their new entrepreneurial identity (Kacperczyk and Younkin, 2017; Marlow and McAdam, 2015), which are resources gained through prior employment that fit with the new entrepreneurial role. The closer the perceived fit between the career stages (i.e. between past employment and present entrepreneurial role), the easier entrepreneurial identity (re)construction tends to be.

However, entrepreneurs often struggle to disengage from prior work identities. While congruence between prior work-related identity and the entrepreneurial identity drives a successful transition into entrepreneurship, preserving past work identity can constrain the construction of an entrepreneurial identity (Burcharth et al., 2022). Especially when the current entrepreneurial identity diverges significantly from the individual's desired self, negative emotions can be triggered, thereby influencing how they persist despite adversity (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2013). Under such tensions and contradictions, individuals need to reduce dissonance through their identity construction (Beyer and Hannah, 2002), for instance by crafting self-narratives that distance them from certain roles (Burcharth et al., 2022; Haynie and Shepherd, 2011), or by accentuating a process of reclaiming or reconnecting with their entrepreneurial identity rather than viewing it as something entirely new (Mallett and Wapshott, 2015; Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014). Such strategies allow for continuity between past employment and current entrepreneurial role, thus ensuring coherence between past, present, and future selves (Brown et al., 2009; Hamilton, 2014; McAdams et al., 2001).

While these studies have enriched our understanding of how individuals (re)construct an entrepreneurial identity as they move from one career stage to another, we know that these transitions are more complex and often involve crossing multiple boundaries, such as occupations, industries, and countries (Sullivan and Ariss, 2021). Consider, for instance, an engineer in Finland who becomes a self-employed consultant in Australia, compared to a nanny in Saudi Arabia who opens a food stall upon returning to Indonesia. Further, entrepreneurial identities also shape, and are shaped by, non-work roles, such as in the case of women who become entrepreneurs following motherhood (Duberley and Carrigan, 2013). However, prior studies on entrepreneurial identity construction following such transitions have chiefly adopted a narrower view of this process by focusing predominantly on how entrepreneurs manage perceived tensions and contradictions within their current work context, thereby neglecting dynamics that lie beyond business settings, including gendered sociocultural norms (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). As Sullivan and Al Ariss (2021) pointed out, a key limitation in current approaches to identity in the context of work transitions is their failure to consider how multiple identities may influence these transition processes.

Entrepreneurial transition as a situated gendered process

Identity (re)construction following the transition from waged labour to entrepreneurship is further complicated when the new entrepreneurial role conflicts with other role identities (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010; Warren, 2004). Women entrepreneurs often need to manage the possible incongruency between their work and gender role, particularly the masculinities inherent in entrepreneurship and the femininities ascribed to their gender; existing studies have shown that women entrepreneurs often find themselves compelled to adopt masculine traits to gain legitimacy and

acceptance within the entrepreneurial community (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Stead, 2017; Swail and Marlow, 2018; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2021). Yet, responses to these masculine norms vary: while some women accentuate their femininity to establish credibility as entrepreneurs in their fields, others deny the gendered nature of entrepreneurship and focus on similarities between male and female entrepreneurs, and yet others attempt to dissociate entrepreneurship from masculinity altogether (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Hytti et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2022). These strategies highlight the diverse ways in which gendered expectations within the business context shape entrepreneurial identity construction.

Beyond the business context, the identity construction of women entrepreneurs is also shaped by broader societal norms, such as religious, cultural, and family expectations. Research has shown, for instance, that highly educated women entrepreneurs with formal businesses in the UAE and Lebanon operate at the intersection of Islamic teachings and patriarchal sociocultural values (Tlaiss, 2013; Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021). For many of these women, entrepreneurship becomes a way to simultaneously comply with, challenge, and/or resist dominant gender norms, offering a means to balance economic activity with family responsibilities. Similarly, displaced Palestinian women facing greater economic precarity navigate cultural norms, traditional family dynamics, and economic necessity through home-based entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010). They engage in craft production from home as a way to generate income through work that remains socially acceptable for women in their communities. These examples illustrate how entrepreneurial identity is contextually constructed within, and against, broader social and economic structures.

Despite increasing recognition of the embeddedness of women entrepreneurship, relatively little is known about how identity is (re)constructed following the transition from wage work to self-employment in relation to the sociocultural expectations embedded in families or communities (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Especially in contexts embedded with strong patriarchal norms that promote gendered subordination, caregiving roles, and dependence on men (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Trivedi and Petkova, 2021), women must negotiate both their past work and present entrepreneurial engagement in a manner that aligns with local gender expectations. For women whose prior work experience lies outside managerial or professional domains, as is often the case for women in poverty contexts, these negotiations are particularly complex considering the interaction of gender, necessity, and local norms across different stages of work and life. However, this issue has not yet been sufficiently researched, motivating our study.

Methodology

Stead et al. (2021, p. 1) emphasise the need for gender and management scholars to adopt ‘methodologies and methods capable of getting under the surface of everyday discourses, practices and processes [. . .] to access how gender organises, shapes, operates and influences’. Heeding this call, we conducted a qualitative study informed by a narrative approach (McAdams, 1996, 2001; McAdams and McLean, 2013), which holds that entrepreneurs continuously (re)construct their identities throughout their entrepreneurial journey to integrate diverse experiences into their existing work/life story and maintain coherence across changing contexts (Brown et al., 2009; Hamilton, 2014; McAdams et al., 2001). Through narration, entrepreneurs are thus able to negotiate, challenge, and reconstruct their identities in relation to various sociocultural demands (Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Hytti et al., 2017; Marlow and McAdam, 2015). We argue that examining self-narratives proffers an invaluable way forward in developing situated understandings of how women entrepreneurs construct their entrepreneurial identity in relation to prior work and local gendered expectations. In particular, this approach allows us to explore how women entrepreneurs

internalise definitions associated with their ascribed role(s) and personalise this identity by imbuing it with meanings that are particular to them (Hytti, 2005; Ramarajan, 2014), thus creating their own understanding of being an entrepreneur within the local context. As individuals are 'free' to choose which events, key characters, and themes to include in their story (Essers, 2009; Singer and Blagov, 2004), entrepreneurial self-narratives also enable us to investigate the multiple identities of importance in the context of their entrepreneurial engagement. In line with our research aim, our methodological focus is therefore not simply on how identities change following the transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship, but on how women entrepreneurs make sense of and structure both their past and present in relation to local sociocultural norms.

Research context

The setting of our study is Central Java, a province in Indonesia with around 37 million inhabitants and the country's second largest migrant-sending province (BP2MI, 2025). The majority of the population identifies as Muslim (97%) and ethnically Javanese (98%) (Na'im and Syaputra, 2010). In Javanese culture, the concept of family plays a central role and revolves around four principles: *rukun* (harmony), *hormat* (respect), *musyawarah* (mutual deliberation), and *gotong-royong* (cooperation) (Adamson, 2007). Embedded within these principles is the belief that enacting particular social roles and obligations serves the well-being of the collective. Specifically, women have duties as wives and mothers, and they are expected to submit to their husband's authority as head of the family and provider (Ida, 2001). Deviating from these norms by prioritising individual interests, such as pursuing paid work over caregiving, is considered disruptive to family cohesion. In fact, women's engagement in paid work is often associated with higher risks of family conflicts and divorce (Damayanti et al., 2024). This belief is further reinforced by the Javanese philosophy of *nrimo ing pandum* (to sincerely accept all that life has given as a gift from God), which has become part of the Javanese identity. This philosophy is particularly strong in rural areas and has been linked to resilience among the impoverished as well as acceptance of, and remaining in, perpetual impoverishment (Jati, 2023). For women in particular, *nrimo ing pandum* can serve to normalise inequalities and gendered subordination, such as accepting work that is of lower status and pay than that of their male counterparts, or bearing the double burden of both paid work and unpaid household responsibilities (Damayanti et al., 2024).

In addition to these cultural values, the rise of conservative interpretations of Islam over the past decade has further strengthened traditional gender relations, and paid employment is increasingly seen as contradictory to the long-standing Islamic assumption that women's *kodrat* (natural disposition) is to become a mother and caregiver within the family (Adamson, 2007; Brenner, 2011; van Wiechelen, 2010). Furthermore, the ideal Muslim woman is traditionally considered to be submissive to, and dependent on, her husband (Ida, 2001; Somaiah et al., 2019). The concept of *keluarga sakinah* (happy, peaceful family) promoted by conservative religious groups further idealises a pious, grateful, and supportive wife who is dedicated to caring for her husband and family while preserving her own reputation (Wieringa, 2015). Such views are legitimised by referencing Islamic traditions, laws, and teachings, and remain especially prevalent in rural areas (Sakai and Fauzia, 2016).

As is common in patriarchal societies, such sociocultural norms can pose significant barriers to women's employment as they are generally required to secure permission from their husbands or other family members while continuing to fulfil their domestic responsibilities (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Cruz et al., 2024). However, economic necessity can make it more acceptable for women to work. Given the lack of local opportunities, *merantau* – the act of leaving one's home for work and/

or studies – has become an important vehicle for low-income households in rural Indonesia. Rural women predominantly *merantau* as domestic labourers in larger cities or abroad, for example as maids, babysitters, nannies, or caregivers for the elderly or disabled.¹ This position generally enables women to earn a higher income, especially when working abroad. Although *merantau* in domestic service puts impoverished women in a vulnerable position given the poor terms and conditions of such labour (ILO, 2013; Sondakh and Naovalitha, 2003), it can nevertheless inform greater resistance to the embedded sociocultural expectations that reflect strong patriarchal norms in rural areas and suggest that women should prioritise caregiving in support of their ‘breadwinning’ husbands (Somaiah et al., 2019). Nevertheless, when mothers engage in *merantau*, their childcare responsibilities are often transferred to female relatives, for instance to their mothers, grandmothers, or sisters (Chan, 2017). The need for obtaining permission, alongside their dependence on relatives to take on their caregiving obligations, makes *merantau* a family decision instead of a personal choice. It is also common for individuals who have worked through *merantau* to start a small business upon returning to their home village, chiefly due to their accumulation of various forms of capital acquired during paid employment and the limited availability of work opportunities in the village (Anwar and Chan, 2016; Démurger and Xu, 2011; Lianos and Pseiridis, 2009). Yet, upon their return, individuals re-enter into structurally gendered subordination (Marlow, 2002), which is enforced through strong cultural and religious norms. In reconstructing their identity, post-*merantau* entrepreneurs are required to negotiate and balance tensions between their pre-existing notions of work, current self-employment activities, and local gendered expectations. It is within this context that we undertook the data collection for this study, as we now proceed to describe.

Data collection

We conducted our study in three villages in Batang regency, Central Java, Indonesia. We specifically sought to interview self-employed women with prior experience working as *merantau* domestic labourers in Indonesia and/or abroad. Identifying appropriate research participants was challenging despite the lead author’s Indonesian background, since entrepreneurs in rural Indonesia operate largely within the informal sector, for which no official registries exist. To address this, the lead author relied on personal connections and networks to help provide referrals to village-owned women cooperatives in this region, which were familiar with both the entrepreneurial landscape and the general characteristics of women in their communities. Initial contact with the cooperatives was made to explain the purpose of the study and to gather basic demographic information about the villages (e.g. the prevalence of *merantau* domestic work and women’s self-employment). Continued collaboration helped to coordinate research in the three villages. Although membership in these cooperatives was not a criterion for selection, their board members aided in identifying participants who met our study criteria and scheduling the interviews. The lead author interviewed 31 women between 27 and 55 years of age. Before each interview, participants were verbally informed about the purpose of the study, how the data would be used, the confidentiality and anonymity of their data, and their right to withdraw voluntarily at any stage. Following this, signed informed consent was obtained from all participants. Almost all participants were married at the time of the interview; one was divorced, and another was a widow. Participant details are described in Table 1.

The interviews started with a few general background questions (i.e. age, marital status, number of children, and level of education) to create a relaxed atmosphere and ease participants into the interview process (Essers, 2009). Then each participant was invited to narrate their work history from the time they first began to work to the present day. To encourage participants to respond

Table 1. List of participants.

| No. | Pseudonym | Age during interview | Education level | No. of children | Age at first merantau | No. of times of merantau | Location of merantau work (country) | Small business type |
|-----|-----------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Ani | 48 | Primary | 1 | 12 | 5 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Spring-rolls seller |
| 2 | Asri | 55 | Primary | 4 | 12 | 2 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Food stall |
| 3 | Bunga | 42 | Primary | 1 | 25 | 2 | Malaysia, Singapore | Food stall |
| 4 | Cahya | 30 | Secondary | 1 | 18 | 2 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Catering |
| 5 | Citra | 42 | Primary | 3 | 31 | 3 | Malaysia | Food stall |
| 6 | Dewi | 44 | Primary | 1 | 26 | 1 | Malaysia | Grocery stall |
| 7 | Diah | 48 | Secondary | 3 | 23 | 3 | China, Malaysia | Catering |
| 8 | Endang | 37 | Primary | 2 | 13 | 4 | China, Indonesia, Malaysia | Clothes seller |
| 9 | Farah | 44 | Primary | 5 | 24 | 3 | Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore | Spice producer |
| 10 | Fitri | 31 | Secondary | 2 | 23 | 2 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Food stall |
| 11 | Gema | 42 | Primary | 2 | 28 | 2 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Tea roastery |
| 12 | Hafika | 31 | Secondary | 1 | 22 | 1 | China | Make-up service |
| 13 | Harum | 37 | Secondary | 2 | 16 | 3 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Soy milk producer |
| 14 | Ika | 38 | Secondary | 2 | 20 | 2 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Mushroom producer |
| 15 | Indah | 29 | Secondary | 2 | 18 | 4 | China, Indonesia | Coffee stall |
| 16 | Kemala | 39 | Primary | 1 | 27 | 1 | Indonesia | Grocery stall |
| 17 | Laras | 31 | Primary | 1 | 12 | 5 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Food stall |
| 18 | Lestari | 47 | Secondary | 2 | 12 | 2 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Vegetable seller |
| 19 | Mudita | 27 | Secondary | 1 | 17 | 1 | Indonesia | Processed-waste handicrafts producer |
| 20 | Nurul | 27 | Secondary | 2 | 15 | 2 | Indonesia | Chicken seller |
| 21 | Putri | 46 | Primary | 2 | 25 | 2 | Indonesia | Food stall |
| 22 | Ratih | 27 | Secondary | 1 | 15 | 6 | Indonesia | Food stall |
| 23 | Sari | 43 | Primary | 2 | 12 | 2 | Indonesia | Food stall |
| 24 | Satya | 36 | Secondary | 2 | 26 | 5 | Indonesia | Grocery stall |
| 25 | Siti | 39 | Primary | 2 | 28 | 1 | Malaysia | Coffee stall |
| 26 | Talia | 28 | Primary | 1 | 15 | 4 | Indonesia | Food stall |
| 27 | Tantri | 31 | Primary | 1 | 12 | 4 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Traditional crackers producer |
| 28 | Turi | 40 | Secondary | 2 | 18 | 2 | Indonesia, Malaysia | Grocery stall |
| 29 | Wening | 35 | Secondary | 1 | 19 | 3 | Singapore | Tailor |
| 30 | Wiwik | 33 | Secondary | 1 | 18 | 2 | Indonesia | Grocery stall |
| 31 | Zainab | 43 | Primary | 0 | 36 | 2 | Indonesia | Traditional crackers producer |

freely and tell their own stories (Barragan et al., 2018; Essers et al., 2013; Hamilton, 2006), interviews were structured only minimally and built on the stories shared by participants. The lead author asked a number of probing questions during interviews, for instance on motivations and decisions related to periods of transition. In this way, space was provided for participants to select and narrate those events from their past and present which they themselves considered significant (Essers, 2009; Singer and Blagov, 2004). Towards the end of each interview, a visual timeline was created together with the participant as a summary of their work history and to offer space for clarifications or additions to their narratives (Ginting-Szczesny, 2022). All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and lasted for an average of 45 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed through a three-phase process (Shepherd et al., 2020). First, the interviews were fully transcribed in Bahasa Indonesia without correcting grammatical errors, stuttering, or incomplete sentences. Next, the transcripts were translated into English by a professional translator, with such errors kept intentionally intact to keep the narratives as close as possible to the original (Xian, 2008). Finally, the lead author verified the accuracy of both the transcriptions and translations.

We are aware that the identities of the lead author, being an Indonesian female researcher currently living abroad, might have influenced the narratives constructed by the participants (see Essers, 2009). Being introduced to participants by representatives of the women's cooperatives helped to establish a degree of trust. Shared gender and nationality between the interviewer and participants may have further facilitated rapport and mutual understanding. Further, the lead author's position as an 'outsider' due to originating from a different region in Indonesia may have encouraged participants to discuss their personal challenges or other issues that are typically difficult to discuss within communities marked by high social control (Chan, 2017; Essers, 2009; Essers et al., 2021). For instance, some participants openly shared details of the demeaning or abusive behaviours of previous employers. Still, there might have been topics they did not feel inclined to discuss with outsiders of the community. We reflected on how the researcher's identity may have influenced the research process and writing up of the findings within the author team (Essers, 2009). We ensured that the women's narratives remained at the centre of our analysis and findings, which we continue to discuss in the next sections.

Data analysis

Informed by a narrative identity perspective (McAdams, 1996, 2001; McAdams and McLean, 2013), our narrative analysis relied on 'extended accounts that are preserved and treated analytically as units, rather than fragmented into thematic categories as is customary in other forms of qualitative analysis' (Riessman, 2008: 12). The data was analysed in the original language, Bahasa Indonesia, in an effort to remain faithful to the participant's original narratives and minimise the loss of subtle linguistic elements (Charlebois, 2010). The narrative analysis comprised four stages. We started with a descriptive round of coding to inductively identify themes that were central to the construction of narratives. Here, we focused on the building blocks of each narrative – events, characters, actions, locations, and time (Czarniawska, 1998) – as well as both explicit and indirect expressions of identity construction, such as expressions related to who an individual believed they were or experiences that were significant to them (Brown and Coupland, 2015).

Through this process, we found that stories on the *merantau* period were mainly centred around work, such as relationships with their employer, their work, and their experiences in the large cities. Meanwhile, post-*merantau* stories were more centred around how they managed their businesses while also caring for their families and homes. Given that some participants had worked only in Indonesia, others exclusively abroad, and some in both, we also examined whether there were notable differences in their narratives based on the location of their *merantau* work. While

working abroad may offer exposure to different sociocultural environments, we did not find consistent or significant differences in how the participants narrate their prior employment. Across all groups, participants shared experiences of visiting new places, interacting with diverse people, and coping with the emotional challenges of separation from family. We subsequently wrote a case summary for each narrative, which consisted of (1) an overview of the participant's work history, (2) a synopsis of their entrepreneurial self-narrative, and (3) a list of identified themes.

Consistent with our interest in how individuals construct their entrepreneurial identities in relation to prior work experiences and local gendered expectations, the second stage of our analysis focused on exploring the interplay between present entrepreneurial activities and earlier wage labour (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Particularly, we were interested in examining how past work experiences were evaluated and utilised in constructing current identity. We observed that similar past experiences, such as living abroad or having multiple work responsibilities, could be interpreted differently (e.g. as either pleasant or unpleasant), yet this did not necessarily define their position within individual narratives. We identified that the key distinction here lay in whether such experiences were seen as separate from or, conversely, as foundations for present entrepreneurial roles. We refer to this as *zooming*, which is the extent to which past and present experiences are used as resources for identity construction. We suggest that individuals engage in *zooming in* when they rely chiefly on experiences in the recent past or present as narrative resources. *Zooming out*, on the other hand, refers to a process of weaving the entire past into the present, thereby primarily emphasising continuity.

In the third step of our analysis, we focused on exploring the interplay between present entrepreneurial engagement and local gendered expectations within the self-narratives (Barragan et al., 2018; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Essers et al., 2013). We found that participant roles as mothers, wives, or daughters featured centrally throughout the narratives, regardless of whether they were speaking of wage labour or self-employment. However, we observed variations in how these gendered family roles and current entrepreneurial roles were positioned in relation to each other. We refer to this as *grounding*, which reflects the centrality, or relative importance, of entrepreneurial identity vis-à-vis other salient identities within the self-narratives (Murnieks et al., 2012, 2020). Specifically, some participants *foregrounded* their entrepreneurial role by elevating it to predominate their current identity, while others *backgrounded* it by placing greater emphasis on their family roles.

Finally, we built on our analysis to develop an empirical typology (Cornelissen, 2017) of narrative strategies in gendered identity construction upon transition from paid work to entrepreneurship. We propose that entrepreneurial identity construction in these contexts is akin to a pivoting process, in that it involves the strategic revising of one's past sense of self as a way of adapting to local external demands within a new or changing social context. Similarly to the way in which entrepreneurs pivot their venture to ensure its sustainability and growth, we argue that pivoting one's identity allows individuals to ensure acceptance from relevant others while establishing who they are as entrepreneurs within the local community. After several rounds of coding, discussions, and iterations, we identified four strategies of identity-pivoting: *identity-realigning*, *identity-resigning*, *identity-reclaiming*, and *identity-reforming* (see Figure 1).

Findings: Identity-pivoting upon transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship

In this section we describe the four forms of identity-pivoting (realigning, resigning, reclaiming, and reforming) and explicate how they differ in terms of the narrative mechanisms of zooming and grounding that underlie such pivoting. Table 2 provides an overview of our findings. To provide a

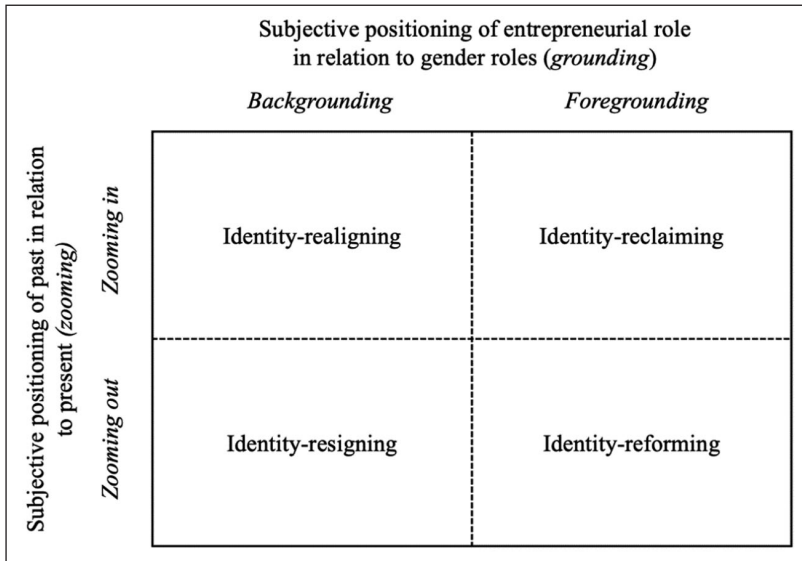


Figure 1. Different forms of identity-pivoting and their underlying processes.

Table 2. Analytical framework: forms of identity-pivoting and underlying narrative mechanisms.

| Identity-pivoting | Application | Zooming | Grounding |
|-------------------|---|---|---|
| Realigning | Foregoing past self to embrace local gendered demands fully. | <i>Zooming in:</i> The past is positioned as a different chapter, which fosters a sense of longing, yet accepting family priorities is more important. | <i>Backgrounding:</i> Focuses on family roles, with entrepreneurial engagement serving as a supportive means therefor. |
| Resigning | Acquiescing to gendered demands and attributing work decisions to external powers (e.g. family, fate, luck). | <i>Zooming out:</i> Past employment and current self-employment are perceived as consistently unfulfilling, thus emphasising a continual sense of disappointment. | <i>Backgrounding:</i> Perceives entrepreneurial role as externally assigned, with more emphasis on the obligation to fulfil family demands. |
| Reclaiming | Integrating aspects of a past working self that remained unattainable while fulfilling gendered expectations. | <i>Zooming in:</i> The past is positioned as a different chapter while improvements in current work are highlighted. | <i>Foregrounding:</i> Values the entrepreneurial role as an improved form of work. |
| Reforming | Building on past and present work and gendered norms to continuously improve the self. | <i>Zooming out:</i> Past and present experiences, both positive and negative, are perceived as contributing to current situation and personal growth. | <i>Foregrounding:</i> Views the entrepreneurial role as a part of a continuously developing identity, and as having been a goal all along. |

richer demonstration of our theorisation of each identity-pivoting strategy, we draw on established narrative research practices that use short stories or vignettes to help illustrate more clearly the identified processes and mechanisms at work (Bacq et al., 2023; Essers et al., 2013; Tomlinson and

Colgan, 2014). This approach enables us to move beyond isolated quotes and offer a more holistic and contextualised presentation of participant narratives. We also selected excerpts that we considered most representative to illustrate each identity-pivoting strategy and its mechanisms. While not every participant is quoted, all are represented across the four identity-pivoting strategies.

Identity-realigning by foregoing the past and embracing gendered demands

Vignette 1. Diah, a housewife with many certificates. Diah is a 48-year-old widow who runs a small home-based business selling snacks. Earlier, in 1993, Diah was one of the few from her region to be selected for work with a well-known technology company in Malaysia. She considers her young self to have been highly skilled and successful, and the generous salary she received also provided her with financial security:

Money flowed like water. After three years I was called by the Government of Malaysia. There was a letter that Ms. [Diah] – this was in the past though, now I do not have anything – they said I had too much income. Back then. Yes, it was true.

Diah left her job and returned to the village to get married. She and her husband ‘started from zero’ and engaged in various self-employment activities, such as teaching and farming, but their attempts remained unsuccessful. When their savings were depleted, Diah decided to engage in *merantau* as a caretaker for the elderly in Taiwan. This was a difficult decision for her, but she persisted for the sake of her family.

The first form of identity-pivoting we identified in our data is that of identity-realigning. Here, individuals construct their entrepreneurial identities by internalising local gendered demands into their sense of self and, thus, assimilating into the local social context. They fully embrace their role as a wife, mother, or daughter, whilst approaching self-employment as a means to fulfil family responsibilities. Past work experience tends to be described positively, with an emphasis on the successes and achievements of the past self, as exemplified by Tantri’s description of her time as a maid in Malaysia: ‘[My employer] said that I suited her. She did not want to find another maid, I do not know why. Because my employer treated the other maids differently.’ Present entrepreneurial activities, on the other hand, are viewed less favourably and individuals may perceive their small business as a failure, or as failing to develop as expected, thus resulting in a sense of unfulfillment.

Hence, a gap exists between an individual’s past (successful) wage labour and present (unsuccessful) self-employment. In response to this perceived gap, individuals distance themselves from the past: they *zoom in* on their current situation within the village and position the past as a separate, concluded chapter of their life. Present entrepreneurial work is juxtaposed with past waged work, yet the past does not serve as foundation for the present. This is further exemplified by Diah in the continuation of her self-narrative:

Vignette 1 [continued]. Upon her return from Taiwan, Diah started a small business selling homemade snacks. She decided to sell snacks that were unavailable in her village so as to avoid competition, but other sellers imitated her products and her customers vanished. Diah subsequently decided to cease actively producing snacks and, instead, to cook upon request. Nowadays, she considers her current situation to be fundamentally different from that of the past: ‘I have lived here for 30 years, as a mountain person. Even though I have many certificates, my skill is in being a housewife’. Diah admits that personally she would have preferred *merantau*, but she has opted to reject this as she is now a mother and believes her prime responsibility to

lie with her three daughters: ‘The main thing for me is guiding my children, guarding my children. It does not matter that I do not earn much. If I get more but my children are neglected, what then?’ She has therefore decided to remain self-employed despite the struggle, rather than risking her children’s development. She considers her successful work experience to be part of her past, while her current focus now lies on her family.

Local gendered expectations within which individuals are enmeshed are thus perceived as constraining in that they keep them away from their preferred (*merantau*) work. However, through identity-realigning, individuals are able to transform the perceived threat to their working self into an opportunity for developing a new, positive self, utilising local gendered expectations as a template for authoring a positive self-narrative. Engaging in entrepreneurship instead of *merantau* employment is framed as a form of sacrifice, through which individuals emphasise that they are good wives, mothers, or daughters. When positioned in the *background* of these self-narratives, their entrepreneurial role serves to ‘prove’ their commitment to family over personal work aspirations. Thirty-six-year-old Satya, for instance, engaged in *merantau* five times over a period of ten years, entrusting her parents with caring for her two children. When her husband no longer permitted her to *merantau* again to look after their now-teenaged son, Satya opened a grocery stall and focused on raising her children:

The main task is to take care of [my] husband and children. The main focus is the children. [. . .] I usually open the store very early in the morning, before the children wake up. Sometimes when I’m taking care of the children then my husband looks after the store. I told him to look after the store for a while. Later after the children go to school, then I take over.

Importantly, instead of trying to remove or escape from constraints, individuals here leverage gendered expectations as a resource in constructing their entrepreneurial identity. Through such identity-realigning individuals reaffirm their femininity by emphasising that they are good women who are willing to sacrifice their wish for wage labour and, instead, become entrepreneurs in service of their family.

Identity-resigning by acquiescing to gendered demands and attributing work decisions to others

Vignette 2. Fitri, accepting the path decided upon by fate. Fitri feels that luck has not been on her side. She first gained work experience when she went to Jakarta as a domestic worker as a 23-year-old. However, the decision to engage in *merantau* was not something she chose willingly: her family was heavily in debt, so she had ‘no other choice’ but to engage in *merantau* alongside her husband and leave their child in the care of grandparents. Later, Fitri sought work in Malaysia, where she hoped to earn a higher salary, yet her 2 years there were not crowned by success: ‘I wanted to try out my luck, but it was not my *rizq* (apportioned fortune or sustenance) yet, so the results were zero. Zero’.

Upon her return from Malaysia, Fitri experienced a period of ‘no activity, just being idle’. She saw online pictures of snacks being sold and decided to open a food stall at home. However, the launch of her business was complicated by competitor actions:

The other sellers were acting unfairly. Then I just gave up. My husband and in-laws said, ‘Just let it be, no need to continue’. [. . .] It was good before. I received much income. But then that. Oh well, maybe it is not my *rizq* yet.

The second form of identity-pivoting we identified is that of identity-resigning. Here, individuals withdraw from actively constructing a (new) positive sense of self and, instead, provide justification for choosing to remain in their current situation, thereby imbuing their self-narratives with a sense of stability and consistency. Self-employment is presented not as a choice rooted in personal motivation, but as a decision imposed upon them by others. It is also perceived as unsuccessful, largely due to difficulties in running a small business and the limited income that is generated. In contrast, stories involving *merantau* are generally filled with more agreeable events, even if the entire *merantau* work period is often considered a failure or disappointment based on its outcome, such as its premature cessation or, as in the case of Fitri, their unmet saving goals.

Identity-resigning was mostly used by individuals who experienced a greater degree of gendered constraints. These constraints were perceived as inescapable, as expressed by Siti when explaining why she opened a coffee stall in her village rather than continuing as a *merantau* domestic labourer: 'But what can I do if my husband does not allow me [to *merantau*]? If he does not give permission, then I do not dare to argue'. A strong sense of defeat suffuses these narratives, arising from the individual's acquiescence to gendered demands without further struggle, with self-employment being more permissible than *merantau* employment. However, the actions women take as entrepreneurs remain dependent on permission granted by their husbands or other family members. By using the strategy of *zooming out*, individuals focus on the continuity and consistencies that pertain between their past and present work; however, the continuity that is underscored throughout these self-narratives involves a sense of failure and unfulfillment. This is illustrated in the continuation of Fitri's self-narrative:

Vignette 2 [continued]. Now Fitri only occasionally sells snacks. When she expressed her wish to try selling her products online, she was prevented from doing so: 'There is something like online shop, but my husband has not given me permission yet, so what to do'. Fitri does not know what her husband's reasoning is, but she has chosen to comply with his decision: 'I do not know [why he refused]. I also want to have my own income, you know. Oh well, I just let it be'. When describing her emotions, Fitri says that it has been 'all black' throughout her work history. However, she wants to continue running her small business: 'If there is capital, I want to. *Insya Allah* (God willing)'.

Unlike identity-realigning, identity-resigning does not culminate in a new, positive sense of self based on family roles. Entrepreneurial roles are positioned in the *background* of self-narratives, yet they serve as a form of obedience. Moreover, individuals often draw on religious teachings on fate, destiny, and divine providence as narrative resources, thus attributing hardship to external factors, as illustrated in the following excerpt from Lestari, who currently sells vegetables as a way of helping her husband:

During the most difficult time, when I was at my worst, I felt that I wanted to go [abroad]. I don't know, even if not to [go] there, am I allowed to go to Jakarta to help my husband send my children to school? But what can I do, God did not give permission. Not allowed yet, maybe.

By assigning responsibility to powers beyond their control, individuals position themselves as victims, thereby protecting themselves from blame in light of the hardships they experience.

Identity-reclaiming by restoring the past working self and fulfilling gendered expectations

Vignette 3. Gema, convinced in continuing the family business. Gema runs a tea roastery jointly with her parents and brother after having inherited it from her mother. She was initially not interested

in continuing the tea roastery as she planned to engage in *merantau* for a majority of her life. She gained her first *merantau* experience as a domestic worker in Malaysia, in preparation for her ambition to work in the Middle East. However, upon returning home, her husband withheld his permission for her to engage in *merantau* again because he believed it to be bad for their child. Gema remained in the village but, when her husband went for *merantau* to Jakarta, she decided to join him, working there while their child remained in the village with her sister-in-law.

When visiting her home village during her free days, Gema occasionally helped out at her mother's tea roastery. Her parents attempted to convince her to stay, yet she refused because the work was too laborious and she wished to continue her *merantau*. Nevertheless, over time Gema discovered the satisfaction in running a small business:

I was not interested at first, not interested at all because I still wanted to *merantau*. Then when I thought about it, it was true. I mean, the income, I mean between working and having [one's] own business, when I thought about it, it is more useful to have [one's] own business. It is more of a blessing, they say.

The third form of identity-pivoting present in our data is that of identity-reclaiming. Here, an identity from the past is reconstructed around the new (and better) work context discovered by the individual through self-employment. This new type of work allows individuals to restore their past working selves whilst fulfilling their roles as a wife, mother, or daughter within the family. The narratives typically portray both *merantau* and post-*merantau* experiences in a positive light. When looking back to their past employment, individuals often recall the higher income and particular experiences they gained, neither of which pertain to their current work in the village. Nevertheless, individuals point to how self-employment also provides them with a novel work experience, which is more fulfilling as it allows them to be near their families. As highlighted by 40-year-old Turi, both *merantau* employment and her current self-employment in running a grocery stall provide personal satisfaction in their own right: 'The reason for being happy is different. Back then I could earn money but now I can be with family'.

A key characteristic of this self-narrative is that individuals do not always prefer self-employment over paid employment, with many initially having sought to continue working through *merantau* until family demands rendered this impossible. Having to choose between work or family and finally opting for the latter, these individuals experienced a significant shift in their preferences after discovering the advantages of self-employment. In constructing their self-narratives, such individuals *zoom in on* the present chapter of their lives as entrepreneurs and utilise past work experiences for comparison, emphasising their improved circumstances and way of life. Some experienced a change of heart after discovering the feasibility of working whilst being with their family, while others discovered the joy of running a business and realised that self-employment generated benefits which paid employment could not provide. In Gema's case, she experienced both:

Vignette 3 [continued]. Once she realised that satisfying work did not necessarily entail the need to engage in *merantau*, Gema finally decided to take over the tea roastery. She now feels more fulfilled due to her self-employment and expresses no desire to ever return to *merantau*:

Business is better. Because the main thing is that I can also take care of my child. We can also rest whenever. [. . .] With working, why does money always run out? With [my] own business, we can be more frugal because we feel the tiredness. With working [as a domestic worker] you just feel tired, tired, tired, but there is a difference. The main thing is that having a business is better.

The constraining effect of gendered expectations became evident early in the narratives, when individuals explained why they did not continue prior *merantau* employment although it was viewed positively. The constraints that pertained came to be regarded as negotiable: while individuals understood that they could not elude them, they succeeded in discovering an opportunity for maximising their personal development within the boundaries of self-employment. Ultimately, they no longer viewed their entrepreneurial and family roles as competing and their entrepreneurial role was now positioned in the *foreground* of their self-narratives. By focusing on those elements that had been absent during prior employment – including being with one's family, having a sense of ownership, or having autonomy over one's work – individuals construct a more fulfilling identity that is made possible only within the local context of the village. Forty-six-year-old Putri, for instance, wished to continue her *merantau* yet decided to return to her village because nobody was available to look after her child. She now runs a stall selling fried snacks and is pleased that she can generate an income whilst being near her family; furthermore, working in the village now also allows her to be part of a community once again:

I like both [*merantau* and post-*merantau* work]. But when I was in Jakarta, in Jakarta I only worked, not like in the village, where I join celebrations, visit someone who is sick. [. . .] Well, when I think about it, it is better at home. The [income] is not overflowing but it is better at home, it is enough being at home.

Identity-reforming by building on past and present work and gendered norms

Vignette 4. Mudita, developing a business for the local community. Mudita worked as a caretaker of children in Jakarta when she was 17. Initially, her parents did not permit her to go as it was customary for parents to engage in *merantau* for economic reasons, rather than for their children to do so. However, Mudita insisted, claiming that she wanted to engage in *merantau* not for money but to learn and gain experience. After working in Jakarta for one year, she returned home and joined an embroidery course in preparation for her self-employment:

Yes, they [*merantau* domestic workers] are successful but I do not want to be like that. I want to be here, to develop myself here. To do some kind of business. If we look at the money, whether it is enough or not depends on the heart. I mean, even when you get a lot you can still feel it is not enough. From the beginning I already said I would not want to be in Jakarta all the time.

Mudita explains how the child-rearing skills she gained through *merantau* helped her to be a good mother even while running her embroidery business. She also mentions how she wants to offer free embroidery classes for women returning from *merantau*, but that nobody is interested as most women in her village are 'addicted to *merantau*'.

The final form of identity-pivoting we identified is that of identity-reforming. Here, individuals maintain that which they have obtained through prior work and proceed to build thereon within the local sociocultural context. When unanticipated events occur during their journey, individuals recalibrate their goals to maintain continuity and a sense of purpose, thus allowing them to reform their identity and ensure continued progress. The notion of 'growth', therefore, forms the heart of these narratives, and stories are constructed in a way that shows how one event contributes to the next. Frequently, individuals further highlight personal characteristics that endured the transition from paid employment to self-employment and which have allowed them to maintain continuity despite changes in work and family contexts. This is illustrated well by 43-year-old Sari:

Me, I like all jobs. The main thing for me is that I earn money, I do not have debts here and there. Full stop, that is me. If I am healthy then I must work. Whatever the job, for me it is like that since the beginning.

A key theme in these self-narratives is how past and present forms of employment imbue individuals with skills and experiences that contribute to who they are now and who they wish to become in the future. Individuals *zoom out* and appreciate earlier employment as a stepping-stone on the path to their current entrepreneurial engagement. Endang, for instance, worked abroad through *merantau* three times to generate sufficient savings for starting a small business: ‘If you work then it has to be for business later, right? [The reason] we go abroad is so that we do not have to always be a domestic worker, not always working for someone. It is tiring’. She now runs an online clothing business that allows her to ‘just reap [the income]. That is the nice thing, it is not tiring’. Others view *merantau* as an opportunity for learning and acquiring new skills, as noted by Kemala: ‘My employer there also had a business, so I learned. [Afterwards] I decided to quit and started my own business at home’. This narrative strategy thus allows individuals to create continuity between their various work contexts.

A distinctive feature of identity-reforming is that this form of pivoting is generally adopted by individuals who had already planned to quit *merantau* and remained in their village of their own accord. They considered paid domestic work to be temporary in nature, upon which they would eventually return to the village to start a business. For this reason, this narrative strategy is the least commonly used, as most transitions from paid employment to entrepreneurship are due to family demands. In constructing their self-narratives, individuals *foreground* their entrepreneurial role, claiming that it had always been part of their personal ambitions in life even if not all who pursued identity-reforming considered themselves as successful in running their small businesses. Nevertheless, a key characteristic of these self-narratives lies in their strong orientation towards the future, framing both positive and negative events as pathways leading to a better future. This is evident in how Mudita envisions the future of her small business:

Vignette 4 [continued]. In addition to her embroidery, Mudita recently started producing handicrafts made from plastic waste, which she prefers over embroidery because it allows her to be creative. Her goal for the future is to develop her newly discovered interest into an activity for local women, and she now once again offers this as an alternative to *merantau*. She also dreams of her idea spreading to other villages so as to help reduce plastic waste. Hence, she is in the process of developing her skills not in order to earn more money but, instead, to support her personal ambition of benefiting her community:

I want that in the future young mothers, or at least those who *merantau*, do not have to go again. Just do this [waste handicrafts]. You can also work at home if you want. [. . .] Yes, it is more of a personal satisfaction. I am happier even though the money is not so much.

Discussion

By examining the self-narratives of former *merantau* domestic workers who transitioned to self-employment in rural Indonesia, our findings reveal how past paid employment and present self-employment are negotiated in relation to local sociocultural norms through different forms of identity-pivoting (realigning, resigning, reclaiming, and reforming). Underlying these forms are the narrative mechanisms of zooming and grounding, demonstrating how entrepreneurial identity

construction is informed by other roles and experiences that extend beyond the business aspects of current entrepreneurial work.

Through the narrative process of ‘zooming’, our findings show how entrepreneurial identity construction builds on work-related gains generated through prior work. Notably, the forms of experience deemed relevant for present entrepreneurial work among women entrepreneurs in our study differ from those in prior studies focused on former managers and professionals. For some in our context, previous work experiences, such as assisting in their previous employer’s business (as in Kemala’s case), directly inform their entrepreneurial work. However, for others, everyday skills developed through caregiving or domestic roles, such as childrearing skills acquired by working as a nanny (as in Mudita’s case) also prove valuable. Therefore, the transferability of previously acquired knowledge and skills is not influenced solely by how well past employment is perceived to align with current self-employment (Kacperczyk and Younkin, 2017; Marlow and McAdam, 2015), but also by the informal and often overlooked domains of everyday life.

Further, the narrative process of ‘zooming’ also reflects on the relationship between past work and family dynamics. For instance, when constructing their entrepreneurial identities, the women entrepreneurs in our study reflected on whether the financial gains from prior employment justified temporarily forsaking their non-monetary caregiving responsibilities. When the gap between experiences in their past and present work is too significant for reconciling the two work contexts, individuals strategically disconnect from the past by ‘zooming in’. This strategy becomes evident in identity-reclaiming, where an individual leverages the novelty of their current experiences as an entrepreneur to construct their self-narrative. Similarly, in identity-realigning individuals largely leverage their current role and responsibility as a wife, mother, or daughter. In both instances, the past is mainly used as a foil for self-comparison, in that the current entrepreneurial self is juxtaposed with a past working self (Obodaru, 2012). Therefore, while the past is not directly utilised by individuals as a narrative resource to define who they are in the present, it does enable them to redefine themselves. The focus in ‘zooming out’, on the other hand, lies rather on consistencies that pertain between past and present experiences, thereby resulting in a more active construction of a (positive) entrepreneurial identity through identity-reforming, or culminating in withdrawal through identity-resigning. By zooming out, individuals allow their present entrepreneurial identity to unfold gradually over time as they utilise the past as a resource to define who they are in the present.

Our findings also demonstrate how women can strategically navigate gendered expectations to construct a preferred identity, generate a sense of belonging, and acquire legitimacy, reflecting prior studies (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Stead, 2017; Swail and Marlow, 2018; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2021). However, we find that, instead of solely emphasising those masculine qualities traditionally associated with entrepreneurship (Marlow and McAdam, 2015), women may assert their entrepreneurial identity by deliberately embracing their femininity. The women entrepreneurs in our study integrate roles that are perceived as legitimate (such as being a mother and wife) and constrained (such as being an entrepreneur and income earner) within their local context by means of the narrative process of ‘grounding’. Here, our research data suggest the use of a ‘backgrounding’ strategy in identity-resigning and identity-realigning, where an individual pivots their identity to converge on their role as a wife, mother, or daughter. In such narratives, entrepreneurial engagement is perceived as either supporting or undermining these family roles. Meanwhile, we identified the use of a ‘foregrounding’ strategy in identity-reclaiming and identity-reforming, where the focal point of self-narratives comes to rest on being an entrepreneur and embarking on entrepreneurial activities within the community. Here, family roles remain important yet serve primarily as contextual backdrops to an individual’s entrepreneurial engagement.

Based on these findings, we argue that this grounding mechanism serves as a means for affirming and/or challenging locally established norms on the roles that women are to fulfil within their families and local communities. By leveraging this narrative strategy, entrepreneurs construct identities that generate a sense of authenticity whilst precluding disapproval (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2016). In our research context of rural Indonesia, the family wields considerable disciplinary power in shaping what is most significant for women: namely, whether they are good wives, mothers, or daughters who act in line with their *kodrat* (natural disposition). Both Javanese cultural values and conservative Islamic teachings enforce gendered hierarchies in the family. Our data show how these concomitant family dynamics significantly influence women's entrepreneurial endeavours as women are often required to seek approval from their husbands or parents before engaging in work that deviates from conventional caregiving responsibilities. These norms situate family roles at the core, even when women work as paid domestic labourers beyond the village. As a consequence, women are compelled to emphasise their femininity in their entrepreneurial efforts to ensure the family's support of their work. This, then, suggests an alternative meaning of entrepreneurship that differs from the one prescribed by the predominantly masculine model (Hamilton, 2013). Instead, entrepreneurship is simultaneously feminine in its caregiving-supporting nature and masculine in its income-generating aspect, allowing women to support the everyday functioning of the family while sharing the role of 'breadwinner' with their husbands. We therefore suggest that entrepreneurship offers women new ways to engage with and express their gender identities.

Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that our study has limitations, which also offer potential avenues for future research. Although our qualitative study does not aim at generalisation, our empirical focus on rural Central Java, Indonesia raises the question of how our findings could fit other contexts. Gendered, patriarchal sociocultural norms manifest differently across contexts (Tlaiss, 2013; Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021) and individual's responses are also shaped by their economic environments (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Tillmar et al., 2022). We therefore encourage future comparative work across different socio-economic and cultural contexts, particularly in other settings where strong relational expectations and economic necessity shape women's entrepreneurial experiences, such as among economically disadvantaged women in Western countries or patriarchal communities. Further, while our cross-sectional data allows us to understand how women entrepreneurs in our context make sense of their past and ongoing entrepreneurial transition, a longitudinal research design would further explore how these identities evolve over time. Including perspectives from other community members or support actors could capture the broader dynamics of doing gender while engaging in entrepreneurship within a particular context.

Implications and conclusion

Our study examines the narratives of women entrepreneurs who transitioned from paid domestic work to self-employment. In doing so, we expand on the literature on entrepreneurial identity construction by delineating various identity-pivoting strategies (realigning, resigning, reclaiming, and reforming), which are informed not only by current entrepreneurial experiences (Cardon et al., 2009; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Gruber and MacMillan, 2017) but are also shaped by prior work experiences and the ongoing negotiation of gendered expectations. In business venturing, both entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms often pivot, or reorient, their strategies when confronted with new or conflicting insights and/or beliefs (Grimes, 2018; Kirtley and O'Mahony, 2023). Through identity-pivoting, we argue that a similar process occurs in entrepreneurial identity

construction upon transition from paid employment, as individuals encounter new and sometimes conflicting demands and expectations related to their new entrepreneurial role (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Warren, 2004). Building on this, our study proffers the following contributions.

We contribute to existing literature on identity construction following entrepreneurial transitions (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010) by demonstrating the pivotal role of family and community norms in shaping how entrepreneurs interpret both their past and present work experiences as part of their evolving self-concept. In line with calls for a broader understanding of entrepreneurial identity construction (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021) following work transitions (Sullivan and Ariss, 2021), we show how the process of entrepreneurial identity construction upon transition from employment to entrepreneurship is deeply influenced by the dynamic between entrepreneurs and the sociocultural structures in which they are embedded. Our findings also extend prior research that has highlighted how individuals often craft narratives of professional self-discovery or development upon transitioning to entrepreneurship (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012; Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014; Warren, 2004). We show that, in the context of our study, such discovery involves more than merely uncovering a latent capacity for entrepreneurship in that it also reflects a renewed dedication to family. This suggests that rather than necessarily undergoing an identity change or the construction of a completely new work or professional identity upon starting and/or running a new venture (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011), individuals may instead reinforce pre-existing non-work identities. Furthermore, we suggest that career transitions undertaken voluntarily – that is, those not triggered by external disruptions such as layoffs, illness, or accidents (Burcharth et al., 2022; Haynie and Shepherd, 2011) – need not always result in a positively framed entrepreneurial identity. This becomes evident when considering the role played by gender dynamics, thereby reinforcing the importance of concretely situating entrepreneurial identity construction following such transitions.

In addition, our study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how gendered norms are negotiated in entrepreneurial identity construction. Despite operating within established norms and expectations, our findings reveal that women entrepreneurs are not without agency, as they modify the parameters that define who they are and adopt a range of ways to appropriate local sociocultural norms (Barragan et al., 2018; Ginting-Carlström and Chliova, 2023; Tillmar et al., 2022). Some individuals, rather than openly resisting patriarchal norms, shaped their identities largely in accordance with these social expectations, either by *realigning* their identity to relinquish their established self and assimilate into the local context; or by *resigning* from actively (re)constructing their sense of self and accepting their fate. In contrast, others saw their return to the local community as an opportunity for identity transformation and growth. This allowed them to construct an entrepreneurial identity that blended work-related aspects of the self as well as family roles to *reclaim* the established self that had been lost upon their return, or to *reform* it in a way that embraced the prior growth and progress they had experienced. While our findings do not dismiss the potential benefits of entrepreneurship, they do serve to highlight ‘the contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities and tensions at the heart of “entrepreneurship”’ (Verduijn and Essers, 2013: 627). Further, efforts to challenge gender structures in rural contexts may paradoxically require reinforcing certain aspects of those very structures, thereby embedding women more deeply within the local context (Roos, 2018). In light of this, we underscore the importance of critically assessing taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding entrepreneurial engagement.

Considering the prevalence of impoverished women opting for entrepreneurship, our findings provide practical implications for organisations and policy makers aiming to support women entrepreneurship in rural regions. Many development agencies and NGOs often adopt a makeover approach, aiming to transform impoverished women into socially accepted subjects by providing help in improving personal and financial capabilities (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). Our work highlights

the importance of understanding local sociocultural norms embedded in the family and community, and customising interventions to fit with the local context instead of a one-size-fits-all approach based on mainstream Western conceptions of entrepreneurship. Promoting sustainable entrepreneurial endeavours would require understanding the situated meanings of entrepreneurship in the particular community and working *with* the existing social structures (Roos, 2018), recognising caregiving responsibilities and relational dimensions of work and entrepreneurship in impoverished contexts. For instance, entrepreneurship can be framed within the dominant cultural and religious discourses, such as introducing the Prophet's wife Khadija as a role model of a successful woman entrepreneur (Essers and Benschop, 2009; Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021), or by collaborating with local women's religious organisations to advocate a feminist interpretation of a harmonious family (*keluarga sakinah*) built on equality and justice between husband and wife (Wieringa, 2015). Importantly, it is crucial to assess whether entrepreneurship is a good option for women in a particular sociocultural context, or if other work alternatives might better achieve the goals envisioned by supporting organisations.

To conclude, our study demonstrates how entrepreneurial identity upon transition from waged employment to entrepreneurship is contextually constructed within and against local sociocultural structures. Our findings emphasise the situated and gendered nature of entrepreneurial transitions, highlighting how family and community dynamics often play a more central role in shaping the identities of entrepreneurs than business aspects of the work. By introducing the different forms of identity-pivoting, we provide deeper insight into how women entrepreneurs are able to respond differently to the gendered expectations around both income-generating work as well as unpaid care work. We hope this study encourages further empirical exploration into the complex, gendered interplay between past employment and self-employment, particularly in economically constrained contexts.

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Author contributions

Bernadetta Aloina Ginting-Szczesny: research idea and design; theoretical framing and literature review; data collection; data analysis and discussion of findings; overall research narrative and presentation.

Ewald Kibler: theoretical framing and literature review; initial analysis and discussion of findings; overall research narrative and presentation.

Ulla Hytti: theoretical framing and literature review; discussion of findings; overall research narrative and presentation.

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Ethical considerations

All research activities complied with the Finnish guidelines for research ethics and integrity and adhered to the legal requirements of the study country.

Consent to participate

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating.

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Data availability

The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Note

1. In 2017, 36% of the 9 million Indonesians working overseas were women domestic labourers in Southeast Asian, East Asian, and Middle Eastern countries, an estimated 16% of whom originated from Central Java (World Bank, 2017). Within Indonesia, the estimated number of domestic workers ranges between 4 million (Suhaimi and Farid, 2018) and 10 million (Sisters for Change and JALA PRT, 2018), 75% of whom were women and 15% were located in Central Java (Suhaimi and Farid, 2018). In their study of women domestic workers in Java, Sisters for Change and JALA PRT (2018) estimate that around 54% were born in rural areas and live at an average of 176 km from their home villages.

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