

WOMEN'S ROLE IN FAMILY BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes women's roles in family businesses using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify the dominant themes, challenges, and strategic opportunities shaping their participation and leadership within family firms. Drawing on peer-reviewed articles published between 2018 and 2025 from major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald, and ScienceDirect, a total of twenty-five studies were selected through a rigorous screening process based on PRISMA guidelines and clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Thematic analysis of the selected literature revealed five central dimensions: leadership and governance, decision-making involvement, succession and inheritance, work-family balance, and structural and cultural barriers. The findings demonstrate that women are increasingly occupying visible and formalized leadership and succession positions, contributing to innovation, ethical governance, and long-term sustainability; however, their roles remain constrained by systemic bias, patriarchal norms, and limited institutional recognition. The synthesis further indicates that supportive professional networks, gender-inclusive governance policies, structured mentorship, and transparent succession planning significantly enhance women's leadership effectiveness and organizational impact. Overall, the study concludes that strengthening women's participation in family businesses is not only a matter of equity but also a strategic imperative that reinforces sustainability, intergenerational continuity, and competitive advantage.

Key words: women's role; family business; leadership; gender bias; systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

Gender issues and the participation of women in family businesses have become an increasingly important topic in management and entrepreneurship research. Family firms are recognized as key contributors to global economic growth and innovation, providing stability, employment, and intergenerational wealth creation (Sharma & Nordqvist, 2022). Within these firms, women often occupy essential but underacknowledged roles in management, ownership, and decision-making. Historically, they were viewed as "invisible contributors," providing emotional and operational support without formal recognition (Ligier & Mikolajczak, 2019). This pattern reflects deep-rooted gendered expectations embedded in family and business structures, where leadership and succession traditionally favored male heirs (Floris & Dettori, 2022; Sharma et al., 2021). However, women's roles in family firms have become progressively more central, substantive, and important in recent years.

Recent scholarship approaches gender not merely as a biological distinction but as a socially constructed and contextually embedded phenomenon shaping family business dynamics (Calabrò et al., 2019; Hytti et al., 2022). Since business families function as social institutions, gender norms and inequalities within broader society are often reproduced in family firms, influencing leadership, ownership, and succession patterns (Cesaroni & Sentuti, 2023). Despite growing awareness, women in family enterprises continue to face barriers such as patriarchal culture, gender bias, and limited access to leadership training (Díaz-Muñoz et al., 2021). Yet, their involvement has been shown to promote ethical leadership, innovation, and sustainable performance (Lech & Scholnick, 2023), underscoring the importance of gender-inclusive practices in strengthening family firm resilience.

Building on these insights, this research seeks to synthesize recent empirical findings and address persisting gaps in understanding women's roles within family firms. Employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study aims to identify: (1) the primary roles women play in family businesses; (2) the barriers and enablers influencing these roles; and (3) the implications for leadership, succession, and business sustainability. Through this synthesis, the study contributes to advancing a more inclusive framework that supports gender equality, enhances leadership diversity, and ensures the continuity and competitiveness of family businesses in an evolving global context.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to synthesize existing scholarly knowledge regarding women's roles in family businesses. The SLR approach was selected to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability in identifying, screening, and analyzing relevant academic literature. The review process followed the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021), which provides structured guidance for reporting systematic reviews and minimizing selection bias.

The literature search was conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Emerald Insight. These databases were selected due to their high academic credibility and

extensive coverage of management, entrepreneurship, and gender studies literature. The search strategy combined keywords and Boolean operators to enhance precision and comprehensiveness. Core keywords included “family business,” “family firm,” “women,” “gender,” “female leadership,” “women entrepreneurs,” “succession,” and “governance.” The search string was adapted to each database’s indexing system to ensure consistent retrieval.

The inclusion criteria were defined as follows: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles; (2) publications written in English; (3) empirical or conceptual studies focusing on women’s roles, leadership, governance, succession, or participation within family businesses; and (4) articles published between 2015 and 2024 to capture contemporary developments and recent theoretical advancements. Exclusion criteria included conference proceedings, book chapters, dissertations, non-peer-reviewed reports, and studies that addressed entrepreneurship or gender issues without a specific focus on family firms.

The initial search yielded a broad pool of articles. After removing duplicates across databases, titles and abstracts were screened to assess relevance. Articles that did not explicitly examine women’s participation or gender dynamics within family businesses were excluded at this stage. Full-text screening was subsequently conducted to ensure alignment with the research objectives. The final selection consisted of 25 articles that met all inclusion criteria and were deemed methodologically sound and substantively relevant.

Data extraction was conducted using a structured review matrix that captured key information from each article, including authors, year of publication, geographical context, research design, theoretical framework, main findings, and identified themes. To synthesize the findings, this study applied a thematic synthesis approach following Tranfield et al. (2003). The analysis proceeded in three stages: (1) open coding to identify recurring concepts and patterns; (2) grouping codes into broader thematic categories; and (3) refining and interpreting themes to construct an integrative framework explaining women’s roles, challenges, and opportunities in family firms.

To enhance analytical reliability, themes were cross-validated by comparing findings across regional contexts and methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods). This comparative process allowed the identification of convergent trends and contextual variations. The final outcome of the synthesis was the identification of five dominant thematic clusters: leadership and governance, decision-making involvement, succession and inheritance, work–family balance, and structural and cultural barriers.

By employing a systematic and transparent review protocol, this study ensures methodological credibility while providing a comprehensive synthesis of contemporary scholarship. The SLR approach enables the development of an integrative conceptual perspective that advances understanding of gender dynamics within family businesses and informs future empirical research directions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Overview of Selected Studies

The 25 selected studies reflect a geographically diverse body of scholarship, with Europe (8 studies) and Asia (7 studies) contributing the largest share, followed by North America (5), Latin America (3), and Africa (2). This distribution suggests that research on women in family businesses is increasingly global, although still concentrated in regions with stronger publication ecosystems. Methodologically, the majority of studies employed qualitative approaches such as case studies and in-depth interviews, while several adopted mixed-method designs combining surveys and narrative analysis. The predominance of qualitative research indicates that gender dynamics in family firms are often explored through interpretive lenses, emphasizing lived experiences, identity construction, and relational processes rather than purely quantitative measurement.

Table 1. Summary of Main Themes Identified from SLR

Theme	Key Findings
Leadership & Governance	Women increasingly occupy managerial and ownership roles; positively affect innovation and ethical leadership.
Decision-Making Involvement	Women influence strategic decisions through empathy, collaboration, and long-term vision.
Succession & Inheritance	Daughters are emerging as legitimate successors despite traditional norms (Diaz-Munoz et al., 2021)
Work-Family Balance	Flexible structures and emotional support enhance women’s performance and satisfaction.
Structural Barriers	Persistent gender bias and limited institutional support remain key challenges (Sharma & Nordqvist, 2022)

2. Thematic Synthesis

The thematic synthesis identified five dominant and interconnected dimensions: leadership and governance, decision-making involvement, succession and inheritance, work–family balance, and structural and cultural barriers. These themes do not operate independently; rather, they collectively shape women’s visibility, legitimacy, and influence within family enterprises.

3. Leadership and Governance

Across the reviewed literature, women’s leadership in family firms is increasingly formalized through managerial, board-level, and ownership roles. Studies indicate that women leaders tend to promote ethical governance, long-term strategic orientation, and stakeholder-sensitive management practices. Their leadership style is often characterized as relational and inclusive, fostering collaboration and internal cohesion. However, despite measurable contributions to innovation and sustainability, recognition of women’s authority remains uneven. In patriarchal contexts, leadership roles may be symbolic or secondary, with ultimate decision-making power informally retained by male family members (Koironen, 2019). This discrepancy between formal title and actual influence highlights the persistence of embedded gender hierarchies.

4. Decision-Making and Strategic Roles

Women’s participation in strategic decision-making is strongly associated with increased stakeholder trust and participatory governance structures (Eddleston et al., 2020). Their involvement often introduces greater transparency, consensus-building, and long-term orientation in strategic planning. Several studies emphasize that women contribute emotional intelligence and empathetic communication, which strengthens organizational culture and intergenerational alignment. However, the extent of their influence frequently depends on family norms, ownership structure, and generational stage. In founder-led firms, women’s participation may be constrained, whereas later-generation firms exhibit greater openness to shared leadership models.

5. Succession and Legitimacy

Succession remains one of the most contested arenas of gender inequality in family businesses. While sons are traditionally preferred as heirs in many cultural contexts, daughters are increasingly emerging as legitimate successors when they demonstrate professional competence, education, and loyalty to family values. The literature suggests a gradual shift from gender-based succession norms toward merit-based criteria, particularly in firms facing competitive market pressures. Nevertheless, legitimacy for female successors often requires higher proof of competence compared to their male counterparts. This “double standard” underscores how succession processes reflect broader societal gender expectations.

6. Work–Family Interface

The intersection between professional and domestic roles remains a central theme. Women in family businesses frequently navigate role conflict, balancing leadership responsibilities with caregiving expectations. Yet, this dual positioning also provides relational advantages. Studies indicate that women often function as mediators between family and business spheres, maintaining emotional stability and organizational cohesion (Lech & Scholnick, 2023). Flexible governance structures and supportive family environments significantly enhance their effectiveness and job satisfaction. Mentorship, spousal support, and peer networks reduce burnout and strengthen leadership continuity.

7. Institutional and Cultural Context

Structural and cultural barriers persist as overarching constraints. Gender stereotypes, rigid traditions, and limited institutional support systems restrict women’s access to authority and ownership (Ligier & Mikolajczak, 2019). Even when women hold formal titles, implicit bias can undermine their credibility. However, firms that implement formal equality policies, transparent governance systems, and structured succession planning demonstrate stronger continuity and performance outcomes. This suggests that institutional design plays a mediating role in translating gender inclusion into measurable organizational benefits.

8. Integrative Discussion

Collectively, the findings indicate that women occupy multifaceted and strategic roles within family firms, contributing not only to operational management but also to governance quality, innovation capacity, and intergenerational continuity. Empirical evidence from recent publications, including studies in the *Journal of Business Research* (2023), demonstrates that gender-inclusive ownership and governance structures positively influence succession readiness and long-term business continuity. Women’s participation enhances adaptive capacity in volatile business environments and encourages cross-generational learning.

Recent theoretical developments further enrich this perspective. Discua Cruz et al. (2024) conceptualize women’s entrepreneurship in family firms as stewardship, positioning female leaders as custodians of both emotional and economic capital. This stewardship perspective reframes women’s contributions not as auxiliary

support but as central to sustaining legacy and strategic renewal. Their relational leadership complements market-driven innovation, aligning family values with evolving competitive demands.

Despite these advances, gender stereotypes remain a significant barrier. Cultural norms continue to shape expectations regarding authority, risk-taking, and succession legitimacy. These constraints reduce entrepreneurial confidence and limit women's visibility in strategic arenas, even when competence is evident (Eddleston et al., 2020). Therefore, structural reforms—such as gender-sensitive succession frameworks, leadership development programs, and mentorship networks—are necessary to translate inclusion into sustained organizational transformation.

Overall, the synthesis affirms that integrating women more fully into leadership and governance roles enhances ethical decision-making, strengthens stakeholder trust, promotes innovation, and supports long-term sustainability. However, meaningful progress requires deliberate institutional change rather than reliance on gradual cultural evolution. Promoting women's leadership is not merely a matter of equity; it is a strategic imperative for ensuring the resilience and competitiveness of family businesses in dynamic global markets.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores that women occupy multifaceted and strategically significant roles within family businesses, extending beyond supportive functions to encompass leadership, governance, strategic decision-making, and intergenerational succession. The systematic review demonstrates that women's participation contributes meaningfully to innovation capacity, ethical governance, stakeholder-oriented management, and long-term sustainability. Their relational leadership style, long-term orientation, and emphasis on collaborative governance strengthen both organizational culture and adaptive capability. In this sense, women's inclusion is not merely a normative issue of equality but a substantive driver of competitive advantage and institutional continuity.

Nevertheless, the synthesis also reveals that women's potential remains constrained by persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, implicit gender bias, and informal power hierarchies continue to restrict women's access to formal authority and strategic recognition. Even in contexts where women hold ownership or managerial titles, legitimacy often requires heightened proof of competence compared to male counterparts. These embedded inequalities limit the full realization of gender diversity benefits within family enterprises.

To promote inclusivity and strengthen long-term performance, family firms must move beyond symbolic representation toward structural reform. The development of gender-sensitive governance policies, structured mentorship and leadership development programs, and transparent succession planning mechanisms that prioritize merit over tradition are essential. Institutionalizing equality within governance frameworks not only enhances fairness but also reinforces organizational resilience, succession readiness, and cross-generational continuity.

Future research should expand the analytical scope by employing longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to capture the evolving nature of gender roles in family businesses across institutional environments. Empirical studies examining measurable outcomes—such as firm performance, innovation rates, succession success, and governance quality—would further clarify the strategic value of women's participation. A deeper understanding of these dynamics will contribute to building more inclusive theoretical models and practical frameworks that position gender diversity as a central pillar of sustainable family business development.

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