

A qualitative exploration of managerial mothers' flexible careers: the role of multiple contexts

Abstract

This study explores the lived career experiences of women managers with children in Sweden. Drawing on existing theory on flexible careers which proposes that multiple contexts – institutional, organizational and individual - shape employees' career decisions, we present findings from a study of 34 career mothers in dual-income households within a large engineering company in Sweden. We show that the institutional context in Sweden, with its shared parental leave, is an important element in the women's career decisions by directly mandating the fathers' engagement with childcare and home roles and indirectly fostering a family-supportive organizational culture. We theorize that the family context needs to be incorporated into existing theoretical models and specifically demonstrate how continuing shared childcare roles between the parents is critical to mothers' career outcomes. We evidence the various ways in which fathers engage with home responsibilities and how that influences the mothers' career decisions. Furthermore, we argue that the institutional environment has consequences which cascade down to each of the other contextual levels and that the importance of the different contexts can vary according to the work-care regime. We therefore challenge recent research which claims that the industry ecosystem is the crucial force in shaping women's careers.

Keywords: flexible careers, women managers, institutional environment, organizational dynamics, family context, industry ecosystem

1 Introduction

Women continue to face barriers in sustaining career progression and achieving senior leadership positions. One enduring obstacle is the persistent gendered division of domestic labour (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015). Across the EU, 92% of women provide unpaid care

several days a week compared to only 68% of men (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). However, there is considerable variation across countries; a more equal division of domestic roles between mothers and fathers has been found in countries where institutional policies promote fathers' involvement in home and care roles (Hook 2010) and encourage fathers to reduce their working hours (Bünning & Pollmann-Schult, 2016). Highly educated fathers are more involved at home as they are more likely to hold egalitarian beliefs about the division of paid work and care (Ma, et al., 2018).

The gendered division of home roles can result in career compromises or interruptions (Lewis & Humbert, 2010) or use of various flexible working arrangements (FWAs) all of which can threaten women's career sustainability and further advancement. FWAs are offered by organizations as a means of reconciling career and family, thereby contributing to women's career sustainability. However, their potential benefits can be undermined as utilizing FWAs deviates from ideal worker norms and may result in career penalties in the form of low commitment attributions (Leslie et al., 2012). Therefore, individual career decisions are not unencumbered choices (Kossek et al., 2021) and opportunities can be constrained by contexts in which they are enacted (Kossek, et al., 2017). Career scholars have called for and proposed various conceptual approaches in the study of career to shift from an uncontextualized focus on the individual career actor to a connectedness between individuals and their contexts. For example, a relational approach recognizes that career development is shaped by relationships with multiple contextual actors (Blustein et al., 2004). A systemic approach takes a broader perspective by looking at how these relationships are embedded within complex and interacting systems (e.g. McMahon & Patton, 2017; Young & Collin, 2004). While recognizing that prior studies have advanced understanding and prompted a multitude of studies on women's barriers in advancing to leadership positions including the gendered caregiving responsibilities at home (Schultheiss, 2021), much of the research focuses on particular individual or organizational

determinants relevant to women's paid work experiences (Flores et al., 2021; Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014) and often ignores unpaid work at home (Schultheiss, 2009). A much stronger focus on context which could facilitate the integration of person-level with organizational-level and social-level influences in the study of women's career development is a common theme for future research amongst papers on women and work in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (Fouad, 2021). This is in line with Kossek et al.'s (2021, p. 14) contention that careers and work-family experiences are influenced by "... dyadic, group, occupational, organizational, and societal/cultural processes" and that future studies need to examine how institutional level and organizational resources (e.g., FWAs) can support employees' work-family and career, protecting their wellbeing.

Recent studies on flexible and sustainable careers call for the inclusion of both individual and contextual elements which can influence sustainability of a career as individuals' needs change over time and across the different life stages (De Vos et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2018). Specifically, Tomlinson et al.'s (2018) model proposes that career decisions to suit employees' shifting needs across the life course are embedded in the institutional environments and organizational contexts in which they occur. Institutional environment (or context) encompasses both the structural aspect regulating work, welfare, and care, and the cultural aspect e.g. normative expectations on behaviour of working women and men after childbirth. Organizational dynamics (or context) refers to organizational policies, practices and culture including managerial agency regarding employee access to flexibility and career consequences of utilization. An institutional environment which values gender equality (for example) may adopt public policies to facilitate work and care (Vinkenburg et al., 2015). This, in turn, may affect the organizational dynamics by inducing a positive attitude by line managers (decision makers) and organizations to actively encourage the use of FWAs and protect employees from career penalties associated with reduced commitment. It may also be

the case that when a specific institutional environment, through its legal structures, helps working parents' continued employment (Pettit & Hook, 2005), there is less need for organizations to offer an extensive range of FWAs. The opposite will hold true in liberal market economies which are less likely to have public policies to support working parents (Lyonette et al., 2011); in such cases FWAs are employer-driven based on market forces (Kossek et al., 2010). Therefore, the institutional environment can influence organizational dynamics, which in turn can increase or constrain employee agency to craft flexible careers to suit their changing needs through life. More recently, Cooper et al. (2020) in their study of women in investment banking, argued for the inclusion of the industry ecosystem (industry-specific structures, norms and practices) as a further level in Tomlinson et al.'s (2018) model.

This qualitative study conducted within a large engineering company (EngCo) in Sweden, explores how women with children in dual-income households sustained their managerial careers. Drawing on Tomlinson et al.'s (2018) flexible and sustainable career determinants model (extended by Cooper et al., 2020), our study responds to calls to explore both individual and contextual elements which can influence career decisions and sustainability over time. We focus on these managerial mothers' lived career experiences over time and while raising children.

The next section positions our theoretical interest in the field of flexible and sustainable career determinants focusing on the intersection between the work-family interface and women's career decisions. We then discuss the Swedish institutional environment and introduce the specific industry ecosystem and organization. We outline our qualitative methodology using interviews with 34 women managers from dual-income households and present our analysis and findings. We conclude with implications for policy and practice, limitations and directions for future research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Women's careers and the work-family interface

Managing work and family affects women's career experiences differentially than men's, as gendered roles and contextual factors impose strong expectations on mothers regarding their career decisions and how they combine work and care (Allen et al., 2016) albeit with significant variation across national contexts (Grönlund, 2020). Incorporating family responsibilities in career decisions often translates into mothers rather than fathers scaling back on their career to manage both domains (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Women often turn to various types of FWAs including switching to part-time work (Tomlinson & Durbin, 2010), or exit middle to senior management positions, or forego further promotion opportunities if those hinder their ability to achieve a work-family fit; such strategies in turn constrain their career advancement (Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). A more equal share of fathers' involvement with childcare however, was found to buffer Swedish mothers' stress and subsequent tendency to adapt their work hours in order to spend time with their children and shorten their day-care hours (Grönlund & Öun, 2020).

Contemporary career models have emerged to reflect the notion that employees, rather than being committed to a single organization for most of their lives, pursue alternative career paths within their organization, move to other organizations, or become self-employed for career development and more independence in managing their work-family interface according to their values and goals (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Powell et al., 2019). However these models such as the boundaryless career (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994) and the protean career (Hall, 2004) place emphasis on individuals to self-craft their careers and do not explicitly acknowledge how context, i.e. institutional environment and organizational dynamics, influence one's agency for career formation and mobility over the life course (Tomlinson et al., 2018). Career compromises (e.g. decisions to switch to part-time work or exit a career to

accommodate work-family demands) are often discussed in the context of choice, ignoring the constraining factors which limit agency in deciding according to one's preferences (Anderson et al., 2010). Presenting a career decision which may ultimately lead to compromising further career advancement as "choice" not only obscures the obstacles and constraints which bound a woman's decision to change her working pattern, but also removes responsibility from organizations and societies to implement policies which support gender equality in work and care, and prevents a shift from the prevailing norm that having career and spending time with family is an either/or proposition (Fernandez-Mateo & Kaplan, 2018).

2.2 Understanding flexible and sustainable careers

The more recent theoretical concepts of flexible and/or sustainable careers recognize the influence of context on career and refer to protecting and fostering career development without depleting employee well-being, just as sustainability of environmental resources refers to resources being used without being depleted (Pfeffer, 2011), with a focus on renewal and balance (Kossek et al., 2014; Newman, 2011). These concepts link employee work-home balance and well-being to careers over the course of employees' working lives, enabling them to perform well over time while also thriving in their personal and family lives; this benefits both employees and organizations (Herman & Lewis, 2012; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). The flexible and sustainable career concepts encompass multiple and overlapping definitions (for example see, De Vos et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2018), with flexibility to manage the work-family interface included either implicitly or explicitly and depicted in various ways such as work-family balance (De Hauw & Greenhaus, 2015) and work-life fit (Valcour, 2015). These implicit and explicit references foreground the importance of fit between career and other life roles (Vinkenburg et al., 2015), highlighting the essential element of flexibility to manage the work-family interface with career sustainability. This link between flexibility and sustainable careers has been implied by an earlier study (Moen & Sweet, 2004) which

introduced the concept of flexible careers across the life course, critiquing traditional career structures which value long-hours and place employee wellbeing at risk. Such structures threaten career sustainability. Tomlinson et al. (2018) link the concepts of flexible and sustainable careers with their model of flexible career determinants, calling for studies to incorporate the influence of multiple contexts on employee agency in crafting flexible and sustainable careers to suit their needs as those change through the life course. Their model (Figure 1) emphasizes the embedded nature of careers within gendered occupational and labour market regimes and suggests the interaction between the institutional environment and organizational dynamics which affects the capacity of individuals to develop flexible and sustainable careers that meet their needs and preferences as those change over their life course.

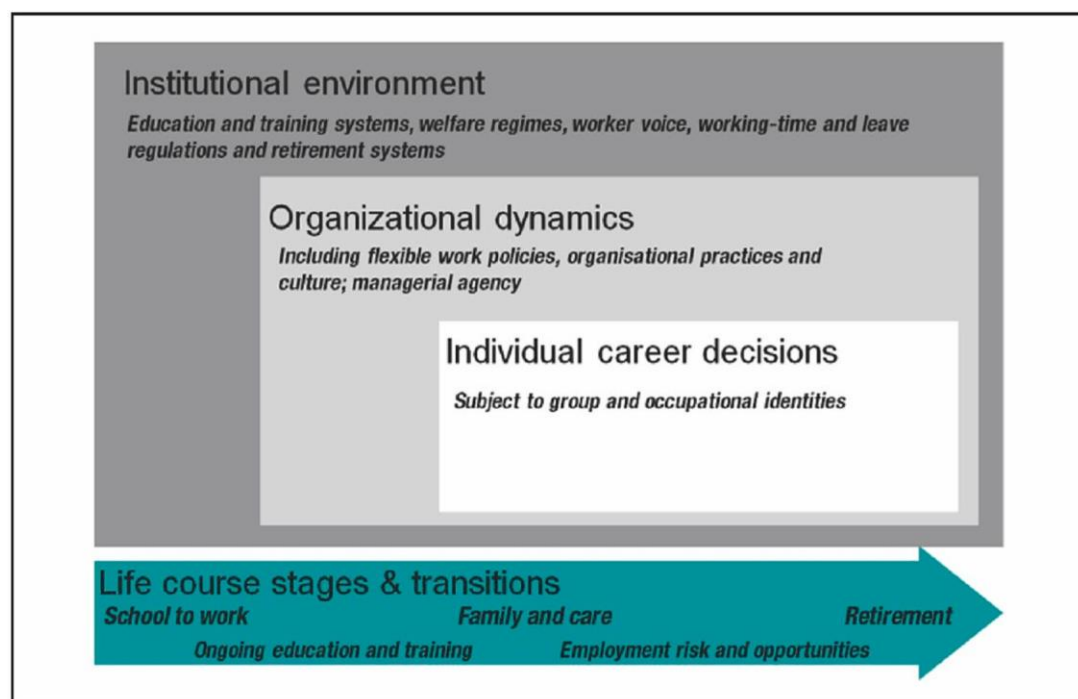


Fig. 1. Determinants of a flexible career
Note: From Tomlinson et al. (2018).

Extending Tomlinson et al.'s (2018) model, Cooper et al. (2020) argued that the industry ecosystem, comprised of industry-specific structures, norms and practices should be added to the original model and assert that it is, in fact, the most critical force producing

women's under-representation, marginalization and lack of progression in investment banking (Figure 2).

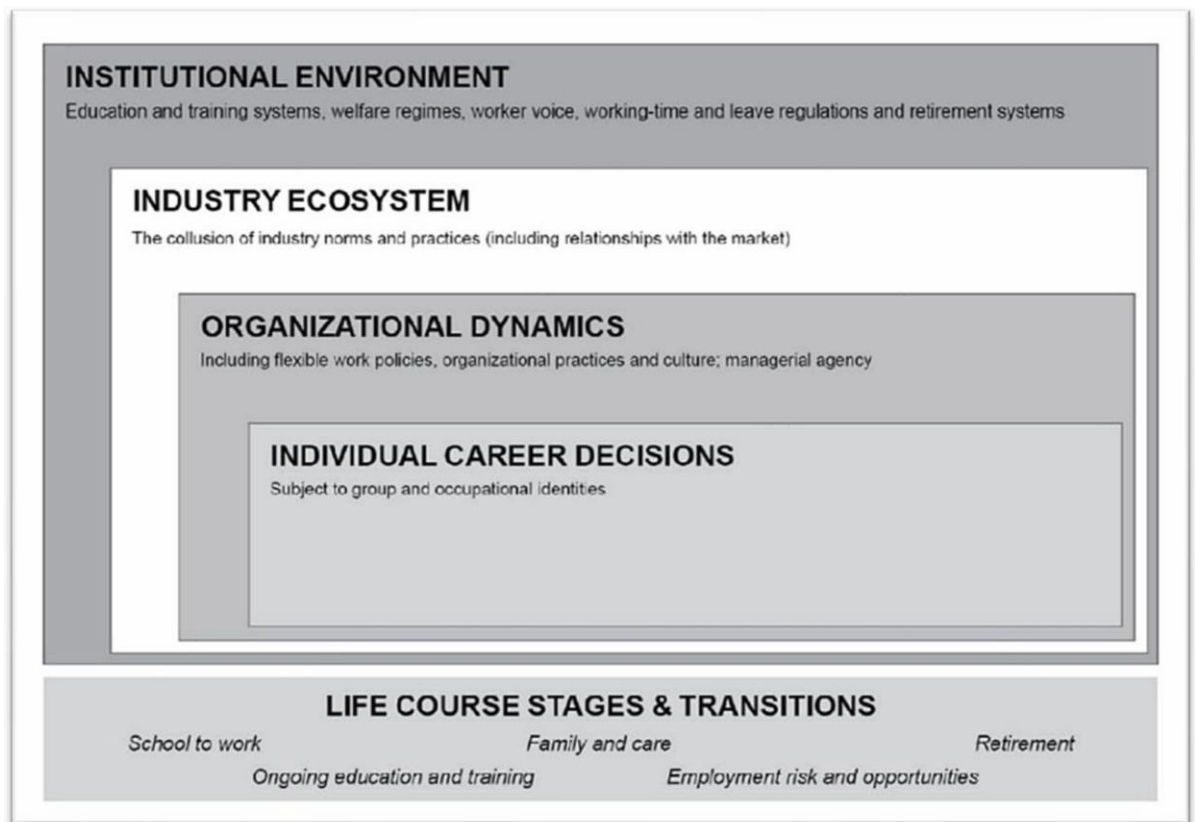


Fig. 2. Determinants of a flexible career.

Note: From Cooper et al. (2021).

2.3 Institutional environment: Sweden

Research shows that institutional policies such as publicly funded day-care fosters mothers' continued employment (Pettit & Hook, 2005), yet, EU countries have differing norms about combining working and parenting. Returning to work after childbirth is more challenging for women in liberal market economies such as the UK, with high day-care costs and where almost half (48.6%) of employed women with children work part-time (Eurostat, 2018). Flexibility in the form of part-time work or reduced load can often result in career penalties of reduced advancement opportunities and income (Kossek et al., 2017). In contrast, in institutional environments with more generous support, fewer women work part-time; in Sweden for example, only 29.2% of employed women with children work part-time (Eurostat,

2018). Therefore, a much larger share of women continues to be engaged in their career after having children due to support from national structures in terms of shared parental leave and highly-subsidised day-care from the age of one.

We chose Sweden as the context of this study, being the most gender equal country in the EU (EIGE, 2020). The Gender Equality Index (GEI) measures the achievement of gender equality in six domains: work, power, time, money, knowledge, and health. The higher the value of the index, the lower the inequality. The EU-28 average GEI stands at 67.9 out of 100, while Sweden ranks first overall with 83.8 points. Of particular relevance to gender equality in career opportunities are the domain of work (includes measures of opportunities available to women and men to have stable careers, quality of work in terms of flexible working, and the ability to reconcile work and private life) and the time domain (allocation of time to care, domestic work and social activities). Sweden's overall score for gender equality in time spent on care, domestic work and social activities is 90.9 indicating a very high involvement of men in home and care-giving roles compared to a much lower EU-28 score of 70 (EIGE, 2020). Shared parental leave provides each set of parents with 480 days of paid leave per child, which can be taken until the child's eighth birthday. Men now claim about 30% of total parental leave taken (Sweden 2021). Parental leave secures employees' right to take leave and the right to return to their position (or another position at the same organizational level). The Parental Leave Act, amended in 2016, added a three-month exclusive leave clause for each parent to encourage fathers to exercise the right to take leave and foster a culture change in employer attitudes. If untaken, the three months are deducted from the total leave entitlement.

2.4 The industry ecosystem

The science, technology, engineering and mathematics ecosystem (STEM) is renowned for its low representation of women, particularly at senior levels (Herman et al., 2013). Gendered organizational practices such as ideal worker expectations can push mothers out of

their careers even when FWAs are offered, due to underlying assumptions of low commitment to their work (Lewis & Humbert, 2010). Lack of workplace social support in terms of career development opportunities, and family responsibilities with attached flexibility stigmas have been identified as key factors contributing to women's attrition from engineering careers (Fouad et al., 2016). Usage of FWAs and leaves in male-dominated organizations and sectors have been found to strengthen gendered perceptions about mothers' careers being incompatible with family (Kalysh et al., 2016).

3 Method

3.1 Research design overview

The results reported here are drawn from a wider case study designed to examine the role of FWAs in the careers of women managers. In this paper we qualitatively explore the lived career experiences of 34 managerial mothers in the sample who were in dual-income couples in order to understand how they sustained their flexible careers while raising their children. We draw on phenomenology, the study of experience which stipulates that "it is through our lived experience of the world that we can engage with that world and come to know about it" (Holt & Sandberg, 2011, p. 218). We interrogate the data from semi-structured interviews focusing on how the women experienced and construed their flexible careers i.e. their subjective meanings of their lived experiences. Through our interpretation, we provide a common understanding of their career experiences and in turn their career decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and how these have been influenced by the contexts in which they were embedded (Holt & Sandberg, 2011). This approach is in line with our interpretivist epistemology and constructionist ontology which stipulates that person and world are inextricably related through persons' lived experience of the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Cohen et al., 2004). The participants' lived career experiences (including their use of FWAs) have been socially constructed through their interaction with people who influence their career,

i.e. organization, family, and society, over time and space. The focus is on what the women are thinking and feeling, and how they talk about it. The constructionism associated with this research lies in its emphasis on constructing meaning and interpretations based on those of the participants, and the events and people significant to their career experiences, challenging the taken-for-granted. The participants made sense of their experiences and interpreted their interactions and relationships via the medium of language within the interview (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

3.2 Researchers

The research team comprises the first author, a postdoctoral researcher with extensive senior HR management experience in several countries in Europe and the Middle East, executive interviewing experience and training in qualitative research methods including research interviews. The second and third authors are tenured academics with between 20 and 40 years of research experience respectively, who specialize in qualitative research including teaching qualitative methods at postgraduate level. Both the second and third authors have personal experience of interviewing as organizational psychology, organizational behavior management practitioners and through engaging with many professional women delivering executive development programmes. All authors are active in researching gender and leadership, women's careers and flexible working.

Confirmability in qualitative research requires us to show how we have minimised the likelihood of our values and biases influencing the findings of the research. We each reflected on, and then together discussed, our individual views regarding flexible careers, given our personal experiences as working mothers (all authors), and experienced academics in this field (second and third authors). We adopted a reflexive approach to the analysis, recognizing that our own perspectives will have inevitably shaped the selection of material to include or discard, to highlight or ignore. For example, the first author (first coder) reflected on her positive lived

experience of flexible working and expressed that this may cause her to focus on the positive aspect of working flexibly and overlook negative content. The second author (second coder) reflected on her expectation that flexible working can sometimes lead to work intensification and challenges in work-life boundary management. The third author and auditor considered that the reported family-friendly culture of EngCo, would be matched by creative and elaborate flexible working policies. Furthermore, we anticipated that women's career decisions may have been influenced by their home domain as supported by the literature (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). In order to elicit rich descriptions of what the participants perceived influential in their career decisions, we asked broad and open questions e.g. what they considered salient in a particular career transition and probed for supports and obstacles in those transitions as outlined further in the data analytic strategies.

The inductive process involved interpreting the data bottom-up: the codes were derived directly from the data and then applied to explore how managerial mothers sustained their careers. Aiming to minimize researcher bias influencing the data analysis, we constantly challenged and reviewed our initial expectations and interpretations of the data to provide rich and alternative viewpoints (Alvesson, 2003; Cunliffe, 2003). The first author documented the evolving interpretation of the data in a research diary and regularly briefed the team through email, shared documents and meetings in addition to the data analytic strategy presented below. We also presented the research at several academic conferences, therefore seeking the views of other experienced colleagues.

3.3 The organization and participant recruitment

EngCo was chosen as the research site because of its setting in Sweden, an egalitarian country, and a male-dominated industry sector (engineering), and with women represented at every managerial level. In addition, the company has a number of initiatives to improve gender equality, including increased flexibility, development programs and mentoring. EngCo has a

high profile in Sweden and is often portrayed in the media for its family-friendly culture. EngCo is therefore a particularly interesting organization to deepen understanding of managerial women's career experiences over time, and including their navigation of the period involving parenting. At the time of the interviews in 2018, women accounted for 25% of EngCo's employees in Sweden, 24% of management level positions (numbering 61 out of 256 managers) and 36% of board positions.

We gained access to EngCo after discussion with the VP Human Resources and the VP Operations, who explained EngCo's philosophy and objectives to improve gender equality. The researchers confirmed that confidentiality of all records would be maintained, and that the research design had been approved by the University Ethics Committee. Email invitations were then sent to all 61 women managers based in Sweden, emphasizing the voluntary nature of the study, and explaining that, as far as possible, any identifying details would be removed from reporting of accounts and specific quotes, in order to preserve confidentiality.

3.4 Participants

Forty-three out of the 61 women responded and were subsequently interviewed, including 34 women who had children and were part of a dual-income couple living with their partners/husbands. The latter form the sample for this paper and represented all levels of EngCo's managerial pipeline, ranging from Levels 2 to 6 (Level 1, the CEO position is currently held by a man) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of women and ages by organizational level

Level	Population of female managers	Sample's female managers	Age Range of Sample
2	3	2	49 to 55
3	9	9	42 to 53
4	24	8	39 to 53
5	16	12	38 to 50
6	9	3	32 to 58
–	61	34	–

EngCo's managerial pipeline is described in Table 2. The more senior positions within Levels 4 and 5 have bottom line responsibility as opposed to leading a support function.

Table 2: EngCo's managerial pipeline.

Managerial Pipeline	Levels	Examples of positions within levels
Senior	2	Division President, Executive VP (CEO's direct reports)
	3	Managing Director of Region or Product Line
Middle to Senior	4	Director of Function up to Director of Business Unit
Junior to Middle	5	Team Leader up to Department Head
Junior	6	First Line Manager Responsibility

All participants were university educated with 22 out of 34 having an MSc in Engineering or a related field. We interpret the high educational attainment of the participants and their husbands (also reported by the participants) as a proxy for high socioeconomic status (Bünning & Pollmann-Schult, 2016). Participants ranged in age between 38 and 55 ($M_{\text{age}} = 46.20$, $SD = 4.69$). They were all employed full-time and their tenure with EngCo ranged from 3 to 33 years ($M_{\text{tenure}} = 12.35$, $SD = 12.80$). An overview of all sample participants' characteristics in terms of managerial level, number and ages of children is presented in the Appendix. To further preserve confidentiality, the ages of the children were classified into five ranges: pre-school (1-6), lower school (7-13), middle school (14-16), upper school (17-19) and over 19. It should be noted that all but two of the line managers of participants were men.

3.5 Data collection

The interview questions were designed by the first and second authors. From our review of the literature (see Section 2 above) on women's careers and the work-family interface, flexible and sustainable careers, and the institutional and organizational environments we derived sensitizing concepts of career transitions, challenges and successes at work and home,

and engagement with FWAs, all within the context of work and family. Sensitizing concepts are interpretive devices giving a general sense of guidance and are therefore appropriate for use in exploratory research as a means of helping to explore and understand empirical instances (Bowen, 2006). Open questions were formulated, and probing questions or prompts were used to encourage the participants to expand upon their answers to provide a rich and detailed account of their experiences. For example, we asked, “Can you give me an example of an important career transition and how it has contributed to your success?” We listened and asked probing questions such as asking about who else played a role in this transition, any support or obstacles, and any perceived career consequences. These prompts encourage a full explanation of each of the transitions, and a consideration from different perspectives. The question was repeated to cover several career transitions. Through this technique, we were able to note what each individual considered salient, and where they placed emphasis. A further question was: “How do you see the relationship between flexible working and your career experiences?” and again probing questions were asked to encourage a rich account of the women’s perspectives. The final interview protocol was agreed after two pilot interviews were conducted, and the wording of the questions was adjusted to ensure clarity and relevance to the research aims. The pilot interviews were not part of the final data set. The interviews were conducted via Skype by the first author, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes at the end of which she recorded a synopsis of the main points, reflections about an important word or phrase said, and topics/issues to further explore. All conversations were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim.

3.6 Data analytic strategies

The transcripts and synopses were uploaded onto NVivo used to support a thematic approach to analysis (Ritchie et al., 2013). Analysis was an iterative process which involved both deductive and inductive reasoning (Walsh & Bartunek, 2011), moving towards a

conceptual understanding of the data. For example, using deductive reasoning, we drew on existing literature, and in particular, Tomlinson et al.'s (2018) determinants of a flexible career and Cooper et al.'s (2020) extended model, to formulate *a priori* initial codes regarding any institutional, industry, organizational and individual influences on the women's lived career experiences including their work-family interface. The inductive process involved interpreting the data bottom-up: the codes were derived directly from the data and then applied to explore how managerial mothers sustained their careers.

The first author began by reading and re-reading interview transcripts and the synopses of each person's account. The first and second authors independently coded the same first five interviews in order to begin the development of an initial list of codes from the data covering broad topic areas such as career post childbirth and salient actors which featured in their career stories (e.g. line managers). We subsequently discussed these lists in some depth, comparing coding, exploring interpretations and reaching agreement of themes to take forward. These themes were used as a basis for the remaining interview transcripts, which were coded by the first author. Weekly meetings with the second author involved discussion and debate about emergent themes, observing similarities and investigating differences, collapsing and combining nodes, or developing new hierarchical "tree" nodes. Using matrix queries in NVivo, we interrogated the data to explore connections between codes. As an example, we sorted the content on flexibility and different patterns and compared accessibility, utilization and whether it varied by managerial level, function, tenure and age of children. It emerged that flexibility was informal yet accessible and utilized across levels. We also revisited the literature to ascertain any application to existing theory, and to highlight any codes which were unique to our sample and context (such as the extensive day-to-day parenting which extends beyond the age of 14). We continued to review the codes as the list grew, making further comparisons and understanding any connections between concepts. Transcripts were revisited in these meetings

of first and second author to avoid omissions, ensure depth of understanding of concepts and to include a comprehensive range of examples from a number of data sources. During these iterations, the first author kept a research diary to document how the first and second author moved from initial forays to modified themes which was presented to the third author (auditor) through physical or virtual meetings (typically on a monthly basis). Having more distance from the data, the third author could bring a new and independent perspective to the analysis, e.g., how different patterns were emerging regarding the extent of husbands' involvement with the children. Through this process we were able to develop a nuanced understanding and explanation of the women's experiences of their careers while caring for their children across their different ages. At the end of this stage involving both inductive and deductive reasoning, we identified numerous themes, such as women's work experiences after childbirth and the salience of sharing parental leave with their husbands, the empathic support from their line managers and the continued active involvement of their husbands in caring for their children, which all related to an egalitarian family context. We noted this as an omission to the original model (Tomlinson et al, 2018).

3.7 Methodological integrity

Following this stage of coding and recoding, and to ensure appropriate academic rigour of the analysis, the third author acted as auditor, reading selected transcripts and sense checking the list of codes, their definitions, and connections between them, challenging us to ensure sufficient rich description and distinction between codes. This allowed us to demonstrate the dependability of the data; in addition to discussing confirmability in section 3.2 above, we also addressed a further two elements demonstrating trustworthiness of qualitative research, namely credibility, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To address credibility of our analysis we reverted to the participants to validate their constructed accounts. We have provided thick

descriptions of the contextual uniqueness of the study so that others can evaluate the transferability of findings to other contexts (Gioia, 2021).

Table 3 summarises the key themes and sub-themes emerging from the women's experiences with regard to the institutional environment, the industry ecosystem, the organizational dynamics and the family context. It also shows the number of instances in each sub-theme and its frequency of occurrence based on Hill et al.'s (2005) consensual qualitative research method. A label of 'general' is given to the sub-themes which include all or all but one of the participants; a label of 'typical' is assigned to the sub-themes applicable to more than half of the participants; a label of 'variant' is assigned to those with at least two and up to half of the participants.

Table 3: Core Themes, sub-themes, number of cases and frequency of occurrence.

Core themes	Sub-themes	Number of cases	Frequency of occurrence ^a
Institutional Environment	Shared parental leave	34	General
	Working after childbirth	34	General
The Industry Ecosystem	Gender barriers outside Sweden	5	Variant
	Demands of an engineering ecosystem	15	Variant
Organizational Dynamics	Informal of flexibility	34	General
	Appreciation of flexibility	34	General
	Empathic support by line managers for family roles	34	General
	Career support by line managers	34	General
Family context	Extent of husbands' involvement with childcare and household responsibilities	34	General

Core themes	Sub-themes	Number of cases	Frequency of occurrence ^a
	• Egalitarian homelife	22	Typical
	• Higher involvement of husbands	8	Variant
	• Husbands as primary carers	4	Variant
	Intensive day-to-day parenting until <i>children are 14+</i>	18	Typical

The narrative in the findings section expands on these themes and sub-themes.

4 Findings

We present evidence relating to the varying contexts from the Tomlinson et al. (2018) and Cooper et al. (2020) model of flexible career determinants and how they influence the women's career decisions. Importantly, we conclude with evidence for the inclusion of the critical influence of family context and specifically the different ways their husbands engaged with childcare and home roles in shaping the women's career decisions.

4.1 The institutional environment

Most participants expressed how they felt it was important for each parent to take shared leave to ensure both their own, and their partner's engagement with childcare from the early stages, as well as facilitating a successful return to work. They also referred to access to government subsidised day-care as a significant support in making the transition back to work.

Shared parental leave. Without exception, the participants emphasized their appreciation of this Swedish policy with respect to its duration and the fact that it can be shared with the fathers. The extent of sharing parental leave varied, with 25 doing so equally, taking six months each. Nine mothers took longer leave (9 to 12 months) than their husbands, who took between 6 and 20 weeks.

This is a nice thing in Sweden...when you talk to colleagues in other countries you realize what a good opportunity we have here to stay home so long with the children

and then go back to your work... When back at work and don't feel guilty about leaving the baby because the father is there and not nannies or other family. [Bianca, 40, L5]

All participants expressed the view that shared parental leave was instrumental to fathers' involvement with the children and household work.

It's really important for men also to take the chair of staying at home and having the full responsibility of the house and family. Otherwise, they don't know what to share if they have not seen the whole burden. [Elsa, 42, L4]

Working after childbirth. Most women discussed the positive effect of being able to return to work leaving their husband in charge of home and child(ren), indicating that the father's presence as carer enabled them to focus on their career.

My husband was on paternity leave. I think that was really good as when I got home from work, he was there and the kids had been really happy because he had been home with them all day and we could talk, but I think if he had worked as well, it would have been hard. So, I came home to a happy environment, and I think that was what kept me going [in my career]. [Matilda, 42, L4]

Fathers assuming the primacy of care during shared parental leave also facilitated some of the participants to step back from their roles as mothers when returning to work.

The men have to see what it's like and be responsible for it. And for us women to really let go. That was the best way to kick-start my career after maternity leave... My husband was at home for half a year with our first child, and I mean that is the best period (laughs) because you have somebody taking care of everything at home and you can just concentrate on work and get things started again. That is also why it is quite easy to get into work and you can put in as many hours as you need. [Elsa, 42, L4]

Some mothers variously expressed "relief", or "peace of mind", or a "lack of guilt" as they were not "abandoning" their children, if the father was the caregiver, and they were

therefore able to focus on their work role. Such comments indicate the deeply ingrained and socially prescribed expectations of parents themselves providing childcare, rather than more formal offerings such as nurseries. Similarly, although parental leave was spoken of very positively by all of the women, a few also talked about their mixed feelings: wanting to share the leave with their husband, and at the same time wanting time at home with their young baby.

My opinion is that if we want women and men to have equal rights, we need to share equally. That is the only solution. But it's not easy because I wanted to stay at home for one year. So, it was our choice. The Swedish government tries to control how much each parent will take but, I also feel that it's really important that the family decides what's best by themselves. So, I'm struggling because I also know that real change will not happen unless we really split 50/50. [Svea, L5]

Svea thus recognizes the importance of egalitarian parental sharing in promoting gender equality and yet wants personal choice to remain.

4.2 The industry ecosystem

Despite working in a male-dominated engineering organization, few women referenced gender biases or being held to higher standards or similar gender related obstacles and attitudes often related to the industry ecosystem.

Gender barriers outside Sweden. Only two women gave examples of gender structures and glass ceilings preventing women's further career advancements, and this pertained to working for EngCo's operations in countries where vertical and horizontal segregation was more pronounced. For example, Freja discusses obstacles she faced in Italy:

We have many women engineers in Italy. But you only see them in junior management levels. The culture in Italy is still very masculine, and this affects the attitude towards women and the way society is structured. Compared to Sweden, Italy is still a couple of decades "behind" in terms of viewing women as equal contributors and creating

real equal opportunities. [Freja, 53, L3]

Three other women engineers talked about having “to prove themselves”, mostly to clients outside Sweden.

When I was 27, I was travelling to Russia working for purchasing, to buy steel. I would be meeting with 60-year-old men who saw me as a young and inexperienced woman engineer. So, I always had to be very well prepared and prove myself. [Ella, 47, L5]

Demands of the engineering ecosystem. Several participants talked about the challenges of combining a senior position in engineering with having a family, due to expectations of travel, and evening meetings with clients. The tensions in managing both roles were ameliorated by the extensive support from both husbands and line managers. Several of the women said that lack of such support had led to leaving previous organizations, whereas at EngCo, many expressed ease in working flexibly on an informal basis.

*I got to where I am today because... I would say it's a mix of different things, and definitely the possibility to work from home, to leave the office earlier, to look after the children and be able to make up for those hours in the evening instead of sitting at a desk from 8 to 5 every day and then have trips on top of that...that would have **never** worked for me. [Lykke, 50, L3]*

Ideal worker norms associated with the STEM industry ecosystem where often flexibility is regarded as a concession and not an entitlement, do not seem to be at play in EngCo. Alice describes how she responds to demands from home:

A key to my career so far is the acceptance and possibility to have flexibility but not only the flexibility in saying that “I work from home because my children are sick,” also the acceptance for me to say that I have to stay home today because my children are sick, and I cannot work. You can also say no, and that is accepted in this organization. [Alice, L4]

The data suggest that the institutional environment in Sweden and its interplay with the specific organizational dynamics within EngCo seem to outweigh the expectation of constant availability to work often experienced in the STEM ecosystem in other countries.

4.3 Organizational dynamics

Informal flexibility. Another dominant theme was EngCo's family-friendly culture and practices enabling informal flexibility and schedule control arranged with line managers. EngCo did not offer formal flexible work arrangements, yet the participants at all levels reported having flexed their hours or worked from home as they needed to throughout their time with the company and without any career penalties.

We have no rules regarding how much one can work from home and it's better because there is an understanding that people can do it on an as needs basis. It is working well...people use it when they need it" [Wilma, 49, L3]

Appreciation of flexibility. All mothers talked about how important it was to be able to work from home or to vary their hours depending on demands from the home domain. They explained how much they valued the culture of informal flexibility and lack of expectations to be constantly available, irrespective of level.

I think EngCo as a company, they are very flexible when it comes to work and home balance, I strongly believe that's all very flexible and not only if you are a manager... If someone needs to go to school or needs to be home with the children, or leave early, I mean of course, yes! That is very good here! [Philippa, 47, L5]

Empathic support by line managers for family roles. The women perceived that male line managers who had themselves taken parental leave had developed an increased understanding of care responsibilities and ultimately their employees' needs for flexibility.

Sweden is special in many ways because we have this equality thinking, and I mean that men can be home with the children with paternity leave. There is acceptance in Sweden

for family life and taking care of children and stuff. And I think it influences our male leaders as well, for sure. [Ella, 47, L5]

The autonomy to control work schedules based on family responsibilities was explicitly appreciated by most of the women, and many considered it to be a necessary condition for them to stay in their roles.

That is part of the secret why I made it in my career. You know, it wasn't one of these jobs where you had to be in your office, same spot every day from this time to this time. I mean I could decide when and where I worked. [Leah, 47, L4]

Freja talks left her previous organization due to no understanding from her managers:

I had two female managers who had grown their careers when it was much harder and they weren't so understanding and that's actually why I left that company - when they started to tell me, 'But there are nannies you know.' I felt that I don't have two small children to hand them over to nannies. For me it's enough that they are in daycare for seven hours a day. And that's when I started to look for another job. [Freja, 53, L3]

In addition to flexibility and control of their own working patterns, many of the participants described the company's culture of trust and their line managers agency to provide flexibility. They explained how nobody doubted their commitment and work ethic, and others specifically mentioned a lack of stigma attached to taking a flexible approach to work.

You have people (your manager and colleagues) around you that trust you and give you the responsibility and also the authority to really make decisions. They let you prioritise and work independently, and they look at results and not hours, which is really supportive for your career. [Creta, 41, L5].

EngCo's family-supportive culture was portrayed as protecting them from negative career repercussions following parental leave. For example, the length of the maternity leave taken (between six and twelve months) did not seem to have any adverse effects on subsequent

promotions. In fact, several of the most senior women had taken longer leave (12 months) and a few shared their experiences of being promoted by their line manager while on parental leave.

Career support by line managers. The more senior women (levels 2-4) expressed gratitude that managers had supported them in terms of significant next promotions. They gave many examples of how line managers facilitated their career development, through conversations to determine the appropriate next step, feedback and encouragement regarding when to move on, and advocating their promotion to more senior roles.

I was very happy that the manager that I had at that time, he really believed in me – I never had a female manager, by the way, because it was not so easy to get into operations [from marketing] but he pushed for me... [Felicia, 46, L3]

Several of the women extensively referred to participation in the organization's women-only leadership programme. Attendance on the programme was perceived as a key to developing their career plans and strengthening their network and visibility among the wider senior managers; the programme also allowed them to build their social capital and form strong bonds with the other women attendees.

The programme continues developing you from where you are, and you get a fantastic network of senior managers and also wonderful women in EngCo. It becomes a bond that is extremely useful when you have something you would like to just bounce off, or just somebody who understands you and your situation. [Tilde, L4]

4.4 The family context

The family context emerged as critical in shaping women's careers. A prevalent theme in the women's career stories was the shared parenting with their husbands which they considered as key to their career sustainability. This continued beyond parental leave, as the women and their husbands coordinated work schedules in order to manage childcare and home roles. They flexed their careers depending on work and home demands during each other's

intensive work periods, or during new and more senior roles, or overseas assignments, some of which lasted for several years. The extent of husbands' involvement with childcare and home roles and the ages of the children were described as central to the women's career decisions at many different points in their careers.

4.4.1 Extent of husbands' involvement with childcare and household responsibilities

Women across all levels emphasized that they had continued to share childcare beyond parental leave, including significant coordination of daily schedules for both children and parents. Three distinct patterns emerge from the findings regarding the women's perceptions of their husbands' involvement with childcare and home roles following parental leave: *egalitarian homelife; higher involvement of husbands; husbands as primary carers.*

Egalitarian homelife. Egalitarian sharing meant that there was no foregrounding of mother or father's career and that each parent flexed their work schedules as needed to look after the children.

After parental leave, we split our work hours. I dropped off and he picked them up at 3 - 3.30. It worked out pretty well for us and the kids loved day-care. When they were ill one of us stayed home every other day so that we would not be away from work for too many days in a row. We both had flexible jobs and we could rearrange our work accordingly. We are doing it together, so it works out. [Tuva, 46, L6]

Higher involvement of husbands. More than half of the senior women (levels 3-4) reported that their husbands took on a larger share by actively adjusting their schedules to fit with the responsibilities at home, particularly as the women progressed, and travelling became a more essential part of the woman's role.

Working for most central functions here in EngCo, you have to travel to a certain extent so I can't see how it would have worked if both of us had been travelling, so my husband has definitely been a key to my career development. [Lykke, 50, L3]

These senior women explained that often the father was the nominated parent who would leave work early to collect the children and then put in long work hours from home.

And even when my husband was CEO for 4 years when the kids were small, he used to work at home on Fridays. He always left early in the morning and he came home early in the afternoon so we could pick up the kids at kindergarten. [Emelie, 45, L4]

Husbands as primary carers. A few of the senior women described their husbands as being the primary carers for extended time periods as the women advanced to new and more demanding job roles. Two women (both level 3) explained that their husbands formally reduced their own working hours in order to accommodate their wives' careers.

I did not need to switch to part-time. I had the freedom to be flexible and at home, we share things. My husband took paternity leave and he has been working part-time since the kids were born as I was always travelling quite a bit. He is the stable one at home, he is the one making dinner and being there when the kids come home. [Wilma, 49, L3]

In addition to such practical support, several of the women reported that their husbands actively encouraged them to take on more senior roles or international assignments, even if, as the women explained, the men "put their own career on hold for a while". In some instances, these husbands became trailing spouses who stayed home to look after the children, as happened to Emelie when she took on a role in Asia:

He had his own career also in Sweden so he's stepping back; now he enjoys being at home and he doesn't have a problem with that. [Emelie, 45, L4]

4.4.2 Intensive day-to-day parenting until children are 14+

In explaining the challenges of sustaining career roles while raising children, more than half of the women talked about how they, together with their husbands, spent a lot of time on day-to-day parenting until the children became 14+ years old. At 14, children in Sweden enter middle school and usually take public transport to school and activities.

Since my children became 15, I no longer have to consider my hours at work. Building a career and family, all happens at the same time, so the last 15 years have been tough and that is why it was so important to have flexibility. But now, I'm not in a hurry to get home. They can prepare their meals and take the bus to school [Melissa, 45, L4]

Prior to the age of 14, the children are very much dependent on their parents to be transported to and from school and activities and to be at home at the end of the school day or when they are ill. Leah whose children are 15 and 13, indicates:

I don't have any regrets, but I mean, I wouldn't say that it was a walk in the park. And it has gotten easier both because the kids are older now, so you don't feel it, you're not so tied up and there's more freedom now than 5 years ago. [Leah, 47, L4]

As mentioned above, several women left work early but continued to work in the evenings and saw this as a way of prioritising the needs of their growing children. Some participants and/or their husbands switched to part-time work in order to cope with the work-family demands as the children progressed through lower school (aged 7-13). Others, particularly the senior women, were able to sustain their job roles when the husband became the primary parent at home, as in Siri's experience. She described a significant transition in her career where she was promoted into a demanding position with a heavy workload, pointing out that her children were six and ten years old at the time. On the one hand, she perceived that it was a great career opportunity but on the other hand, she felt that it conflicted with her role of mother, given what she described as "the young ages" of her children. Her husband's encouragement to accept this role, and his active increase in childcare and home roles, appeased the tension she experienced and led Siri to "keep on going" and succeed in her work role as her children were happy. She explained that she would have changed roles if she perceived that the children were unhappy.

Wilma talked about hesitating to take on a senior role when her oldest was 10 but was ‘pushed’ by her line manager:

If I had known how big this role was, I would have thought that I could not combine it with my family. I have this old prejudice that women tend to have, that now I have to take this responsibility to take care of my kids. But I was pushed by the manager and given the fantastic manager I had, it has turned out very nicely. [Wilma, 49, L3]

Several participants stated that their needs for flexibility shifted as the children grew older and became more independent, feeling unrestricted in working longer hours at the office.

5 Discussion and contribution

Our study explores how mothers at various managerial levels within a multinational, engineering organization in Sweden experience and sustain flexible careers, with a focus on the family forming stage. The women’s accounts provide support for the specific influence of the institutional environment in sustaining mothers’ careers after childbirth by promoting an egalitarian family context, and a family-supportive organizational culture and policies which ameliorate the STEM ecosystem’s expectations of long hours. In this section, we situate our findings regarding the overarching role of the institutional environment on these managerial mothers’ career decisions and sustainability and the interplay with the family context, the organizational dynamics and the industry ecosystem.

5.1 Institutional environment and sustaining careers after childbirth

Our analysis suggests that the Swedish institutional policy of shared and job-protected parental leave was a key determinant in facilitating women to combine career and family and sustain their managerial careers while looking after children. All participants shared parental leave with their husbands in some way. Full-time maternal employment was further supported by publicly funded day-care from the age of one as also found by Pettit and Hook (2005).

Sharing parental leave increased both the women's expectations of sustaining their career after childbirth and their husbands' entitlement to also engage with FWAs in order to share the childcare and home roles (Lewis & Humbert, 2010; Herman & Lewis, 2012). Notably, husbands of several older and more senior-level participants, typically of high educational attainment, exercised their legal right to stay at home despite workplace reactions to men being away from work for caregiving roles, a less 'accepted' practice two decades ago. This provides additional support to previous research whereby men of high educational attainment (Bünning & Pollmann-Schult, 2016) and income (Ma et al., 2018) feel more entitled to take leave and work fewer hours in countries where parental leave is a non-transferable and well-compensated right for fathers. By exploring institutional policies in studying careers, we address previous calls for research to explore flexibility to manage the work-family interface (Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2017) and career (Moen & Sweet, 2004; Tomlinson et al., 2018) by incorporating the influence of national context. We provide additional support to these studies' contentions that government policies to support working parents can influence women and men's career decisions and experiences, and their beliefs regarding whether their careers are sustainable during different phases of life as they help erode the gendered division of work and care.

Our findings also show that sharing parental leave enabled the women to re-commence their career after childbirth, confirming prior studies on effects of Swedish and other European family-friendly structures (Bünning & Pollmann-Schult, 2016; Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2017; Sundstr et al., 2002). Having a husband who also experienced the primacy of child-rearing and home roles helped mitigate the work-family tensions most of the women faced between the roles of mother and worker-professional, a constraining factor which can lead to career compromises. Once returning to work and giving the reins of childcare and home management to their husbands, the women referred to having peace of mind. Thus, they worked

very intensively, trusting their husbands to care for the children, as opposed to worrying about them getting used to hired carers or spending long days in day-care, which, has been shown to add to working mothers' stress (Grönlund & Öun, 2020) and can hinder their career sustainability (Pfeffer, 2011).

5.2 Institutional environment and the family context

The women's accounts suggest that the institutional environment in Sweden, through its shared parental leave policy, mandated the fathers to get involved in the first year of children's lives, increasing their understanding of managing career and home, and arguably opening their minds to make family-level decisions regarding each. This enabled the women to return and focus on their careers after childbirth. After the period of shared parental leave however, parents still had to make a family-level decision regarding career and childcare involvement pointing to the 'linked lives' concept (Elder 2003, as cited in Kossek et al., 2021) which explicitly recognises that individuals' family and career lives are affected and affect those of others. We argue that what facilitated the women's continued flexible and sustainable careers was the ongoing negotiation between both parents in terms of how they both fulfilled their responsibilities at work and home.

Our theoretical contribution is extending knowledge of the determinants of a flexible career (Tomlinson et al., 2018, Cooper et al., 2020), by adding in 'family context' and providing a detailed understanding of how this influences career decisions made by women. We also address Kossek et al.'s (2021) critique of the theoretical lenses of work-family research which often understudy the role of home resources and constraints (e.g., dual career considerations and career stigma from using FWAs).

Specifically, we show that fathers' involvement in the family roles was perceived by the women as essential in shaping the women's career decisions as they moved forward from their children as young babies. For several of the senior women, their husbands' involvement

was a key determinant in accepting promotions including overseas assignments. Therefore, we propose that the family context needs to be incorporated into Tomlinson et al. (2018) and Cooper et al.'s (2020) model nested within the institutional context and interconnected with the industry ecosystem and the organizational context, as shown in Figure 3.



Fig. 3. Determinants of a flexible career including family context, an extended model.

Note: Adapted from Tomlinson et al. (2018) and Cooper et al. (2021)

In line with previous research, we show that family capital is associated with work-family balance (Orellana et al., 2021) and, when combined with career capital, this can enhance women's career sustainability. Similar to our study in Sweden, Heikkinen et al. (2014) found in their study of 25 women managers in Finland, that 14 had spousal support which they called 'harmoniously flourishing', as opposed to minimal support, inconsistent support or irrelevant support. In the Finnish study, the woman manager challenges the traditional gender order so that husband and wife are defined as equal and a genuine team in the family. Like Sweden, Finland is regarded as an egalitarian society with an extensive system of public childcare and

a parental leave system which facilitates mothers to return to their jobs. In contrast, Dickson (2020) in her study of academic mothers living in the UAE, found that the bulk of childcare was carried out by the mothers, who were considered the parenting ‘expert’ of the two, albeit that they all had some form of help from female domestic staff. Interestingly, in Ezzedeen and Ritchey’s (2008) study of 20 executive mothers in the US, only nine mentioned that their husbands sometimes take care of the children.

Our empirical contribution shows three patterns of husbands’ involvement as described by the mothers: *egalitarian homelife i.e. continued sharing of childcare and home roles post-parental leave*, including significant coordination of daily schedules for both children and parents; higher involvement of *husbands by taking on a larger share of the responsibilities at home* beyond the day-to-day sharing which impacted their own career; *husbands as primary carers* for extended time periods as the women advanced to new and more demanding job roles. The mothers’ decisions about whether to sustain their roles and/or accept more senior ones, revolved around their children being safe and contented. This is evidenced by the experiences of most of the senior level women, who reported that their husbands had assumed a larger share of the family care responsibilities to enable them to sustain their demanding careers or take on more senior roles, including overseas assignments. This alleviated tensions from the women’s work-family interface management and specifically their concerns with their children’s wellbeing.

We also show how continued sharing of childcare roles between parents, following parental leave, is critical to the mothers’ career outcomes; day-to-day parenting extends to when the children join upper secondary school (over 14 years old) and become less dependent on being driven to and from school and activities. Furthermore, in contrast to Hoherz and Bryan (2020) who found that post-childbirth, fathers in the UK work fewer hours if the mother works part-time and only while the children are between 1 and 5 years old, we show that following

parental leave, irrespective of whether the women worked full-time or part-time, fathers in our study reduced their hours at work and some took a year off (or longer) to look after the children. Importantly, fathers' involvement in our study which extended to when the children were older than 14, constitutes a much longer period than previously argued regarding fathers reducing their hours when they have small children (Dommermuth & Kitterød, 2009).

Our findings suggest that for this extensive period up to when the children were 14, women's career decisions to accept more senior roles, including overseas assignments, were enmeshed with their family context, i.e. concerns with whether such career moves would be detrimental to their children owing to their young age. For those who did move to such roles, their decisions were encouraged by their husbands' stepping in and taking a larger share of childcare and home roles. This is consistent with, and strengthens, previous research findings whereby for women to have genuine career opportunities, we need a culture change away from gendered division of care roles (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015). The institutional environment mandating sharing parental leave and the extent of husbands' involvement subsequent to parental leave sustained the women in their careers.

5.3 Institutional environment, organizational dynamics and the STEM ecosystem

Another positive outcome of shared parental leave experienced by the women participants, is that it influenced the organizational dynamics and attitudes of male line managers who were more likely to have experienced shared parental leave with their wives (Ma et al., 2018). Being at home and in charge of childcare and home responsibilities, becomes more of a normative behaviour for male line managers (Hook, 2010), who would therefore be more inclined to encourage flexibility without attaching low commitment attributions to those who use it. While this study did not interview male supervisors, many women talked about their male line managers (including the CEO), being role models in prioritising their family over work by leaving the workplace early to have dinner with their children and urging their

teams to do the same. Manager attributions regarding utilization of flexibility may have negative or positive career outcomes according to Leslie et al. (2012) who called for studies to examine the impact of manager attributions in feminine cultures (their study was conducted in the US). We respond to this call and show that line managers within EngCo, who were most likely socialised into Swedish norms, which support life outside work and men's involvement with caring duties, did not seem to attribute the use of flexibility to low work commitment. We also affirm Briscoe and Kellogg's (2011) findings on the role of supportive and powerful managers as 'career and work-family gatekeepers' (Kossek et al., 2021, p. 8) who protect employees' career capital from flexibility-related stigma once they utilize FWAs.

In terms of the industry ecosystem, none of the interviewees in our study mentioned the challenges typically associated with working in the STEM sector such as ideal worker expectations, contrary to previous studies (Cooper et al. 2020; Herman et al., 2013; King et al., 2010). This is more strongly evidenced by the absence of negative career repercussions for women who took longer parental leaves. This is contrary to prior research on work-life practices and leaves which found that they strengthen the gendered association of women-family and men-career, especially in male-dominated environments (Kalysh et al., 2016). We argue that the strong infrastructure to support working parents in Sweden means that male-dominated STEM ecosystems may not necessarily restrict women's career advancement in the way that was evident in Cooper et al.'s (2020) study. Our study suggests that Sweden's parental leave policy has encouraged line managers within EngCo to support life outside work without attaching flexibility stigmas. Our findings suggest that EngCo has embedded the Swedish culture and norms ascribing gender equality in work and care by being supportive of working parents' flexibility needs, thereby placing fewer constraints on retaining and advancing women (Bourdeau et al., 2019; Kossek et al., 2017). We thus demonstrate that the institutional environment can ameliorate an unfriendly industry ecosystem. We also extend knowledge from

prior studies on mothers' career progression and wage penalties related to dependent children (McIntosh et al., 2012), which focused on work leaves following childbirth or switching to part-time work while the children were under 6 years old (Tomlinson & Durbin, 2010).

6 Conclusion

Our research adds to flexible and sustainable careers literature (De Vos et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2018) by highlighting the specific influence of the institutional environment in relation to the extended Tomlinson et al.'s (2018) and Cooper et al.'s (2020) model and evidencing the way it interacts with the organizational dynamics, the industry ecosystem and the family contexts. We further extend the model by incorporating the family context (Figure 3). We also address other authors' calls for an approach which highlights the interplay of multiple contexts affecting career sustainability over time (De Vos et al., 2020; Fouad, 2021). Importantly, we argue that the institutional environment has consequences which cascade down to each of the other contextual levels and that the importance of the different contexts can vary according to the work-care regime. Thus, in Sweden, an institutional regime which highly values gender equality, the combination of public policies to mandate sharing childcare, together with subsidized day-care, sets the context and constitutes the bedrock of supporting parents to work *and* care. This, we argue, may diminish the importance of the industry ecosystem and organizational dynamics, as is evident in our study. In contrast, in liberal market economies where public policies for parental leave and subsidized childcare are inadequate or do not exist, women are dependent on their industrial ecosystem (as was the case in Cooper et al.'s study) and the particular organizational dynamics or entirely dependent on their own family resources. We therefore challenge Cooper et al.'s recent model (2020) which contends that the industry sector is the most critical determinant in Tomlinson et al.'s flexible careers model (2018).

7 Implications for policy and practice

This study's findings have important policy implications as they highlight the salient role of social policies towards achieving gender equality. We show that non-transferable public level policies directed towards working mothers **and** fathers, are paramount in accelerating culture change towards the un-gendering of the division of labour at work and in families. Fathers and, by extension, male line managers, through engaging with such public policies, are exposed to the primacy of care which could help shift gendered norms regarding care and reduce biases in promotion decisions which ultimately penalize mothers. The significant support from the family context combined with the role of line managers in sponsoring the women, was key for the women's career sustainability. Accordingly, we show that organizations and line managers can play an important role in fostering women's career sustainability and gender equality by mainstreaming family-friendly policies i.e. encouraging utilization by mothers and fathers at all levels and especially by top managers, which would signal that career advancement to senior positions and family are not an either/or proposition thereby removing ideal worker expectations. By guarding against unrealistic workloads, line managers and career counsellors could be instrumental in encouraging women to seek developmental growth to leadership roles while raising their children, such as international work assignments.

As we show the cascading role of the institutional environment down to the industry ecosystem, organizational dynamics and the family context, we inform organizations and managers that when making strategic decisions on the types of family-related supports they offer (e.g. parental leave; FWAs; career support and help with transitioning back to work), they need to do so considering the institutional environment in which they operate. In the absence of a public work-care regime, organizations with family-friendly cultures, have the opportunity to differentiate themselves and will be better able to attract and retain talented employees.

8 Limitations and suggestions for future research

In this research we focus on how a specific worker type i.e. women managers with children in dual-income couples experienced and sustained their flexible careers situated in the Swedish institutional environment and one engineering organization. Future research could examine how the model's contextual levels interact in the crafting of flexible and sustainable careers of different types of participants e.g., single mothers, working mothers with elder care responsibilities, women with no children. The interplay of the different contextual levels could also be explored during other important life transitions such as when workers approach retirement age and risks or opportunities for their career (un)sustainability. Future studies can also compare how the importance of contextual levels varies for different generations' cohorts whereby younger generations may differ in their work-family and career un(sustainability) ideals. Cross-cultural research could also provide a deeper understanding of the role of other institutional environments, with varying public policies and norms, on women's career sustainability. Different organizational dynamics and/or industry ecosystems within an institutional environment can also be studied with regards to their role on women's career sustainability over time. For example, research on the different roles of the contextual levels in countries with little formal support for working mothers and fathers would be insightful.

Longitudinal studies could also follow the linked-lives effects of work-family decisions on both individual and family career outcomes. Our study captured the women's reflections on their husbands' involvement and support with both career and home. Future studies, by including the husbands as participants, could increase understanding of the family context and family career sustainability over time. We focus specifically on the hands-on support provided by the fathers to their children. Other researchers investigating such spousal support also look at psychosocial support, career assistance, help with other family members (other than children) and household chores. Future studies might take a wider definition of spousal support.

The focus of this study on women managers, typically of high educational attainment, in dual-income households with partners of similar attainments, may have captured a more positive picture of gender role ideologies regarding career and family than may exist between couples of different educational backgrounds. Future research could include participants of diverse educational levels.

Our sample did not include women managers who left EngCo and could have therefore captured a more positive picture of the organizational dynamics. Future studies could interview employees and leavers.

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Appendix

Details of Participants

Pseudonym	Level	Age of Child 1	Age of Child 2	Age of Child 3
Siri	2	19+	19+	-
Kirstin	2	Middle School	Middle School	Lower School
Sigrid	3	19+	Upper School	Pre-school
Ellen	3	Middle School	Lower School	Lower School
Elinor	3	19+	19+	Middle School
Robin	3	19+	Middle School	-
Freja	3	19+	19+	-
Eva	3	19+	19+	-
Lykke	3	Middle School	Lower School	-
Wilma	3	Upper School	Middle School	-
Felicia	3	Upper School	Upper School	-
Vera	4	19+	19+	19+
Elvira	4	Lower School	Pre-school	-
Ines	4	Lower School	Lower School	-
Elsa	4	Lower School	Lower School	-
Emelie	4	Middle School	Lower School	-
Leah	4	Upper School	Middle School	-
Tilde	4	Upper School	Middle School	-
Matilda	4	Lower School	Lower School	-
Ella	5	19+	Middle School	Lower School
Cleo	5	Upper School	Middle School	Lower School
Philippa	5	19+	Upper School	-
Ebba	5	19+	19+	-
Clara	5	19+	19+	-
Ida	5	Pre-school	-	-
Maja	5	Lower School	Pre-school	-
Bianca	5	Lower School	Pre-school	-
Mira	5	Lower School	Lower School	-
Creta	5	Middle School	Lower School	-
Svea	5	Middle School	Middle School	-
Alice	5	Lower School	Lower School	-
Tuva	6	Upper School	Middle School	Lower School
Pia	6	19+	19+	-
Rut	6	Middle School	Pre-school	-

Note. School age ranges: Pre-school: 1-6; Lower School: 7-13; Middle School: 14-16; Upper School: 17-19.