

# Chapter 9

## Women's Roles in Family Businesses: Specifics, Contradictions, and Reflections

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter is based on a systematic literature review of 56 articles published in leading academic journals and aims to reflect on the role of women in family businesses, focusing on specifics, contradictions, and opportunities derived from this specific setting. In detail, this work intends to disentangle this ambiguous and fragmentary topic and shed light on new perspectives by identifying how and why women are involved in invisible or minor roles where they are sometimes unpaid or paid less than men, despite having shown uncontested ability in firm management. Further studies are suggested to analyze in depth specific insights of the topic, particularly those related to anthropological and psychological perspectives.*

### INTRODUCTION

Several academic studies have shown that family businesses represent one of the most relevant kinds of firms in the world (Anderson & Reeb, 2003; Barnes & Hershon, 1976; Chrisman, Chua, Kellermanns, & Chang, 2007; Donnelley, 1964) in light of their importance to the global economy and their impact on the workforce (Astrachan & Shanker, 2003; Corbetta & Salvato, 2012).

Despite this recognized relevance, scholars have not provided a unique and accepted definition of “family firm.” Thus, researchers’ conclusions appear to be inconsistent and unclear. The definition used here is one proposed by Rosemblatt, de Mit, Anderson, and Johnson (1985), which describes a family

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9171-9.ch009

firm as a business controlled and influenced by a family, where two or more family members are active in management. This concept spotlights the main difference between a family and a non-family business: the pervasiveness of the family in strategic and organizational positions. Thus, family structure plays a key role in defining pivotal roles inside the business, especially when cultural traditions place women and men in a different social and work positions (Alcorn, 1982; Lyman, Salganicoff, & Hollander, 1985; Ponthieu & Caudill, 1993; Ufuk & Özgen, 2001).

In this scenario, the role of women appears contradictory because they are traditionally involved in family care, and they have less time and business awareness than male counterparts (Dumas, 1990, 1998). Moreover, daughters often suffer the “daddy’s little girl” dilemma (Dumas, 1989, 1992), which influences their acceptability as suitable successors, even when female leadership has been more productive than male leadership and more appreciated by employees and other stakeholders (Allen & Langowitz, 2003).

This evident contradiction between the positive results of women’s efforts in leadership tasks and the low opportunities they have when performing management roles calls for a more in-depth analysis to uncover the “how” and the “why.”

Salganicoff (1990) added to the debate by declaring that, while family business studies were in their infancy, literature on women in family business was in its pregnancy. Nowadays, family business studies are numerous and frame a well-defined stream of research. However, literature on the role of women within family businesses, despite the last decade showing an increase, continues to require more study (Vera & Dean, 2005). Interesting recent contributions have addressed this topic outlining literature reviews (Campopiano, De Massis, Rinaldi, & Sciascia, 2017; Gupta & Levenburg, 2013) to capture the ongoing process of the studies to draw conceptual models, relevant insights, and to suggest further research directions.

This chapter, based on a systematic literature review, and on a conventional content analysis of 56 selected articles, aims to reflect the role of women in family businesses, focusing on specificities, contradictions, and opportunities coming from specific settings. In detail, this work disentangles this ambiguous and fragmentary topic, shedding light on new perspectives by identifying the how and the why of women involved in invisible (Cole, 1997) or minor roles, often unpaid or less paid, compared to the same roles played by men (Rowe & Hong, 2000), and it also examines women showing uncontested ability in firm management (Cruz, Justo, & De Castro, 2012). Concluding remarks and final reflections highlight new perspectives and suggest new questions.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Defining Family Businesses: An Enduring Challenge for Scholars**

Family firms are the most common form of business worldwide, and their importance is widely recognized by seminal studies (Anderson & Reeb, 2003; Barnes & Hershon, 1976; Chrisman, Chua, Kellermanns & Chang, 2007; Donnelley, 1964). This agreement about the relevance of family business has stimulated a proliferation of studies focused on a plurality of aspects, adopting multiple definitions and approaches. The utilization of different definitions has created contradictions in the findings of studies referencing ample or narrow meanings to confer the “family business” concept. In other words, adopting one definition or another influences the real dimension of the family firm phenomenon that, in the case of a narrow definition, describes a small group of firms and, in the case of an ample definition, portrays

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