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Women's involvement in family firms: Progress and challenges for future research

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews research on women's involvement in family firms according to a drivers-behaviors-outcomes framework. Through a systematic review, we analyze and organize the content of 87 academic articles according to the type of involvement of women in family business, i.e. entrepreneurial entry, succession, career dynamics, and presence in family firms. We identify the drivers and outcomes of women's involvement in family firms at the firm, family, and individual level of analysis, as well as the contextual factors that may influence the aforementioned elements. Drawing on these findings, we identify relevant research gaps, propose a number of future research directions aimed at bridging these gaps, and suggest unexplored research avenues.

1. Introduction

We define *Women's Involvement in Family Firms* as any act or process whereby women take part in the life of a family firm. Women's involvement in family firms has attracted increasing attention amongst practitioners and in the popular press. Since 2014, a couple of digital platforms have been launched to share the experiences, challenges, and best practices of women in family firms around the world.¹ *Forbes* (2015) published an article to share and discuss the findings of a working paper titled "The effect of female executives: Positive for family firms, negative for public ones". EY (formerly *Ernst & Young*, 2015)—through its Family Business Center of Excellence—published a report titled "Women in leadership" in relation to the findings from a global survey on female leaders, predicting that women will increasingly take the lead in family firms in the near future. Similarly, *PricewaterhouseCoopers* (2016)—through its PwC network—published the "PwC Next Generation Survey 2016", a report on the main issues of the next generation of female leaders in the context of family business.

Although recently attracting greater interest among practitioners, women's involvement in family firms has been a topic of academic inquiry since the 80s (e.g. *Lyman, Salganicoff, & Hollander*, 1985), studied from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints, with different

research methods and theoretical perspectives. This academic literature was reviewed in 2009: in her paper, *Jimenez* (2009) discusses some of the pathways that women typically take to assume management or leadership positions in family firms, looking in particular at their professional achievements (e.g. *Rowe & Hong*, 2000; *Vera & Dean*, 2005) while pointing out some of the obstacles and positive aspects of their involvement in family firms. More recently, in their book chapter, *Gupta and Levenburg* (2013) revised the same body of literature in a temporal perspective, identifying three generations of studies.

Although these prior reviews have been useful in mapping emerging research on women's involvement in family firms, too many years have elapsed since then. Moreover, the number of papers on the topic has more than doubled since 2009, in line with the significant growth of family business literature: publications have appeared not only in *Journal of Family Business Strategy* (e.g. *Overbeke, Bilimoria, & Perelli*, 2013) and *Family Business Review* (e.g. *Schröder, Schmitt-Rodermund, & Arnaud*, 2011) but also in other premier journals, such as *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice* (*Dumas*, 1992), *Journal of Business Venturing* (*Cruz, Justo, & De Castro*, 2012), *Small Business Economics* (*Hoffman, Junge, & Malchow-Møller*, 2015), and *Management Science* (*Amore, Garofalo, & Minichilli*, 2014).

Thus, beyond the increasing attention that scholars have paid to

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¹ <http://www.womeninfamilybusiness.org> and <http://weficommunity.org/>

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reviewing the literature on women in family business (Cole, 1997; Gupta & Levenburg, 2013; Jimenez, 2009), our review is particularly timely as it aims to take the academic debate to the next step with three main contributions. First, we offer a novel perspective by clustering existing contributions into four topics (entrepreneurial entry, succession, career dynamics, and presence) in line with the importance attributed to the temporal dimensions in family business research (Sharma, Salvato, & Reay, 2014). In addition, we ascertain the mechanisms underlying the drivers-behaviors-outcomes relationships that characterize women's involvement in family firms as well as the possible contextual effects. Last, we identify major research gaps and provide a detailed agenda to guide future research.

2. Literature review methodology and descriptive findings

To identify the relevant literature eligible for our review, we combined three databases: (a) Business Source Complete, one of the most complete databases of academic articles available, (b) Scopus, the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature, and (c) JSTOR, a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary sources. We focused our search on articles published in academic journals up to December 2016, without a lower boundary for the timeframe. We used the following search algorithm of keywords in either the title or abstract: (“family business” or “family firm”) and (“gender” or “woman” or “female” or “wife” or “daughter” or “sister” or “spouse”). The plurals of these keywords were also checked to ensure that any potentially relevant articles were not omitted. Through these three databases, we identified 184 articles. In addition, we double-checked on Google Scholar that all the existing 2016 articles were detected and found 2 articles in press at the time. Thus; we carefully read the 186 articles to identify the truly relevant ones.

We limited the literature review to influential articles published in established peer-reviewed journals, as articles in academic journals can be regarded as validated knowledge and likely to have a major impact on the field (Ordanini, Rubera, & DeFillippi, 2008; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Bachrach, & Podsakoff, 2005). Established journals are acknowledged to shape research in a field by setting new horizons for investigation within their frame of reference (Furrer, Thomas, & Goussevskaia, 2008). We therefore considered that this approach provided an accurate and representative picture of relevant scholarly research. We excluded articles that were not written in English (5 articles), teaching cases (8), those not addressing business and management issues (36), not focused on family firms (19), not focused on women (29), and book reviews/interviews for book reviews (2).² This procedure led to a final population of 87 articles (marked in the reference list with an asterisk) published in 40 different academic journals. The list of journals that published at least 2 of these is reported in Table 1. *Family Business Review* published the most articles, given its focus and its relatively long history, followed by *International Journal of Entrepreneurship* and *Journal of Family Business Strategy*.

As Fig. 1 shows, literature on women's involvement in family firms has grown exponentially since 1985. According to Gupta and Levenburg (2013), there are three generations of studies on this topic.

The first generation, published until the end of the 1990s, focused on the difficulties women encountered when joining their family firms and the lack of recognition for their work (Jimenez, 2009), also known as “women invisibility” (Gillis-Donovan & Moynihan-Bradt, 1990). The research interest was grounded in the temporal context of these studies, when women's professional responsibilities were still considered secondary to their obligations toward the family (Lyman et al., 1985; Moen, 1992). Scholars investigated both the critical issues that

Table 1

Academic journals with more than one paper on women's involvement in family firms.

Journal	Number of articles
Family Business Review	27
International Journal of Entrepreneurship	5
Journal of Family Business Strategy	5
International Small Business Journal	4
Entrepreneurship: Theory & Practice	3
Corporate Governance: An International Review	2
International Journal of Cross Cultural Management	2
International Journal of Entrepreneurship & Innovation Management	2
International Journal of Human Resource Management	2
Journal of Business Research	2
Journal of Management & Organization	2
Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development	2
Journal of Small Business Management	2
South African Journal of Business Management	2

hindered their involvement in family business, such as stereotyping and discrimination, women's attitudes towards their role (Salganicoff, 1990), and how traditional rules and roles have been challenged over time (Cole, 1997; Frishkoff & Brown, 1993; Hollander & Bukowitz, 1990).

Later on, i.e. in the first decade of the new millennium, family business studies started focusing on the rise in women's careers and leadership (Curimbaba, 2002). Indeed, the second generation papers mostly focus on “the opportunities or advantages that family firms can offer women, the pathways that these women take to assume positions of management or leadership in these firms, and their achievements” (Jimenez, 2009, p. 53). This second generation of studies is not only characterized by a more optimistic view of women's involvement in family firms, but they also more frequently and explicitly mention the theoretical perspectives adopted, such as agency theory (e.g. Van den Bergh & Carchon, 2003). In addition, method-wise, the authors of these second-generation studies more extensively leverage empirical evidence, albeit using small samples (e.g. Lussier & Sonfield, 2007) and qualitative methods (e.g. Vera & Dean, 2005).

The third wave of studies began at the end of the last decade with a growing number of papers published in this field. This wave of papers emphasizes the characteristics of the previous wave: first, maintaining an optimistic view of women's involvement in family firms while exploring the conditions that maximize its outcomes (e.g. Amore et al., 2014). Second, with the emergence of the Socio-Emotional Wealth (SEW) perspective, these studies are even more grounded in explicit theories (e.g. Cruz et al., 2012). Third, they constitute empirical studies to a greater extent, with the emergent use of large samples (e.g. Ahrens, Landmann, & Woywode, 2015). Moreover, this generation of studies places more emphasis on the role of the context of their involvement in family firms (Gupta & Levenburg, 2013).

Table 2 lists the theoretical perspectives employed in at least two articles. Worth noting is that around 50% of the identified articles do not explicitly state the adopted theoretical perspective, while the remainder from a wide range of scholars in different fields adopt a variety of theoretical lenses, thus paving the way for a multidisciplinary approach to studying women's involvement in family firms. Agency theory emerges as the most adopted theoretical perspective, as is the case in the entire family business literature.

As regards the methodological approach, most of the identified articles are empirical (72 papers), while only a few are conceptual (15 papers). More than half the empirical articles adopt a qualitative method (35 papers), 33 rely on a quantitative approach, and only 4 employ mixed methods. The presence of a majority of qualitative articles in this area contrasts with the trend in overall family business research, which is instead largely dominated by the use of quantitative

² For example, the Adrian and Diana (2010) study was excluded because it does not address business/management issues; the Fairlie (2005) paper was not included because it does not focus on family firms; the Beach (1993) article was excluded because it does not focus on women's involvement.

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