
Guest editorial: Gender and entrepreneurial family business – decision-making, agency and empowerment

Guest editorial

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Introduction

As the most prominent form of business organisation, the family business has intertwining priorities related to the family, business and the firm (Tagiuri and Davis, 1992). Due to the involvement of family members in the business, the family is usually set as a core of the business and influences major decision-making processes (Rau *et al.*, 2018). As a result, family firms possess non-economic goals and financial objectives (Chrisman *et al.*, 2012). Family firms contribute significantly to the world economy with providing jobs, quality products and excellent services supporting their business longevity (Le Breton-Miller and Miller, 2022). Research on family business has grown exponentially in the last ten years, with a strong focus on firm-level behaviour and family dynamics. Empirical works have shown that family firms are better than non-family firms in several areas, such as financial performance, business resilience, and sustainability (Calabrò *et al.*, 2021; Wagner *et al.*, 2015; Agostino and Ruberto, 2021). We continue to see a burgeoning work examining the antecedents and impacts of family business performance, decision-making process, family dynamics and successions. The main theoretical perspectives include resource-based theory, stewardship theory, agency theory and the popular home-grown theory of socioemotional wealth.

Apart from these firm-level measures, family firms are also proud of preserving their family values, traditions and legacy that influence their families and business communities (Picone *et al.*, 2021). One of the traditions observed in the family firms is that male owners or heirs often lead and drive family businesses while their spouses and sisters stay behind the scenes. Due to gender roles, women often have dual responsibilities for the business and household. They have been relatively “invisible” in their family businesses yet taking on enormous amounts of administrative work and providing informal support in both the business and the family (Martinez Jimenez, 2009; Rowe and Hong, 2000). Women sometimes played the “chief emotional officer’s” role in providing emotional stability and support in the family firms (Calabrò *et al.*, 2023).

Nevertheless, women have taken more prominent positions in family business in recent years. While women are often excluded from the succession process, some works have examined the role of women and daughters in succession planning (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2018; Xian *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, there is growing interest in looking at the impact of gender diversity in the family board of directors and board of governance, women’s role in innovation and firm-level decision-making process (Maggi *et al.*, 2023; Ramadani *et al.*, 2017).

While having a more prominent role and active participation in family firms illustrate women’s capabilities being appreciated by families and firms, their contributions are often considered crucial resources supporting family firms’ performance. On the other hand, literature on how family firms support, empower and give women autonomy in the business is scarce. It is, therefore, essential to conduct more systematic and extensive research into how women emancipate themselves from unassuming roles to become more visible and vocal in family business from a gender perspective. Family business research must consider gender and gender theory to progress from a traditionally masculinised family business culture and



to transform the way gender is being considered in family business literature (Kubíček and Machek, 2019; Ramadani *et al.*, 2017). Using a new research context that reflects gender as the primary theoretical lens would help identify supporting conditions that elevate women's position and power in family business. Hence, this special issue addresses this gap in the extant literature.

Rationale for the special issue

Research suggests that women tend to show more devotion to the family business, concern for family members and are more thoughtful towards the needs of others (Curimbaba, 2002). Hence, joining the family business is a more welcoming option than starting their own ventures for women. Given their active role in supporting the family and firm, it is essential to understand what women can gain individually from their involvement in the family business. Shifting the current focus from what women can contribute to family business, this special issue takes the next step to encourage more work examining how the context of family business supports women in their agency, decision-making and empowerment. By uncovering more women's voices in family firms, the special issue advances theoretical contributions in family business literature using gender as a theoretical approach.

While research has observed the active participation of women in family business in recent years (Bauweraerts *et al.*, 2022), there is a need to consider women's role in family business beyond entrepreneurial entry, succession, career dynamics and presence in a family firm (Campopiano *et al.*, 2017). This special issue, therefore, puts forward the question of whether these women are empowered in their roles in the family firms. This evaluation allows researchers and practitioners to verify the enablers and deterrents for women to pursue an active role in the family business. In addition, it is also essential to understand how family business supports women in leadership development, gaining recognition, achieving agency and being empowered. The benefits of women's participation in family business should not be limited to firm and family level but extend right across to include consideration of the individual level.

Recent works have started to examine individual influence on family business in several contexts (Kelleci *et al.*, 2019) and how women's participation impacts family firms' outcomes (Bauweraerts *et al.*, 2022). Women are also found to have a long-term orientation in facing the COVID-19 pandemic (Anggadwita *et al.*, 2023) and influence participation in community and social responsibility (Peake and Marshall, 2017). The contribution of women in family business is becoming more evident through these empirical studies, but how family business operates as a medium to promote women's agency and empowerment remains unexplored. Spotlighting women's experiences in gaining personal agency would elevate their willingness to bring meaningful impacts to the firm, family and other women in the same context.

This special issue offers a vital research platform to expand the current discourse on gender equality, as established in United Nations SDG#5 in a family business context. Aligned with the global goals, there is a need to challenge the societal prejudice, (un)conscious gender bias and family traditions in family firms. As the main contributor to the economy and social development, the family business could exert its influence as a role model to support gender equality. Family business literature must move from taking gender as just another variable to understanding the gender approach and its impact on family firms. Through gender theorising that reflects the impact on the individual (the women) rather than the firm, family or the family firm, this would lead to more prominent roles held by women in family firms.

With these rationales in mind, the special issue is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do women see themselves in a family business?

RQ2. How do gendered processes impact women's engagement and participation in family businesses? Guest editorial

RQ3. How do women contextualise their experiences in family business?

There are four papers accepted in this special issue. These papers show empirical evidence of women's involvement at different levels in family firms. The family firms examined are also of various sizes, ranging from micro-enterprises to public-listed family firms operating in Ireland, South Korea, India and a global dataset survey.

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Special issue contributions

The first paper in this special issue is "Women's Entrepreneurial Resistance to COVID-19 Pandemic inside Handloom Family Enterprises: A Case Study of West Bengal, India" by Sayana Basu. This fascinating paper documents the experiences of 66 women involved in 26 family handloom businesses in West Bengal, India. The labour crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic may be reminiscent, for Western readers, of the pressures faced by women when men returned from the world wars. In this case, men had left the family businesses to work in the city, and the women took over the management and running of them. When the men returned home, due to Covid-related job losses, these talented women faced relegation and potential collapse of their agency due to the prevailing gender realities. This was a common phenomenon worldwide as the 'gains' many women and societies imagined they had made experienced truth put to the lie. These women, through various coping strategies, including bargaining and passive resistance, rode out the threats to their business internally (family pressures, increased childcare and schooling responsibilities) and externally (collapsed markets, storage issues) by collectively acting, taking this opportunity to reinforce community and responding innovatively to the new market realities. In the face of pressures from relatives, and exhortations to concentrate now on family safety and their parenting duties, leaving the business actions (meetings and marketing) to their husbands and the loss of markets for their expensive, export-oriented offerings the women both pivoted to producing new, cheaper items (scarves) and also used their talents to produce face masks – all the while encouraging their fellow artisans to do the same.

... I was reprimanded by my husband when I encouraged my neighbours (other women artisans) to propose this idea [making Covid masks] to the marketing agents they were working for. In a few weeks, I practically saw all weaving households making them. But I wasn't jealous at all; I was just so very happy to see women smiling again after such a long time. I was exalted to hear the sound of loom in every household. He (her husband) doesn't understand this is not about winning; this is about surviving together.

This paper highlights the role of women in social cohesion and their collective approach to business and community. It also illustrates the choice the men made to "strengthen their individual identities and power positions by trying to regain control over the family business". The entrepreneurial resilience of these women is an important example of sustainable entrepreneurship/business and ensuring the survival of this artisanal community over this crisis.

In the second paper – "Women in the family business: Self and family's influence on their perceptions of financial performance", Ana Gonzalez, Yeny Rodriguez and Carol Sanchez look at perceptions of financial performance, including the concept of socioemotional wealth and its influence on the perceptions of both families and individuals. Utilising the Successful Transgenerational Entrepreneurship Practices (STEP) survey and combining the socioemotional wealth considerations of identity, exercise of family influence, family goals and continuation of the family dynasty overlaid with the social construct of gender, this paper

points to how financial evaluations vary according to gender – a fact often overlooked in research design.

Highlighting an important theoretical area in the literature on entrepreneurship, these authors point to a lack of theory which regards gender as a social construct and so either data on the gender of respondents is treated as merely a variable – or not at all – which leaves important gaps in our understanding: are these respondents women, men, leaders or family members? They find that gender is very significant in terms of financial perceptions, with women tending to be more positive – but not if they are leaders. In that case their perceptions decrease, even becoming negative. Socioemotional wealth amplifies these tendencies.

Women, consistent with their gendered socialisation, can overstate the financial performance of their family business, with their relational-oriented and optimistic view of financial performance and reflective of their gendered context of being more loyal and unconditional towards the family firm than men. This means they may overestimate financial performance when asked for the purposes of scholarly research. As leaders, women reflect their socialisation by being less optimistic than men, possibly due to the challenges they face as women leaders, the lack of support they may endure in striving towards strategic goals and with a wish to temper expectations. This position may cause others to question their competence to lead. In keeping with this finding, Gonzalez *et al.* find that the theoretical perspective of “precarious manhood” is supported, as men overstate financial expectations to reinforce their gender socialisation as men when they are in leadership positions. In terms of socioemotional wealth, only family continuity was influential on overestimation of family business performance. For women leaders, family continuity and enrichment both negatively influenced perceptions of financial performance. These results further support the claim of multidimensionality for the socioemotional wealth construct.

Overall, the paper contributes to several areas including how social constructs of gender lead to differences in perceptions of financial performance as well as self-promotion and self-evaluation related to gender. Further, it reinforces the socioemotional wealth construct as one which is multidimensional, with different elements affecting the different genders in different ways and at different intensities.

The third paper: “Vying for and forgoing visibility: female next gen leaders in family business with male successors” by Martina Brophy, Marua McAdam and Eric Clinton present the topic of visibility and invisibility in family business when there are male successors. In this consideration of identity, women use their tactic of visibility/invisibility to establish their legitimacy and use power and humility to work in concert with the male next generation. This study involved in-depth interviews with 13 next generation family business leaders and offers a model to show how these women establish their legitimacy with the male next generation in power by balancing their visibility/invisibility as leaders themselves – humility in partnership and endorsement of their brother as leader, so leveraging power in partnership. In this way, specific strategies used by these women are uncovered herein.

Answering the calls within the literature for more work on developing and identifying gender as a social construct within the family business area, this paper addresses how women manage the gender dynamics in their daily lives – especially when the preference for sons to succeed to leadership in family business environments is well documented – resulting in women investing much time and effort into their identities. This is particularly true as they navigate exclusion (invisibility) and difference (visibility) whilst working alongside their male next generation leaders.

Gender based differences manifest, for these women, in not being considered as the successor and/or joining the family business later in their careers than their brothers. This leads to respondents framing their failure to succeed or be considered a successor as a result of “time served”, area of specialisation and/or something they themselves do not want. Differences which cause highlighted visibility can be related to childcare/family

obligations, characterised as a lack of commitment when compared to the “workaholic” brothers. Women who successfully balance these visibilities are often the (silent) advisor to (younger) brothers who fulfil the main leadership position in the family business. “By maintaining the outward impression of the male-in-power as sole decision-maker, female next generation were able to challenge male family members in a way that reduced the possibility for confrontation”.

Through the analysis of the three concepts of identity work, gender practices and (in) visibility, this paper is able to illustrate the underlying processes that contribute to the invisibility of women in their family businesses with the male next generation as leaders. It also gives important and empirical insights into the way gender dynamics shape everyday interactions and activities for women in their family businesses exposing hidden power imbalances as it does so.

The final paper – “Gender inequalities in Korean family business: contradictions between show and tell” by Amee Kim and Poh Yen Ng examines how gender-related issues are communicated in *chaebols* (Korean family-run conglomerates) to understand how the public communications of these companies reflect the perception of gender representation within them. Using annual reports to examine what is written and illustrated about gender issues and using a Foucauldian framework, these authors find that the plans *chaebols* refer to with a view to improving female career prospects are vague and under-evaluated.

Data were collected from five purposively chosen *chaebols* (Samsung, LG, CJ – Cheil Jedang, Korean Air and Hyundai) using reports covering a 12-year period. These family businesses had between 9 and 18% women on their boards. Considering employment ratios, talent development and management, female employee retention and female leadership representation in the glottographic (text) and non-glottographic (charts/visuals) material in the reports, these authors found information unclear, inconsistent and potentially misleading.

Although the reports show an awareness of gender issues and have increased their reporting on the topics in more recent years, many of the strong claims made across the *chaebol*'s reports are not at all clear, especially in glottographic statements. In non-glottographic statements numbers are frequently provided without any details around how these were derived, leading to the question: “Is the (glottographic) truth being told or are the (non-glottographic) numbers being calculated correctly?”

Female employment in the *chaebols* is at a low level. Although 65% of Korean women participate in the workforce, the approach of the *chaebols* still reflects the cultural societal expectations on female gender roles. Women are often over-represented in lower-level jobs, including manufacturing. Women are frequently categorised under the title “manager” without any breakdown of the level of manager. There is a strong preference for masculinity in full-time work in Korea, and so the rise of part-time work is likely to be performed by (married) women. These workers are unlikely to have opportunities to progress in their careers or be paid salaries, rather than hourly wages. The authors conclude that many issues surrounding women and their progression up and through work is a “ticking the box” exercise, particularly when women return to work after childbirth.

As they note, “silence can be perceived as the source of resistance to gender equality from dominant groups in society” and there is no doubt that the *chaebols* are hugely important in Korean society. As such, they are missing out on providing a leadership role in improving and equalising the lives of Korean women at work. In fact, they are doing the opposite, and constructing gendered hierarchies. In time, this may affect their global competitiveness, due to their failure to see and support women workers' potential and developing programmes to help them succeed to the highest levels in their companies as they go through bearing and raising the next generation of Korean people.

Conclusion and future directions

This special issue addresses the role of family business to support women's agency, decision-making and female empowerment. As such it also serves as podium to debate questions of gender equality in family businesses. The four articles published in this special issue reveal persisting societal and organisational gender disparities in family business contexts, which are highly challenging for women. The articles describe women who have been successful in managerial as well as leadership roles in their respective family business; they also show women who proved to be exceptionally resourceful and innovative in face of adversity. Nevertheless, the studies point to a persistent disregard for women's contributions to the wellbeing of family businesses across diverse national contexts. From West Bengal to Ireland to Korea and beyond the research articles in this special issue reveal examples of how women operationalise "coping strategies" to be "invisible" or "not too visible", how women "downplay their contributions as leaders to firm performance"; and how they have to negotiate their role as managers and leaders with gendered societal expectations, that push them to behave in a way that is humble, conciliatory and small to not threaten the "precarious manhood" of their male counterparts in business and society.

Further work on the construct of female visibility as well as identity work of women in family business is needed. The prevailing view tends to assign women a more supportive or secondary role in the business, compared with their male counterparts. Moreover, women are still perceived as marginalised contributors to firm performance and development. Such gendered assumptions are embedded within cultural contexts, and they impact expectations and business practices (Xian *et al.*, 2021) worldwide. As well, they trickle down to the cognitive social constructions of individual women and influence definitions of their own professional identities within family businesses. More studies are needed that address and illustrate the dynamic processes that shape female visibility or invisibility in family businesses, which is intrinsically related to variations and changes in women's role identity within different contexts over time (McAdam *et al.*, 2021). Constructions of women's leadership differ with cultural context and more work is needed that challenges prevailing Western-hegemonic assumptions regarding female empowerment, leadership and entrepreneurship (Wood *et al.*, 2021) which would add to a more complete picture of change processes within collectivist cultural settings as well as developmental and transitional economic contexts.

Similar to entrepreneurship, prevalent concepts of leadership and management in family business are defined as male, where women take the place of "the other" (Ahl, 2006). Thus, research on gender and family firms needs to go beyond analysing and understanding gendered social orders and also address the mechanisms by which these orders can be reconstructed (Ahl, 2004) to become more inclusive of female conceptualisations. This requires including male perspectives and considering how gendered expectations and norms also impact male family members. Involving men more to advocate gender equitable environments, policies and procedures in a family firm context can enhance processes of change. Men still hold preponderant power in most areas of life and in most contexts. As such they play a pivotal role in shifting attitudes and ideas about gendered norms and practices. Recent research on women entrepreneurs in the Arab world revealed how male family members – fathers, brothers, husbands – have been instrumental for women's start-up success, as they provided women with access to key resources, such as social capital, financial resources and skills. They also provided strong emotional and companionship support that was directed at women's entrepreneurial autonomy (Bastian *et al.* 2023).

Significant by their number and/or size, family businesses are in a perfect position to reimagine, reconstruct and reenergize gender/ed hierarchies by championing women and policies which directly affect their work lives, while they directly affect the progress of the overall society in terms of management and leadership styles, procreation and expertise.

With this special issue we hope to have curated a serious, impactful issue of the *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, which contributes to the balancing of a heavily (male) gendered literature and the lived reality for women contributing to their own, and other, family businesses.

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