

Gender roles or gendered goals? Women's return to rural family business

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to add to the theorization of the gender dynamic in rural areas by investigating the motives of women who join their family firm (or their spouse's family firm) and thereby defy the demographic trend of rural flight. The context of this study is the depopulation of rural areas with the closing of basic services and relocation of the younger population, and educated women in particular, to urban areas. Consequently, rural family businesses risk failing to find successors and suffering forced closure or relocation. The empirical site of the study is rural family firms in Sweden, a context characterized by a high level of gender equality in legislation and culture but gender-conservative business structures in rural regions.

Design/methodology/approach – The empirical case in this paper builds on a qualitative study of nine (9) life course narratives of women entrepreneurs in a rural region of Southern Sweden who have returned to rural areas to join their family business. The authors follow the view established by gender scholars that women are active agents in navigating their lives, and their life story narratives offer insight into the considerations that inform their choice to stay or return to rural locations. In Sweden, the setting for the study, gender equality is widely supported by legislation, policy and institutional frameworks and popular understanding of gender relations. In contrast to the gender-progressive policies of Sweden at large, women's entrepreneurship in rural regions of Sweden tends to follow traditional gender hierarchies and face similar constraints as in rural areas of other countries. The juxtaposition of these competing sets of ideals makes Sweden an important and interesting place to study and draw insights from the experiences of women entrepreneurs.

Findings – The findings reveal that women who choose to join rural family firms view them primarily in a positive light and see this choice as aligned with their need for professional flexibility and assertiveness, rewarding relationships, and a calm, secure, well-balanced life. Theoretically, the study implies that women choosing to engage in rural family firms seek non-material benefits, such as work–life balance and social support, and may be driven in part by a sense of psychological ownership that extends to the rural community.

Originality/value – The findings provide novel insights on women as active agents in navigating their lives and the intrinsic (e.g. alignment of personal values) and extrinsic (e.g. community support) motives that inform their decisions. The study also raises questions regarding how women perceive themselves as “fitting in” to rural settings and to what extent the sense of security within these settings that the women describe may be contingent upon factors such as their families' embeddedness within the community as well as their conformity to the local social norms.

Keywords Gender, Womens entrepreneurship, Work–life balance, Psychological ownership, Agency and choice, Rural family business

Paper type Research paper



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1. Introduction

The family –and family businesses– are often “at the heart of many communities” in rural areas and thought of as pivotal entities in understanding what makes rural communities flourish, or conversely, wither (Getz *et al.*, 2004, p. 3). Family businesses, when successful, can add both to the local economy and the cultural cohesiveness of their community (Bosworth, 2012; Bryant, 1989; Getz *et al.*, 2004). However, the depopulation of rural areas adversely impacts these businesses, e.g. through lack of access to schools and other services. Thus, when family businesses close or move, the rural community, struggling to meet the demands of its residents, risks further depopulation (De Rosa and McElwee, 2015) and perhaps, eventually, extinction (Getz *et al.*, 2004). The importance of family and family businesses in rural communities has attracted scholarly attention on the dynamics that contribute to the vitality of family firms, for example, the importance of community-oriented values of the business owners (Getz *et al.*, 2004) or the centrality of local social networks for family firm success (Bosworth, 2012). One important but overlooked factor in rural communities, however, is the gendered facets of both the dynamic of rural depopulation and rural family firms. Scholars suggest that women are overrepresented in the migration from rural to urban areas, particularly those with a university education (Bock and Shortall, 2006). Gender relations in rural regions therefore tend to follow conservative gender patterns (Little, 1987, 2002) with women often occupying supporting roles to their spouses involved in family firms (Gasson and Winter, 1992; Baines and Wheelock, 1998 cited in Kirkwood, 2012, p. 141) or obliged to enact stereotypical gender roles to attract customers (Anthopoulou, 2010; Brandth and Haugen, 2010; Heldt Cassel and Pettersson, 2015). Indeed, the possibilities for women in rural areas are often limited, which could in part explain women’s migration to urban areas, making rural gender relations an important aspect in the theorization of rural development. This paper investigates the research question, “How do women perceive rural family businesses and lifestyle as aligned with their values and therefore as attractive settings for pursuing their life goals?”

This paper takes its point of departure in the above-mentioned gendered dynamic of rural regions and delves deeper into what motivates women stay in or return to rural family businesses. We follow the view established by scholars that gender is a relational phenomenon and that women are active agents in making informed choices (Ogbor, 2000) even when restrained by social norms and gendered hierarchies (Little, 1987, 2002; Marlow, 2020). Women’s active agency can explain the gendered depopulation of rural areas and aid the theorization of the conditions requisite for women to actively choose to stay in a rural setting. Accordingly, this paper builds on a qualitative analysis of nine life story narratives of women entrepreneurs who chose to join their family business.

The contributions of the paper are as follows. Our study suggests that women who stay in or return to rural locales are actively pursuing a lifestyle where non-economic rewards play a significant role. More specifically, our study elucidates the importance of personal identification with either rural or entrepreneurial lifestyles, the pivotal role of social support and the emphasis on a higher quality of life characteristic of rural settings. Moreover, this paper suggests that when carving out their path in life, women actively evaluate the benefits of remaining in or leaving rural areas, as well as careers within or outside of the family firm, vis-à-vis their overall life goals, implicitly indicating that rural areas can be made more attractive to women by accommodating their needs.

2. Overview of earlier research

This paper focuses on women’s choices to join or return to rural family firms as one facet of theorizing the gender relations of (and their impact on) rural areas. There is little previous research focusing on the intersection of gender relations, rural businesses (which are largely

family-owned) (Bosworth, 2012) and rural community (Eimermann, 2016), and gender (Little, 2002; Bock and Shortall, 2006; Heldt Cassel and Pettersson, 2015), as three distinct (Webster, 2017) yet interlinked sets of social relations shaping each other. However, contributions from related fields of rural entrepreneurship, gender in family firms, and gender in rural settings contribute to encircling the particularities of such an intersection and identifying the need for further research. Below, we present an overview of relevant contributions from these three research areas. We begin with scholarly debates on gender, followed by an overview of research on family firms and gender in family firms, and end with literature on rural businesses and gender.

2.1 Gender

This paper takes its point of departure in the view that gender is a set of cultural and symbolic relations of power wherein femininity and masculinity have historically been constructed as binary and unequally valued categories, with masculinity as the assumed norm (Weedon, 1999). Today's Western liberal democracies make a complex site for theorizing the interplay of gendered agency and structural constraints due to the overall achievements and empowerment of women (McRobbie, 2009). In countries such as Sweden, the site of our study, women are typically more educated than men and are increasingly in the majority both in higher education institutions and lower-level management positions. Moreover, gender equality is widely supported by legislation, policy and institutional frameworks and popular understanding of gender relations (Goldscheider *et al.*, 2015; Heldt Cassel and Pettersson, 2015). Yet, patterns of gender inequality linger, particularly in the economic and corporate domains, as evidenced by disparities in earnings and the fact that top management positions remain disproportionately dominated by men (Dashper, 2019; Hirsh *et al.*, 2013; Kalev and Deutsch, 2018). Similarly, culturally dominant ideas on entrepreneurs and business creation continue to privilege men and masculinity (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Bruni *et al.*, 2005; Marlow and McAdam, 2013). Moreover, research shows that women continue to do the bulk of unpaid domestic labor and care work, despite being professionally active (Andersson *et al.*, 2018). In this context, women's situation cannot be understood through the lens of gender roles. Scholars instead suggest theorizing gendering as a dynamic process that acknowledges women's struggle for autonomy, choice and greater equality, despite the limitations that may at times outweigh liberties (Ahl, 2004; Calás and Smircich, 1996; Harding, 1987; Kolmar and Bartkowski, 2010; Nicholson, 1995; McRobbie, 2009; Weedon, 1999). Following this view, we treat women business owners as active agents carving out their career paths within (or outside of) family firms, vis-à-vis gendered structures and stereotypes they encounter.

2.2 Family firms and gender

Family firms comprise a large part of contemporary world economies. Over 60% of all companies in Europe are family firms (Mandl, 2008) and are thus pivotal in understanding economic development and growth (Zahra *et al.*, 2004; Kellermanns *et al.*, 2008; Le Breton-Miller and Miller, 2018). Family firms are diverse in terms of size and industry, ranging from small enterprises to large international firms, but one characteristic they share is the influence of family culture on business decisions (Getz *et al.*, 2004). Scholars show that family and business form an integrated system within family firms, encompassing both the emotional/private and business/public features (De Rosa and McElwee, 2015; Hollander and Elman, 1988; Whiteside and Brown, 1991; Hall *et al.*, 2001). Consequently, relationships between family members, and therefore the gender dynamic within the family, play an important role in theorizing how family businesses function and evolve over time.

Family firm scholars suggest that gender dynamics in family businesses, though complicated by familial relationships, nevertheless often produce gendered hierarchies. For

example, the historical discrimination and devaluation of women has hindered the inward and outward perception of women as leaders and entrepreneurs (Akhmedova *et al.*, 2020; Mussolino *et al.*, 2019; Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017), and women are less often successors to CEO positions in family firms (Ratten *et al.*, 2018; Ahrens *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, women employed in family businesses are more likely to end up working behind the scenes (Cater and Young, 2019) in supporting roles (Frishkoff and Brown, 1993; Danes and Olson, 2003), family roles (Sharma, 2004; Martinez Jimenez, 2009) or peacemaker roles (Hytti *et al.*, 2017), rendering their contributions to the firm invisible (Stead, 2017). Most of the businesses in rural settings are family-owned (Bosworth, 2012) wherein women mainly obtain a caring role (Akhmedova *et al.*, 2020; Heldt Cassel and Pettersson, 2015; Little, 2002) and men a breadwinning role (Lewis, 2014) (cf. further down in this section).

2.3 Rural businesses and gender

Rural businesses are viewed as a significant component of rural development (Getz *et al.*, 2004; Getz and Carlsen, 2005; De Rosa *et al.*, 2019). Rural businesses often deploy local natural, social, and cultural resources and produce value beyond financial results of the firm, e.g. local employment and business opportunities (Kalantaridis and Bika, 2006; Trettin and Welter, 2011; Korsgaard *et al.*, 2015). Strong local community ties and networks are pivotal in understanding how rural businesses overcome social and financial obstacles or, conversely, drive rural entrepreneurship that emerges as a response to local needs (Johannisson and Nilsson, 1989; Stathopoulou *et al.*, 2004; Korsgaard *et al.*, 2015; Siemens, 2015; Gaddefors and Anderson, 2019; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Ring *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, rural businesses are often family-owned (Bosworth, 2012), a contributing factor to their embeddedness in local social networks and strong social ties (Aarstad *et al.*, 2010; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006).

The important role of informal relationships and networks play in rural businesses suggests, albeit implicitly, that gender relations influence the creation and maintenance of rural businesses both through the gendered constructs of the rural (Forsberg and Stenbacka, 2013; Little, 2002; Forsberg, 1998) and gendered family business dynamics (Anderson *et al.*, 2005). Gender relations in rural communities, as Little and Austin (1996) have shown, tend to revolve around the notion of a rural idyll wherein the desirable forms of femininity are motherly and caring, restricting women's choice in relation to employment, domestic responsibilities and lifestyle choices. Such feminine stereotypes also appear to play an important role in rural businesses, where the idea of a rural idyll is enacted to attract customers (Anthopoulou, 2010; Brandth and Haugen, 2010; Heldt Cassel and Pettersson, 2015; McElwee *et al.*, 2018).

The local embeddedness of rural firms and the cultural dimension of gender relations point to specific features of the studied rural area for theorizing gender relations (Roos, 2017). Studies examining gender and entrepreneurship in Sweden (as in this study) suggest that Sweden's rural areas are typically characterized by traditional gender norms and hierarchies (Forsberg and Stenbacka, 2013) in contrast to the otherwise gender-progressive policies of Sweden (Goldscheider *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, rural areas in Sweden are often problematized via the flight of young people (and women in particular), a development drawing attention in Sweden but also evident in other OECD countries (Leijnse, 2017). A small fraction of employed Swedish women (14.4%) live in rural areas (Sköld *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, Sköld *et al.* (2018) suggest that women business owners have lower income than those in rural areas working for employers. Another interesting pattern that Sköld *et al.* (2018) identify is that women in rural settings are more likely to start or work for a self-owned business if they are married, have children living at home, or if their level of education is a high school degree or lower. Women's entrepreneurship in rural Sweden seems to follow traditional gender hierarchies and face similar constraints as in rural areas of other countries (Hosseini and

McElwee, 2011; Ghouse *et al.*, 2021; Ghouse *et al.*, 2017). The next section presents how we investigated women’s motives to remain or return to rural family firms empirically.

3. Methodology

The empirical case in this paper builds on interview material as part of the larger study examining gender dynamics in rural family firms located in the Småland [1] region of Sweden. Småland is classified as a primarily rural region with low population density and is well known for its entrepreneurial activities (Johannisson and Nilsson, 1989). Firms were selected on the basis of having a woman co-owner/successor in the rural family firm often working alongside other family members. A total of nine (9) firms were part of the study (see Table 1. Interviewee professional and educational background).

The study was conducted using qualitative methodology inspired by the narrative approach based on nine in-depth interviews with women entrepreneurs in rural family firms. Interviews around stories give researchers back-door access to emotional topics (Labaki *et al.*, 2019), facilitating an intimate connection to empirical accounts (Dawson and Hjorth, 2012). The analysis of narratives can lead to interpretations which contribute to greater understanding of a woman’s agency in different contexts, including the family business (Larty and Hamilton, 2011). The narration of (life) stories is extensively used in family business research unfolding complex family relations (Hamilton, 2006; McAdams, 1998, 2001, 2006) and in similar contexts such as organizations (Boje, 2018) on understanding gender relations. The interviews in this study gather women’s stories about the different choices which turn their life path toward joining the rural family businesses. The women provide insight on the firm, the family and their individual experiences, perceptions and entrepreneurial journeys. Interview data enables access to the common understanding of subjects, their worldview and the basis for their actions (Kvale, 1996). The nine women interviewed ranged in age from their late 30s to mid-60s, with five holding university degrees and four holding high school degrees. Five of these women previously held managerial positions in different organizations. All were married or had co-habiting partners and were mothers with between one and three children.

3.1 Selection of firms and data collection process

The firms in this study were selected through snowball sampling (Bryman and Bell, 2003). As part of the selection process, regional family firms were discussed with a professional in the Swedish Agency Almi [2], who provided an initial overview of the business landscape in the Småland region and recommended three businesses run by women entrepreneurs. These initial contacts then recommended other women and the last women entrepreneurs referred

Table 1.
Interviewee
professional and
educational
background

Pseudonym	Age	Work life experience prior to joining the family firm	Educational background	Year of joining family firm
Greta	48	None	Highschool	1998
Jenny	44	Career counsellor, manager	University degree	2014
Saga	35	Manager, marketing director	University degree	2019
Maja	53	None	Highschool	1984
Astrid	38	Bank teller	University degree	2012
Elsa	43	None	Highschool	1995
Alva	42	Travel attendant	Highschool	2012
Elin	43	Teacher	University degree	2010
Cathy	65	CEO of a company	University degree	2019

back to the initial informant. Nine firms in total were recruited to participate in the study. Their stories enable us to analyse the way people experience and interpret their work/life situations (Fletcher *et al.*, 2016). Seven interviews were conducted in-person and two were conducted via Zoom [3], with each interview lasting 60–90 min on average. Eight interviews were conducted in English, and one was conducted in Swedish and then translated to English. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. All interviewees are anonymized, and neither company nor personal data are used in the paper in compliance with GDPR.

3.2 Data analysis

We analysed the data from the transcribed interviews and field notes with particular focus on statements regarding why women entrepreneurs stay/return to rural family businesses. These range from descriptive statements of what choices they made to reflections on how they made sense of various steps and events in their life stories. The analysis of the narratives followed the structural narrative analysis framework developed by Larty and Hamilton (2011). We began by analysing the narrative in each interview, looking for significant events and normative statements in them. Next, we sought to contextualize individual narratives by looking for shared narrative structures and patterns. Here we moved between labelling and combining patterns in empirical material and theoretical readings, i.e. engaging in multiple conversations in order to construct narratives (Roos, 2019) we present in the results section (see Table A1 in Appendix). This phase in narrative analysis is described by Larty and Hamilton (2011) as reflexive, moving between individual narratives and identification of metanarratives through which “one makes sense of one’s own and others’ past, present and future actions” (Ahl, 2007, p. 676). In this process, we identified three main narratives: (1) *perception of self*, (2) various forms of *support*, and (3) different types of *rewards* (see Figure 1) intertwined with the narrative of staying in or returning to the rural family business.

4. Results

Three narratives emerged in the analysis of women’s stories on staying in or returning to a rural family firm (see Figure 1): perception of self, various forms of support and different types of rewards. We present these narratives in the following sections.

4.1 Returning to rural settings

The interviewed women have taken different paths into the rural family businesses they now run. Greta, Maja, Alva, Elin and Elsa joined a family business fairly early in life, while Astrid, Jenny, Saga and Cathy joined after spending a considerable part of their working lives as salaried professionals in urban areas. Greta previously worked in a family business in an urban area but moved back to a rural area. For some, this choice meant returning to their own

Returning to rural settings		
<i>Perception of self</i>	<i>Support</i>	<i>Rewards</i>
Entrepreneur Suited for rural	Family support Spousal support Community support	Work life balance Contributions to and social exchange with community

Figure 1.
Overview of the
narratives

family's business in the village or town in which they grew up, while others eventually joined their spouse's family business.

Alva, who returned to the rural family business early in her professional career, first joined her father's business early in life. After working for her family's firm and at a subsidiary of the firm abroad, Alva wanted to travel and took a job at an airline company in another country. The choice to come back was initially incidental – her father asked her to help cover an employee's maternity leave. However, Alva, once back, realized that she had missed her home and the rural environment:

I was supposed to go back [abroad]. But, I came home and I realized that I have missed my home quite a lot as I was living far away from home. So, I started working here as his [father's] assistant, as sales assistance, I met my husband and I stayed (Alva).

Similarly, Elsa began her journey as a rural business owner via a series of unplanned events. She and her brother were asked to take over their neighbour's business when he retired. Elsa explains, "Our plan was our father should work full time and all three of us should help out. It never went that way". It required all four family members to work full-time, including Elsa's mother who left her job to join the rural family business.

Women returning to the family business later in life spoke of this choice as a series of careful considerations. For example, Saga's education and employment background consisted of non-profit work, banking, and marketing and branding, but she joined her partner's family firm in her mid-30s. The decision was not easy, according to Saga:

It was a hard decision because I had a very good job at the bank. The bank world is safe and to have a job there is good, you get a lot of money and everything you need. But it was something, something else I was searching for (Saga).

The search for a certain quality of life and work is a recurring narrative that plays a particularly strong role when the choice to return to rural life is made after several years. For Astrid, it follows the birth of her first child, leaving behind her banking career in Sweden's capital. Jenny makes this decision after working as a gym instructor for two decades. Cathy, the CEO of a public organization, sees her return to the family business as a step in her personal and professional development, saying, "I wanted to develop some interests that I never had the time before to do". Elin makes this choice after several years abroad and describes it as a move that enriches her life:

I really loved the life of so to speak "free" in [capital city abroad], for example there are very funny things [there] that I do not even find in Sweden (laughs). But, I've been there and I've done that so, [...]. I like the nature, I love my family I love to be with my family and I love to be surrounded with people I know. And yeah, safety maybe (Elin).

For many of these women, their return to rural life is a return to their families and childhood homes. Yet their thoughts on the reasons for this choice extend beyond the sense of security and familiarity that Elin describes above. As shown in the next section, they tend to view this step as tied to their perception of self, both in terms of their development as professionals and their values as individuals.

4.2 Perception of self

The women business owners/successors speak of their choice to work in a rural family business as one that reflects who they are. Here, two partially overlapping perceptions of self can be seen in the life stories of the women: seeing oneself as an entrepreneur, i.e. as suited for running a self-owned business, and as suited for rural life. Saga, Jenny and Maja spoke of themselves as entrepreneurial personalities, as exemplified with stories from their youth. Jenny says:

I have always been an entrepreneur I think, since my young age I have been involved in the different community activities. I have always had three (3) jobs not for money, more to meet and interact with people (Jenny).

Similarly, Maja speaks of herself as a “born entrepreneur”:

I think I was entrepreneur when I was really small. I had a flower shop on my mother's and father's porch, and I made newspapers and had a little coffee shop (Maja).

Other women spoke of themselves as particularly suited to the rural lifestyle. While the family business provided space for innovation, problem solving and leadership, they perceive the lifestyle as aligned with their selves. For example, Cathy sees closeness to nature as pivotal in her choice to live in a rural area:

As a former CEO [of a public organization] I am a half entrepreneur in a way. [. . .] Maybe one reason [is] that it's very nice to live here, it's beautiful when you wake up in the morning and look out over the lake. That can be one thing (Cathy).

Similarly, Elin and Saga speak of a preference for the countryside:

I like my family actually; I like the safety and I like to be myself and I love the nature and we have so much room and space here. [. . .] I wanted [to be] home to Sweden. I am not a city girl, as simple as that (Elin).

I like to see the countryside alive [and as a big] part of Sweden. [. . .] We came from this part of Sweden where we had to work hard, hardworking so, we have it in our soul [. . .] We have it in the genes [in our] DNA [. . .] This is our home and I like to lift up the nature questions, [. . .] it's a lifestyle (Saga).

For these women, being part of a rural family business provides the necessary setting to be themselves. The countryside and family business tie into each other as described by Elsa:

I hear a lot because I am from [the small village] and I am brought up here and still some people live here [. . .] and say: 'Oh it's so nice, it's so fun [to run the company]'. [. . .] For me it has been such a normal thing to run the company that I don't think about. [. . .] I'm so used to it, I never had another job or made anything else, this is just my life somehow (Elsa).

4.3 Support

Support is highlighted by all the women as pivotal in running a business and having a family in a small rural town. All interviewees emphasized the support of family, friends and networks readily available in a rural community. The narrative on family support detailed support provided by spouses, parents and siblings, such as helping with children, sharing knowledge about the business and encouraging women to take on leadership roles:

People starting a business today are mainly supported by family or friends, [. . .]. And of course, the family members helping in whatever way they can. [. . .] My other sister that is [producing] yoghurt, we are helping her a little bit and she's helping me a little bit. She's helping me more in my business as I have a bigger company, so she's helping me with marketing and that kind of things' (Astrid).

Also, my husband is very important because he is helping me out in the family business and in our own family, of course. He has been pushing me a lot, he makes me do things I did not think I could do. He is very big part of me daring to say “Yes” to things because he is always there supporting me (Alva).

The support women received includes family matters, as explained by Cathy:

This is a family business, so my husband's father was working a lot when our children were small and taking care of and be here when the children came from school. Our family network was very important for us when children were small. [. . .] I am actually very lucky in that way (Cathy).

Jenny and Elin highlighted support from their friends in the form of inspiration. Women's support of other women seems imperative in learning to manage a business and cultivate self-esteem, as emphasized by Jenny and Elin:

My friend Mary, she is fantastic leader with the big heart and very creative. [...] She is an entrepreneur as well. She works at school, and she is also running a consulting business. She makes you feel good when you talk to her. She listens [to] you and makes you find the answers yourself (Jenny).

I talk with my friends who have businesses. One of my best friends is running a factory, we have a lot in common and I talk to friends in the [capital] that gives me another perspective in city versus small things down here [in rural] (Elin).

Additionally, the interviewees spoke of community support, described as stemming from knowing one's neighbours, making it easier to solve everyday problems when running a business, as explained by Elsa:

A manager over there [in neighbouring company] used to call me and I call him sometimes to move things with big truck [and ask] 'Can you help me please?', and he goes, 'Yes, of course' and we don't charge each other if we help each other (Elsa).

Conversely, a more traditional community may dampen new ideas and initiatives. Saga reflects on the challenge of stalled implementation of her ideas, while Elin speaks of the slow change of pace in her rural community:

Because the biggest challenge in this area is when you're called 'The Law of Jante' [4], [...] it means that you are not better than everyone else. [...] That's so bad, because then many people mostly on the countryside think 'I cannot do that, I cannot believe in my dreams', it's a challenge! (Saga).

[...] Our biggest problem right now is to keep up and be as attractive as you think you are when you move here, so to speak. Because we are a little bit after everything, things that happen in Stockholm come to us 2 years after [chuckles]. We are not that modern and also the way of thinking and mindsets are dangerous sometimes as they are so small (Elin).

4.4 Rewards

All interviewees spoke of life and work in rural family firms as ultimately more rewarding than challenging. The narrative on rewards was depicted as rooted in relationships, experiences and quality of life rather than financial and professional success. Several interviewees spoke of the possibility for both realization of entrepreneurial ideas and better work-life balance, with family business in the rural setting a suitable venue for these objectives. Saga reflects on her choice to leave her former career, while Alva appreciates being part of the family business and Elsa speaks of work-life balance:

I think, I've got a lot of ideas and to bring them down and make them reality [...] here [at the family business] I can make it the way I want. [...] To make something on your own and to make it in your own family. For instance, right now he [son] is sick and we [she and the husband] can change [at the office] and make it suitable for us, I think that was a big part as well (Saga).

I know, it was really challenging, when my daughter was like 3 years [old] she was very sick. [...] Then, we had to make things possible, so he [husband] was home for few days and I was home. [...] The good thing about being in the family business is because everyone will say of course you need to go away, you need to do something for her. It was a challenge but on the other hand it was a really good thing, because if I was working in a normal office, perhaps they wouldn't had let me to go away. If I was just a hired one (Alva).

-I think the [worklife] balance is good now for me. After we had our daughter, for me it was planned out hours, somehow you need to get the instruction how much you're working (Elsa).

Respondents also elaborated on the gratification of contributing to their community, which in turn gave them confidence and appreciation. Jenny speaks about the connection between giving back and receiving, while for Elsa, the appreciation of the community is felt in everyday life:

I like the smallness, that everybody is involved and interested. As a little girl, I was messy and making problems at school. Now coming back feels like “a revenge”. Now I can talk to the people and I think everybody thinks good of me. I try to support community; I promote places and local products in social media. It is good for company and for me (Jenny).

People [who] live here when I meet them, I can see that they are proud of me [. . .] and say: “You are so competent”, many people say that to me, it’s quite fun. It’s funny all of them use the same expression (Elsa).

Similarly, the interviewees perceived the close-knit relationships and everyday interactions in the community as socially rewarding. Cathy describes an experience of acceptance and ease, while Greta discusses how the quality of life in the countryside could be a valuable export to city-dwellers:

We all know each other, and everyone knows each other. [. . .] It’s a kind of local area, local community [. . .] Out here [in the rural] maybe they had too much respect for me. That’s the way it works in the countryside, you get accepted when you’ve been here for a long time. It’s very easy, the life in the countryside is easy. You get to know others; you just talk to them when you go out walking. It’s an uncomplicated life, it actually is (Cathy).

The atmosphere we have in the countryside is the one we are working on getting into the lounges in town. [. . .] I wonder if it would be possible to move the village thinking to the inner city because that is what we want to work towards. [. . .] When you see [our] staff who have worked both in the countryside and in the city, they feel that working in the countryside is a much more content-rich life (Greta).

The relationships and slower pace of life in rural communities were seen as having a positive emotional influence. Elin speaks of the security and calm of the countryside as one of its greatest rewards:

[. . .] You live quite a small life but safe life here and that makes you more secure in yourself, I think, and gives you calm [. . .] I think so and hopefully it will help you in the rest of your life if you have a calm around you and security (Elin).

5. Discussion

The focus of this paper is women’s choices to join or return to rural family firms as one facet of theorizing gender relations in (and their impact on) rural areas. The women narrated their experiences as based on personal motives to join or to return to their rural family business. All women indicated that they made a conscious choice after assessing the benefits of a career within and outside of the family firm vis-à-vis their overall life goals.

Our empirical case suggests that the motives for joining a family firm revolve around three narratives: (1) the perception of self, (2) availability of support, and (3) the rewards of rural life and work in a rural family firm.

- (1) The perception-of-self narrative suggests that the interviewed women perceive themselves as particularly suited for the type of professional engagement a family firm can offer (i.e. entrepreneurial, innovative and flexible) and as “rural” personalities who appreciate nature and a slower pace of life.
- (2) The narrative of support suggests that both rural environments and work in family firms offer a high degree of support. The support of family, friends and community

members extends beyond business-related issues to encompass emotional and social support.

- (3) The narrative of rewards revolves around better life quality associated with flexibility and work–life balance, contributing meaningfully to the community and a calm, secure way of life. Thus, the rewards these women perceive are closely linked to the intimacy of a small, close-knit community, and arguably, their view of themselves as well-suited for that type of work and experiences.

In terms of the self-perceptions, these women see themselves as particularly suited for work in a family firm, as well as for rural life. In family business literature, scholars suggest that attachment to a family firm can be understood through the concept of psychological ownership (Astner, 2020), defined as “a state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership (or a piece of that target) is theirs (i.e. it is ‘MINE’)” (Pierce *et al.*, 2003, p. 86). Thus, psychological ownership can lead to identification with the goals of the family, e.g. continuity of the family firm, and personal interests not aligned with these goals (such as holding a certain managerial position) are put aside (Heinonen and Vainio-Korhonen, 2018). Typically, this line of inquiry is used in studies of succession in family firms (Mahto *et al.*, 2014). In our study, the women’s perceptions of self were related to the rural lifestyle and community itself, which raises the question of whether the rural family firms, due to their embeddedness in the local community (Aarstad *et al.*, 2010; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006), might be best understood as extending psychological ownership (and the implications it has on the individual’s life choices) beyond the family to the particular rural locality.

Women’s search for more flexible living and working situations depends on access to support structures and is well-documented in work–balance working life research (e.g. Warren, 2004), where working from home contributes to a higher quality of life when there is social support, adequate childcare and healthy boundaries between work and leisure (Moore, 2006). Women working in family firms benefit from the support of family and community that enables the realization of a balanced life and does not require them to sacrifice professional or personal ambitions.

The rewards touted by women working in rural family firms were many. The interviewees spoke of work–life balance, flexibility, support, community and calmer pace of life as central to their choice. These values and experiences can be linked to research on women’s entrepreneurship, namely that, rather than the pursuit of financial or career success, entrepreneurship can be a means for women to better accommodate their values, e.g. women who start businesses from home to accommodate more time with their children (Lewis, 2014) or women driven by feminist ideals over financial goals (Orser *et al.*, 2013; Orser *et al.*, 2011).

The findings of our study suggest that women staying in or returning to rural family firms do so to improve their social and psychological well-being. The choice is neither an attempt to advance one’s career and financial situation nor a burden placed on them by their families. The interviewed women’s experiences are described in social harmony with both the firm and the rural community. However, it is important to bear in mind that the interviewed women constitute a fairly small sample and belong to an atypical group of women who contradict the demographic trend of rural flight. Nonetheless, the women’s emphasis on social harmony and psychological well-being are interesting precisely because they represent an important experience which has implications when theorizing the conditions that make rural life attractive to women.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to add knowledge on the gender dynamic of rural settings by investigating the motives of women who contradict the demographic trend of rural flight by joining their (or

their spouse's) family firms. We follow scholars' view that women are active agents in navigating their lives, and their narratives provide insights into the considerations informing their choice to stay in or return to rural areas. Our study suggests that these women view rural family firms in a largely positive light and see this choice as aligned with their need for professional flexibility and assertiveness, rewarding relationships, and a calm, secure, well-balanced life. Theoretically, our study implies that women who choose to engage in rural family firms seek non-material benefits such as work–life balance and social support and might be driven in part by a sense of psychological ownership that extends to the rural community. Thus, women's choices here could be interpreted as gendered goals because they are seeking to create balance between their work and traditional women's domains, such as family, children and home. Some of these women's goals are gendered in the sense of providing care to others, including family and community. Our study suggests that women do not passively assume gender roles but rather are active agents attempting to balance contradictory demands of gendered division of labour and salaried work.

Further, we add to [Gaddefors and Cronsell \(2009\)](#) theorization on entrepreneurs returning (returnees) to a familiar place as advantageous due to local knowledge of history, stakeholders, and local community which offers an opportunity for them to assess their life goals. We saw in our study that the sense of security that rural family firms provided to women is one of the motives for returning to rural areas. Further, our study also asks to what (if any) extent the sense of security these women experience is due to their affiliation with a firm and family already established within a given community or by being in family constellations that conform to the local social norms. We could argue that it is possible to speak of gendered goals here too because women seek work–life balance by returning to rural settings. The rural context is particularly significant here because it provides a familiar supportive community and physical proximity of office and home. Perhaps rural family firms are best at accommodating work–life balance because the private and public are closely intertwined in the firm and the community. Rural family firms may particularly accommodate certain types of femininity, making it possible to easily move between obligations as a mother, sister, daughter, wife, community member and business owner. It is also possible that other, less conformist or traditional lifestyles and identities might not be as easily accommodated by rural family firms and communities.

One practical and societal implication of our study is the importance of work–life balance and community to women interested in working for rural businesses and possibly women entrepreneurs in general. None of the women interviewed spoke of business growth or financial gain, but rather, our study suggests that women in rural family firms are motivated by their quest for work–life balance and community engagement, which could be one key to understanding how to support women's entrepreneurship. This raises a question as to whether women's engagements in taking care of family and having work–life flexibility are sufficiently supported by policy. Our study suggests a need for support for women's entrepreneurship with a primary aim to provide social value. Another practical implication is that holding regular salaried employment positions may necessitate women to separate or render their private sphere responsibilities invisible, which is something not needed in rural family firms, paradoxically making it easier to maintain good work–life balance.

Finally, our study indicates several important and interesting venues for further scientific inquiry. First, further exploration into gender relations within rural family firms, e.g. women's roles in decision-making, could enhance the existing literature in this area. Second, investigating the role of community and networks in rural family businesses owned or managed by women has potential to advance our understanding of women's entrepreneurship.

Notes

1. Småland is composed of Jönköping, Kronoberg, Kalmar Counties and Blekinge, with approx. 948,120 inhabitants, equal to 9.5% of Sweden's population (OECD, 2019).
2. Almi Företagspartner AB is owned by the Swedish state and is the parent company of a group consisting of 16 regional subsidiaries and the Almi Invest AB subgroup. The regional subsidiaries provide loans and business development advice. Almi Invest is wholly owned by the parent company and conducts venture capital activities (www.almi.se).
3. Due to Covid-19 global pandemic, a face-to-face interview was impossible, and therefore Zoom was utilized.
4. The Law of Jante was originally created by Danish writer Aksel Sandemose to describe the ten rules of a fictional town Jante, among which expressions of individuality and personal success were disapproved of. The term 'Law of Jante' is a commonly used expression in Sweden to speak of an informal culture of conformity.

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Further reading

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Examples from empirical material	Sub-themes (found in the process of coding)	The main theme/ category (total of three)
<p><i>Recurring narratives</i></p> <p>“I was always been an entrepreneur” “Always I wanted to be a leader, and wanted to do business” “I have always felt at home” “I was longing for” “I am quite a problem solver and I think it’s fun to make things work” “I think we have something from home and I think it’s fun to start a business on our own”</p> <p>“My partner is not involved in my company. At home he is doing all the family work, I do only during the weekends. I leave at 7 a.m. and come back at 7:30 p.m. Sometimes family comes here in the gym and we spend family time together. I have two kids as well, they are 9 years and 11 years old” “My great grandfather [was the one] who started that business when he was young, eighteen. My family has always been entrepreneurial for as long as I’ve known” “In a small community like this, we companies help each other when we need something. A manager over there [in neighbouring company] used to call me and I call him sometimes to move things with big truck ‘Can you help me please?’, and he goes, ‘Yes, of course!’ and we do not charge each other if we help each other”</p>	<p>The interviewees often spoke of personal motives for wanting to join family business or to return to the rural</p> <p>Two main sub-themes, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes just one at a time</p> <p>(1) Perception of oneself as an entrepreneur from early on in life – choices of career based on that perception</p> <p>(2) Perception of oneself as at home in the rural, or conversely, in the home village/near one’s family</p> <p>The interviewees emphasized various forms of support as pivotal for their thriving in the rural. We identified three main sources of this support. Some of the interviewees experiences all three forms of support, and some only spoken of one of these</p> <p>(1) Spousal support (sharing the work, helping each other out)</p> <p>(2) Family support (exchange and learning from each other)</p> <p>(3) Community support (close-nit relations in the rural, entrepreneurs supporting each other)</p>	<p>Self-perception (narrative of self)</p> <p>Support</p>

Table A1.
Coding scheme

(continued)

Examples from empirical material	Sub-themes (found in the process of coding)	The main theme/ category (total of three)
<p>“While I was working in the bank I was thinking [it] could be nice to try to work in my father’s company. I thought it was worth to giving it a try when I got my first child. [. . .] I think my journey started after I got my first child or when I was home with my first child. [. . .] So, I [decided]: ‘Yes, I will give it a try to see how it will work out and it has been good! [. . .] Today, compare with my work at the bank it has fixed my life so much more “</p> <p>“[There are] these different working groups of businessmen working all together on: what we can do and help the society (community) and being and part of that you help? Like schools come to the company and we show them around, we help them when they want to have their practices. And I guess that makes us giving to the society (community) but the society helps us now when we want to build the new factory. They help us to sort out where we can build, they [allocated] a land for us to build”.</p>	<p>All interviewees spoke of non-material rewards/benefits that outweighed benefits of secure employment in the urban areas. There were two main sub-themes that were evident in the narratives. They were often not overlapping, thus the women spoke of either one or the other</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="497 515 863 606">(1) A flexible work situation allowing for greater work-life balance (e.g. caring for children, adapting to changing needs of family life) <li data-bbox="497 611 863 775">(2) Purposeful and richer life, partially because the rural allows to give back to the local community, but also because living closer to nature or in a smaller community has a certain <i>je ne sais quoi</i> that subjectively feels enriching 	Rewards

Table A1.

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