Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology

Print ISSN: 3078-6428 | Online ISSN: 3078-6436
Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology

Original Article

EXPLORING BARRIERS TO CAREER DECISIVENESS AMONG ONLY DAUGHTERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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KEYWORDS:
Career Decisiveness, Only Daughters, Thematic Analysis, Family Expectations, Gender Roles

CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Faisal, T., Zaman, A. S., & Faisal, D. (2026). Exploring barriers to career decisiveness among only daughters: a qualitative study. Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology, 3(9), 186-197.

ABSTRACT

Career decision-making is a significant developmental process influenced by psychological, familial, and sociocultural factors. This study explored the barriers to career decisiveness among only daughters, with particular emphasis on family expectations, traditional gender roles, and individual psychological challenges. A qualitative research approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven only daughters aged 25 years and above and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed several interconnected barriers, including parental overinvolvement and high expectations, limited exposure to diverse career opportunities, traditional gender roles, fear of failure, and self-doubt. Family dependency and competing expectations surrounding caregiving and professional responsibilities further complicated career-related decisions. These barriers interacted to reinforce uncertainty and indecisiveness, particularly within sociocultural contexts where family approval significantly influences individual choices. The findings highlight the importance of career autonomy, supportive family environments, and culturally sensitive career counselling in facilitating informed career decisions. This study contributes to understanding career-related challenges among only daughters, and an underexplored population, and offers practical implications for psychologists, educators, and career counsellors in promoting career decision-making confidence and psychological empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Career decision-making is a significant developmental process that involves evaluating occupational opportunities, identifying personal interests and abilities, and making informed choices regarding future professional pathways. Career decisiveness refers to an individual's readiness and ability to make and maintain career-related decisions despite uncertainty and competing demands (Gati & Kulsár, 2021). It encompasses cognitive, emotional and motivational processes that contribute to confidence and commitment in career choices. However, career decision-making may become challenging when individuals encounter psychological difficulties, limited occupational information, or conflicting familial and societal expectations (Lent & Brown, 2020). Udayar et al. (2020) identified three major categories of career decision-making difficulties: lack of readiness, lack of information, and inconsistent information. These difficulties may contribute to uncertainty, hesitation, and reduced confidence in career-related decisions. Career indecisiveness extends beyond temporary uncertainty and may involve persistent difficulties in selecting or committing to an occupational pathway. Psychological factors such as fear of failure, self-doubt, perfectionism, and low career decision-making self-efficacy can influence an

individual's ability to evaluate career alternatives and make confident decisions. Career decision-making self-efficacy, in particular, reflects confidence in one's ability to perform tasks necessary for making informed career choices. Previous research has associated higher career decision-making self-efficacy with greater career exploration and decisional confidence (Frederiksen, 2009). Similarly, emotional difficulties and fear of negative evaluation may contribute to career indecisiveness by increasing uncertainty and avoidance of career-related commitments (Ran et al., 2022). These psychological challenges may become more complex when personal aspirations conflict with family expectations and sociocultural responsibilities.

Familial influences represent another important dimension of career decision-making, particularly in collectivistic societies where individual choices are closely connected with family relationships and expectations. Parents may provide emotional encouragement, educational resources, and career guidance; however, excessive involvement or restrictive expectations may limit opportunities for independent career exploration (Chope, 2002). Su et al. (2026) highlighted the relationship between parental interference and career indecision, particularly among individuals with stronger collectivistic orientations. Similarly, parental overprotection may constrain career exploration and influence confidence in independent decision-making (Wen et al., 2023). These findings suggest that parental involvement can function as either a supportive resource or a potential barrier, depending on the nature of family interactions and the autonomy available to individuals. Gender roles and sociocultural expectations further influence women's career related decisions. In Pakistan, women's educational and professional aspirations may intersect with traditional expectations concerning family responsibilities, caregiving, mobility, and socially acceptable occupations. Research has highlighted how cultural expectations and family obligations may restrict women's occupational choices and professional development (Karim & Kakar, 2025). Anticipated work-family conflict may also influence career decisions, as women may consider future caregiving responsibilities when evaluating professional opportunities (Yang, 2026). Consequently, career decision-making may involve negotiating personal aspirations alongside familial responsibilities and culturally prescribed gender-roles.

The experiences of only daughters warrant particular attention within this context. In the present study, only daughters refer to women who are the sole female children in their families. Their position with the family may influence parental expectations, emotional responsibilities and opportunities for independent career decision-making. Although parental involvement may provide encouragement and support, expectations concerning family care, geographical proximity, and professional choices may also create challenges (Kalsoom et al., 2020). Research on only children has highlighted the significance of family structure in psychological and developmental experiences (Falbo & Polit, 1986). However, these findings do not necessarily explain the career-related experiences of only daughters within Pakistani sociocultural settings. Understanding how only daughters perceive and negotiate family expectations may therefore provide valuable insight into their career decisiveness. Eagly et al. (2012) provides a relevant theoretical perspective for understanding the influence of gender-related expectations on career decision-making. The theory emphasizes how socially constructed roles shape individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and perceived responsibilities. Within traditional family structures, expectations concerning women's caregiving and domestic responsibilities may influence their professional aspirations and perceived freedom to pursue particular career paths. For only daughters, these expectations may intersect with parental involvement and perceived family obligations, potentially creating tension between personal career goals and familial responsibilities. This perspective provides a framework for understanding how sociocultural expectations may influence psychological experiences and career-related decisions.

Although previous research has examined career indecisiveness, parental influence, gender roles, and sociocultural barriers among women, comparatively limited attention has been directed toward the experiences of only daughters in Pakistan. Existing literature has primarily addressed career-related challenges among broader populations of students and women, leaving the potential influence of being the sole daughter within a family less clearly understood. Furthermore, quantitative approaches may not fully capture the subjective meaning, emotional conflicts, and interpersonal negotiations associated with career decision-making. A qualitative exploration can therefore provide a more contextualized understanding of how psychological, familial, and sociocultural factors interact in shaping career decisiveness among only daughters. The present study aimed to explore the psychological, familial, and sociocultural barriers to career decisiveness among only daughters aged 25

years and above in Lahore, Pakistan. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, the study sought to understand participants' experiences of parental expectations, gender-related responsibilities, psychological challenges, and career-related making by highlighting the experiences to the literature on career decision-making by highlighting the experiences of an underexplored population and informing culturally sensitive career counselling approaches that promote autonomy, confidence, and informed career choices.

Research Question

- How do only daughters in Pakistan experience and navigate psychological, familial, and sociocultural barriers to career decisiveness?

II. METHOD

The present study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the psychological, familial, and sociocultural barriers to career decisiveness among only daughters in Pakistan. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding career-related challenges within their familial and sociocultural contexts, Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns of meaning within the interview data.

Participants

The study included seven unmarried only daughters aged 25 years and above, residing in Lahore, Pakistan. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on predefined eligibility criteria. Women were eligible if they were the only daughters in their families, unmarried, aged 25 years or above, and had both parents alive. The original screening criteria also excluded individuals with diagnosed psychological disorders, severe traumatic experiences, or serious physical illnesses that could interfere with participation. Participants' demographic information, including age, education, occupation, sibling composition, and parental educational background, was collected to contextualize their experiences.

Table I: Demographics Characteristics of the Participants

Participants no.	Age	Education	Field of study/Profession
P1	29	Bachelors	Nutritionist
P2	27	Masters	Physics Research/Lecturer
P3	26	Masters	English Literature/Lecturer
P4	28	Masters	Software Developer
P5	27	Bachelors	Sociology
P6	27	Masters	Psychologist
P7	26	Bachelors	Biotechnology

Measures

A semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used to explore participants experiences of career decision-making. The interview questions addressed career aspirations, parental expectations, familial responsibilities, psychological challenges, gender roles, and sociocultural influences. Follow up questions were used when necessary to obtain clarification and encourage detailed descriptions of participants' experiences.

Procedure

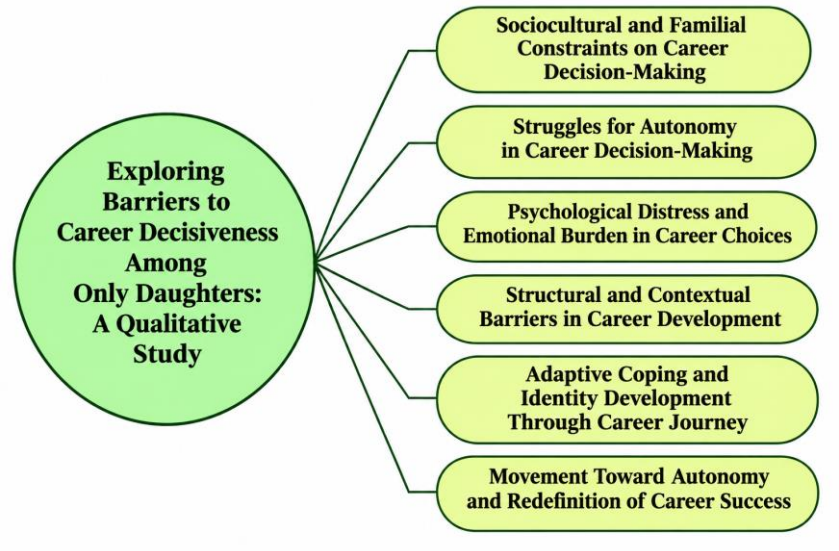
Participants meeting the eligibility criteria were approached and informed about the study's objective and procedures. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in quiet, private settings according to participants' convenience. With their consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of participants' responses. The transcripts were prepared for qualitative analysis, and identifying information was omitted to maintain confidentiality. The data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated by

identifying meaningful statements and recurring patterns related to participants' career decision-making experiences. Third, related codes were grouped to develop preliminary themes representing psychological, familial, and sociocultural barriers. Fourth, the preliminary themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence within themes and consistency with the overall dataset. Fifth, the themes were clearly defined and named to reflect the underlying meanings of participants' experiences. Finally, the findings were organized into major themes and subthemes and presented with relevant participant quotations to support their interpretation. Throughout the analysis, the researcher revisited the transcripts to ensure that the identified themes remained grounded in participants' accounts. The study followed ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary participation, and confidentiality before providing informed consent. They were assured of their right to withdraw without penalty. Ethical permission was obtained from the Institute Research Ethical Board, The University of Lahore.

III. RESULTS

The data obtained from semi-structured interviews with seven only daughters were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The analysis generated six major themes and 12 subthemes reflecting participants' experiences of psychological, familial, and sociocultural barriers to career decisiveness. The findings illustrated how sociocultural expectations, family responsibilities, psychological challenges, and limited career opportunities influenced participants' career-related decisions. Additionally, participants described adaptive coping strategies, identity development, and gradual movement toward greater career autonomy.

Figure I: Major Barriers to Career Decisiveness among Only Daughters



The identified themes and subthemes are presented in figure 1.

Table II: Major Themes and Subthemes of Career Decisiveness Experiences among Only Daughters

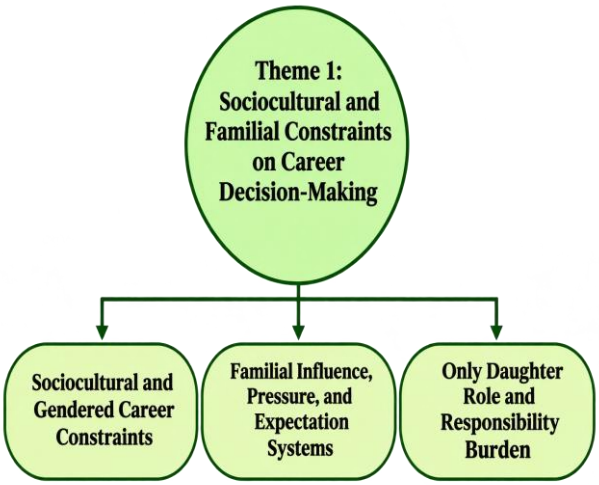
Major Theme	Sub-Theme
Sociocultural and Familial Constraints on Career Decision-Making	Sociocultural and Gendered Career Constraints
	Familial Influence, Pressure, and Expectation Systems
	Only Daughter Role and Responsibility Burden
Struggles for Autonomy in Career Decision-Making	Autonomy Struggles and Negotiation in Career Decision-Making
Psychological Distress and Emotional Burden in Career Choices	Career Uncertainty, Anxiety, and Psychological Distress
	Self-Perception, Confidence, and Competence Development

Major Theme	Sub-Theme
Structural and Contextual Barriers in Career Development	Lack of Guidance, Exposure, and Structural Limitations
	Interest vs Practicality Conflict in Career Choices
Adaptive Coping and Identity Development Through Career Journey	Adaptive Coping and Psychological Regulation
	Identity Formation and Personal Growth Through Career Journey
Movement Toward Autonomy and Redefinition of Career Success	Shift Toward Self-Aligned and Autonomous Career Choices
	Redefinition of Career Success and Life Priorities

Theme I: Sociocultural and Familial Constraints on Career Decision-Making

This theme reflected the influence of sociocultural expectations, familial involvement, and responsibilities associated with being an only daughter. Participants described how gender norms, parental expectations, and perceived family obligations shaped their career preferences and restricted opportunities for independent decision-making.

Figure II: Hierarchy Identified Sub Themes Map of Sociocultural and Familial Constraints on Career Decision-Making



Sociocultural and Generated Career Constraints

Participants described how traditional gender expectations influenced their perceptions of suitable career opportunities. Certain professions were considered socially acceptable for women, whereas nontraditional career pathways were discouraged. One participant stated that,

"Some fields were never even considered because they are not seen as suitable for girls" (P2).

Social approval and marriage-related expectations also influence career choices, as reflected in another participant's statement:

"At the end, everything comes back to marriage and what people will think" (P5).

These accounts illustrated how gendered expectations and concerns regarding social acceptance could restrict career exploration.

Familial Influence, Pressure, and Expectation Systems

Parental involvement emerged as an important influence on career decision-making. Participants described both explicit and implicit expectations that shaped their occupational preferences. One participant explained,

"They didn't force me directly, but their expectations were always there" (P4).

Family reputation also influenced decisions, as another participant stated,

"I had to think about my family's image before choosing anything" (P6).

These experiences suggested that parental involvement, even when perceived as supportive, could create pressure to prioritize familial expectations over personal aspirations.

Only Daughter Role and Responsibility Burden

Participants associated their position as an only daughter with heightened responsibility and accountability toward their families. One participant expressed,

"Being the only daughter means I have to take everything seriously" (P3).

Similarly, another participant stated,

"I feel like I represent my whole family in my choices" (P7).

These accounts reflected the perceived burden of fulfilling family expectations while pursuing personal career aspirations.

Theme II: Struggles for Autonomy in Career Decision-Making

This theme highlighted participants' difficulties in exercising independence over career-related decisions. Their experiences reflected ongoing negotiations between personal interests and family expectations.

Figure III. Hierarchy Identified Sub Themes Map of Struggles for Autonomy in Career Decision-Making



Autonomy Struggles and Negotiation in Career Decision-Making

Participants described adjusting their career preferences to accommodate familial expectations and maintain approval. One participant explained,

"I had to adjust my choices so they would be acceptable at home" (P5).

Another expressed the conflict between personal aspirations and family preferences:

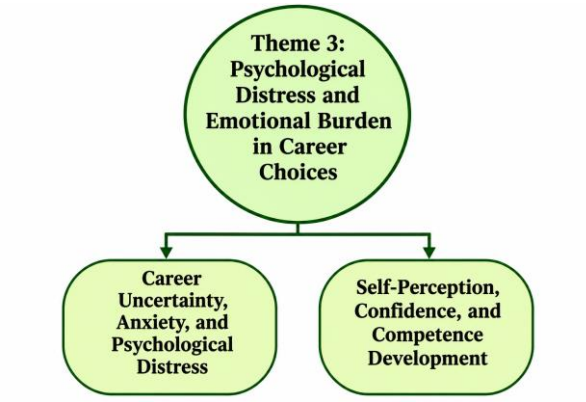
"I wanted something else, but I had to think about what my family prefer" (P1).

These accounts indicated that career choices were frequently negotiated within familial boundaries, sometimes limiting participants perceived autonomy and freedom to pursue preferred career pathways.

Theme III: Psychological Distress and Emotional Burden in Career Choices

This theme captured the emotional and psychological difficulties associated wit career decision-making. Participants described uncertainty, fear of failure, self-doubt, and challenges in developing confidence in their occupational abilities.

Figure IV: Hierarchy Identified Sub Themes Map of Psychological Distress and Emotional Burden in Career Choices



Career Uncertainty, Anxiety, and Psychological Distress

Participants reported uncertainty regarding their career choices and concerns about making inappropriate decision. One participant stated,

"I constantly feel like I might choose the wrong career" (P6).

Repeated consideration of future possibilities also contributed to emotional exhaustion, as reflected in the statement,

"It becomes mentally exhausting to think about the future all the time" (P2).

These experiences illustrated how career-related uncertainty could become emotionally demanding and complicate decision-making.

Self-Perception, Confidence, and Competence Development

Participants described how self-doubt and perceived inadequacy influenced their confidence in making career decision. One participant recalled,

"I didn't believe in my abilities at first" (P4).

However, some accounts also reflected gradual improvements in confidence through experience and support. As one participant stated,

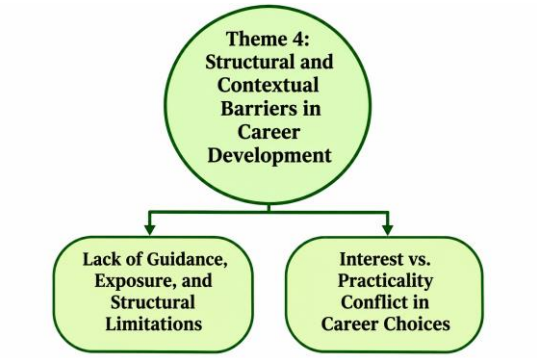
"With time and support, I started feeling more capable" (P7).

These findings suggested that confidence was not necessarily fixed but could develop through supportive experiences and increased self-awareness.

Theme IV: Structural and Contextual Barriers in Career Development

This theme represented the practical and contextual difficulties that constrained participants' career opportunities. Limited guidance, restricted occupational exposure, and competing considerations of personal interests and career stability emerged as important challenges.

Figure V: Hierarchy Identified Sub Themes Map of Structural and Contextual Barriers in Career Development



Lack of Guidance, Exposure, and Structural Limitations

Participants highlighted insufficient access to career guidance and information about available professional pathways. One participant stated,

"There was no proper guidance available to help me choose" (P3).

Similarly, another explained,

"I didn't know many options existed beyond the common ones" (P1).

These experiences suggested that limited career awareness and inadequate guidance restricted participants' opportunities to explore alternative career pathways and make informed decisions.

Interest vs. Practically Conflict in Career Choices

Participants described difficulties balancing personal interests with practical considerations, particularly financial security and occupational stability. One participant explained,

"I had to leave what I liked and choose something more stable" (P5).

Another stated,

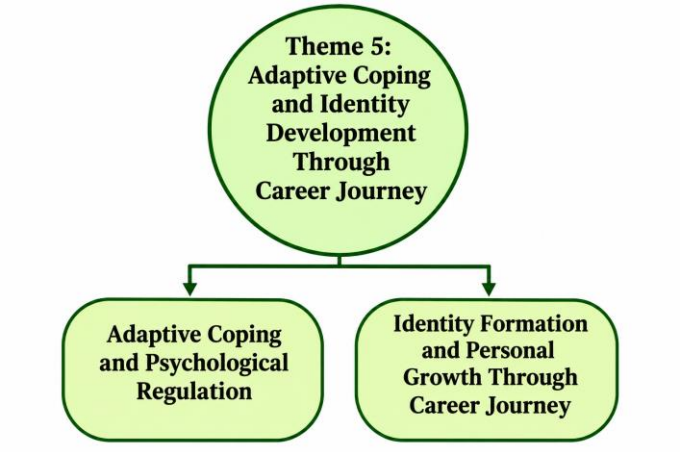
"I couldn't take risks because stability is more important" (P6).

These accounts reflected the tension between pursuing personally meaningful careers and selecting occupations perceived as secure and socially acceptable.

Theme V: Adaptive Coping and Identity Development Through Career Journey

Despite experiencing psychological, familial, and sociocultural challenges, participants described strategies for managing career-related difficulties and developing a clearer understanding of themselves. This theme reflected adaptive coping, emotional regulation, and personal growth.

Figure VI: Hierarchy Identified Sub Themes Map of Adaptive Coping and Identity Development through Career Journey



Adaptive Coping and Psychological Regulation

Participants described efforts to manage emotional pressure through self-regulation, gradual problem-solving, and cognitive reframing. One participant stated,

"I try to stay calm and handle things step by step" (P2).

Another explained,

"I changed my thinking to focus on what I can control" (P7).

These accounts illustrated how participants attempted to manage uncertainty and maintain a sense of personal control while navigating career-related challenges.

Identity Formation and Personal Growth Through Career Journey

Career-related experiences also contributed to participants' developing sense of identity and self-awareness. One participant reflected,

"This process helped me understand who I am" (P4).

Another Stated,

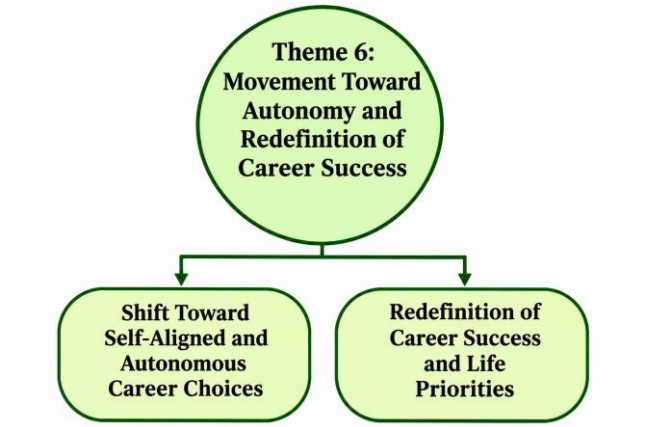
"I have grown a lost because of these challenges" (P3).

These experiences suggest that navigating career difficulties could also provide opportunities for reflection, maturity, and personal development.

Theme VI: Movement toward Autonomy and Redefinition of Career Success

This theme reflected participants' changing perspectives regarding career autonomy and the meaning of professional success. Their accounts indicated a gradual movement toward choices aligned with personal interests, values, and broader life priorities.

Figure VII: Hierarchy Identified Sub Themes Map of Movement toward Autonomy and Redefinition of Career Success



Shift toward Self-aligned and Autonomous Career Choices

Participants described increasing awareness of their own career preferences and a desire to make more independent decisions. One participant stated,

"Now I try to choose what aligns with my own interests" (P6).

This account reflected a shift toward greater personal agency and consideration of individual aspirations in career-related decisions.

Redefinition of Career Success and Life Priorities

Participants also described broader understandings of career success that extended beyond financial achievement and occupational status. One participant explained,

"Success for me is peace of mind, not just money" (P5).

Another stated,

"I want a career that balances both my personal and professional life" (P7).

These accounts highlighted the importance of personal satisfaction, psychological well-being, and work-life balance in participants' evolving career aspirations.

The findings demonstrated that career decisiveness among only daughters was shaped by interconnected psychological, familial, sociocultural, and structural influences. Parental expectations, gender-related restrictions, perceived family responsibilities, limited career guidance, and psychological uncertainty contributed to difficulties in making independent career decisions. Nevertheless, participants also described adaptive coping strategies, developing confidence, personal growth, and changing perceptions of career success. Collectively, these findings highlighted the complexity of career decision-making within familial and sociocultural contexts and the importance of understanding both the barriers and adaptive experiences associated with career development.

IV. DISCUSSION

The present study explored psychological, familial, and sociocultural barriers to career decisiveness among only daughters in Lahore, Pakistan. The findings revealed that career decisions were influenced by family expectations, gender related norms, psychological uncertainty, and limited career opportunities. Participants described difficulties balancing personal aspirations with parental expectations and perceived family responsibilities. These findings are consistent with Hassan et al. (2022), who identified parental influence and gender stereotypes as important factors in career choices among Pakistani students. Similarly, Qazi et al. (2026) highlighted the role of

collective family decision-making and cultural expectations in shaping career pathways in Pakistan. The present findings suggest that career autonomy among the participants was often negotiated within family relationships rather than exercised independently. Psychological distress and limited confidence also emerged as important barriers. Participants reported career uncertainty, fear of making inappropriate choices, and doubts about their abilities. These experiences are consistent with Wang et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of career decision making self-efficacy and social support in career adaptability. Furthermore, participants identified inadequate career guidance, restricted exposure to occupational opportunities, and conflicts between personal interests and practical considerations. Asghar and Ajmal (2022) similarly reported that family influence, financial considerations, institutional factors, and self-awareness shaped career decisions among Pakistani adolescents. These findings indicate that career indecisiveness may reflect interconnected psychological and contextual challenges rather than individual uncertainty alone.

Despite these difficulties, participants described adaptive coping, increasing self-confidence, and personal growth throughout their career journeys. Their experiences reflected gradual efforts to manage emotional challenges, clarify personal interests, and make more independent choices. This finding is particularly relevant to positive psychology, as it highlights personal strengths and the development of career-related agency despite existing barriers. Wang et al. (2024) also demonstrated the importance of social support and career decision0making self-efficacy in career adaptability. In the present study, participants' changing perspectives on career success further suggested a movement toward personally meaningful goals, psychological well-being, and greater autonomy. Overall, the findings highlight career decisiveness as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of individual aspirations, family relationships, and sociocultural circumstances. The study contributes to understanding the experiences of only daughters within the Pakistani context by identifying both career-related barriers and positive psychological responses. These findings emphasize the importance of culturally sensitive career counselling, supportive family communication, and accessible career guidance to promote informed and autonomous career decisions.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study explored psychological, familial, and sociocultural barriers to career decisiveness among only daughters in Lahore, Pakistan. The findings revealed that career decision-making was shaped by the complex interaction od sociocultural expectations, familial responsibilities, limited autonomy, psychological distress, and structural barriers. Participants experienced difficulties balancing personal career aspirations with parental expectations, traditional gender roles, and practical considerations, often resulting in uncertainty, emotional burden, and reduced confidence in their career choices. Despite these challenges, the findings also highlighted adaptive coping strategies, identity development, personal growth, and a gradual movement toward autonomous and self-aligned career decisions. These experiences suggest that career decisiveness is not merely an individual choice but a dynamic process influenced by psychological, familial, and contextual factors. The study contributes to understanding the career related experiences of only daughters within the Pakistani sociocultural context while emphasizing the importance of psychological resiliency, self-awareness, personal autonomy. The findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive career counselling, supportive family environments, and accessible career guidance services that empower young women to make informed and personally meaningful career decisions.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding
The author received no funding from any organizations.

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