



**DAUGHTERS' INVOLVEMENT AND FEMALE SUCCESSION IN  
FAMILY BUSINESSES: A MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY**

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**Article info**

**Date of receipt:** 28/05/2021  
**Acceptance date:** 24/01/2022

**Keywords:** female succession; women involvement; family firms

**doi:** 10.14596/pisb.2880

**Abstract**

*This study intends to contribute to this Special Issue by investigating a relevant topic that inspires numerous studies and deserves to be deepened from several perspectives: daughters' succession. Specifically, building on the family embeddedness perspective, this paper investigates an unexplored field, trying to answer the following question: What happens when a woman becomes a mother after being involved in a family firm? Based on a multiple-case study of four small family-owned firms, this study shows interesting academic and practical implications, revealing four issues that daughters experience when they attain motherhood after being involved in a family firm, namely, family discouragement, family-coach approach, family persuasion and role demotion, resulting in intertwining among family support, family protectiveness and daughter self-efficacy.*

## 1. Introduction

Family businesses, defined in this study as those fully owned and managed by members of the founding family, are pervaded by family beliefs and values and oriented to survive to be handed down through generations (Aronoff & Ward, 2001). They are characterised by intertwined relationships between family and firm that almost completely overlap (Sharma & Manikutty, 2005). This overlap creates several difficulties in considering family and firm as separate entities (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). Family rules, norms, beliefs, behaviour, history, values, dynamics and events affect a business, thereby imprinting the 'family stamp' in every moment of the family business's life.

Scholars have underlined that the intricate family–business tie generates unique dynamics, affecting management and corporate relationships, which are often caused by anthropological roots (Floris et al., 2019). Thus, women's roles and involvement can vary sensitively from leadership positions (Barrett & Moores, 2010) to mere family delegates (Abdullah, 2014) and from minor and unpaid roles (McKie et al., 2004; Salganicoff, 1990) to an invisible presence (Cole, 1997; Hollander & Bukowitz, 1990). This situation suggests that a family business seems a place where women meet their career expectations, thus exercising visible decision-making powers, holding leadership positions and handling conflicts between socioemotional and financial goals (Cruz et al., 2010). Moreover, a family business is a place that can hinder women's involvement and careers, relegating them to more traditional roles (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017).

In the past decades, studies on women in family businesses investigated the role of daughters in leadership positions, exploring their experience in the succession process (Gherardi & Perrotta, 2016; Mussolino et al., 2019). These studies also focused on gender inequality and the removal of the so-called 'glass ceiling', factors inhibiting the succession of daughters and benefits that daughters can obtain from working in a family firm (Martinez Jimenez, 2009). However, Sharma (2004), in her literature review, noted that women and their role in family firms remain in the shadows. Similarly, Campopiano et al. (2017), notwithstanding scholars' increasing attention, suggested that the topic deserves further scrutiny, particularly with respect to 'the role of corporate entrepreneurship activities that can act as drivers of women's entrepreneurial entry, as well as outcomes of succession, career dynamics and presence of women in family business' (Campopiano et al., 2017, p. 9). Recently, an interesting literature review (Kubíček & Machek, 2019) found that although succession is one of the most discussed topics in family business studies, studies on female succession are relatively scarce because in the past, women were perceived as family members rather than suitable successors. These investigations established a significant, but not exhaustive, study on the subject.

For this reason, this study intends to contribute to this Special Issue, by investigating the topic of daughter's involvement and female succession, under the lens of how motherhood that occurs after succession influences the role of women within the family business. This topic appears an argument completely unexplored, and it is particularly relevant because several studies found that motherhood generates a professional shock, which determines a salary decrease (ILO, 2015; EIGE 2019), a choice for part-time occupations (ISTAT, 2019) and often job abandonment. Regarding job abandonment, recent research, conducted on a sample of more than 2,000 new mothers, found that fewer than one in five of all new mothers follow a full-time career after maternity leave. Among those who worked full-time before childbirth, a majority have either stopped working or moved to part-time work. Moreover, only 44% returned to and remained in full-time work 3 years after birth, whereas the percentage of those returning to full-time work for men is 90% (Harkness et al., 2019). These data highlight the importance of deepening the topic and analysing in depth the mechanisms that occur after motherhood.

Intending to participate in this inspirational debate and problematising the topic (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011), this study focuses on daughter successors who have already entered the firm, albeit in different roles, and become mothers after their affirmation in the family firm. The areas of interest in this sense are several and are dictated in particular to understanding whether and to what extent the positions (leadership or minor roles) have remained or changed after motherhood. Another objective is to determine how and through what family governance mechanisms this happens.

How a daughter succession occurs and how motherhood is perceived in terms of women's roles and contributions within family firms should be carefully studied, broadly considering family roles, norms, history and family dynamics. Therefore, this study draws on the family embeddedness perspective, the most suitable theoretical lens that can capture the intricate kin relationships and their effects on businesses (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). Based on this perspective, this study addresses the following research question: What happens when a woman becomes a mother after being involved in a family firm? We conducted a multiple-case study of four small family-owned firms, based on an in-depth analysis of semi-structured interviews performed with predecessors and daughters. Our findings showed four issues faced by daughters when they experienced motherhood after joining a family firm.

The findings show relevant academic and practical implications. Scholarly contributions are twofold. First, this study contributes to the family embeddedness perspective, delving into an unexplored field—a child's birth event and its effects on daughters' roles within a family firm. Second, the findings contribute to studies on daughters' succession, identify-

ing four issues women face when they become mothers after entering a family business. For practitioners, these findings can help identify effective gender-diversity management tools to support women in their work–life balance.

## **2. Daughters' involvement and female succession in family firms**

In the past three decades, the number of studies on women in family businesses has notably increased (Campopiano et al., 2017; Floris et al., 2019; Gupta & Levenburg, 2013; Sentuti et al., 2019). These studies focused on different themes generally characterised by debates about women's challenges (Martinez Jimenez, 2009), careers and roles (Amore et al., 2014; Cole, 1997; Curimbaba, 2002; Martinez Jimenez, 2009; Salganicoff, 1990), invisibility (Gillis-Donovan & Moynihan-Bradt, 1990), over-nurturing (Hollander & Bukowitz, 1990), work–life balance (Moen, 1992) and traditional socially constructed roles (Dardha, 2016). Specific attention has been paid to ownership succession (Vera & Dean, 2005). They found that the choice of successors and the attribution of leadership rules are often based on gender. Sons are preferred as potential successors to daughters (Bennedsen et al., 2007), particularly if first-born (Jaskiewicz et al., 2013), and daughters are relegated to subordinate roles (Barrett & Moores, 2009; Bjursell & Bäckvall, 2011).

However, notwithstanding the increasing scholarly attention on women's involvement and the recent literature reviews on the topic (Campopiano et al., 2017; Martinez Jimenez, 2009; Wang, 2010), daughters' succession continues to be undervalued in its relevance and has thus not been sufficiently explored (Kubiček & Machek, 2019). The reason is perhaps that in the succession literature, gender is often considered only one variable, rather than a relevant factor that can shape the succession process. This case is linked to daughters' personal path towards leadership, demonstrating their credibility and ability to become a successor (Dalpiaz et al., 2014). In this view, despite being often gender-biased (Aldamiz-Echevarría et al., 2017) with sons generally preferred over daughters (Hytti et al., 2016), succession can be considered a process whereby daughters, and thus women, can acquire visibility and involvement in the family business (Campopiano et al., 2017).

Recent interesting studies deepened daughters' roles in family firms (Curimbaba, 2002; Cesaroni & Sentuti, 2018a, 2018b; Mussolino et al., 2019), identifying typologies with distinctive features.

Specifically, Curimbaba (2002), in her qualitative study, found three types of heiresses: invisible, professional and anchor. Invisible women stem from large families, they have to spend their time and efforts within the family, thereby reducing the possibility of personal career and receiving sufficient income, and they have renounced managerial duties. Professional women

are professionally prepared, try to create a boundary between firm and family and are often involved in the succession process to avoid conflicts. Anchor typology refers to daughters who stem from families with predominantly female offspring. They have great visibility inside the family business and are essential for its continuity.

Cesaroni and Sentuti (2018a, 2018b) identified four daughter profiles with reference to the following: personal goals and ambitions before entering the family firm, reasons for joining the firm, effective role in the firm, motives that brought daughters to play their role in the firm, training and skills, and level of satisfaction with their role. With reference to these features, the authors found five profiles, namely, leader by choice, leader because 'she has to', manager by choice, invisible co-leader and outcast. In our study, we did not find the profile of outcasts because we referred only to daughters who have already taken over the family business. The authors defined leaders by choice as those daughters who have desired to take on a leadership role since childhood and strongly pursued their goals. Then, leader because 'she has to' refers to daughters who become leaders, as no other family member has shown interest in or is likely to lead the family business. Invisible co-leader depicts daughters who aspire to leadership and sometimes have to accept a minor role mainly because of gender bias. Finally, the profile 'manager by choice' identifies daughters satisfied with their minor role in the firm to manage work–life balance.

Mussolino et al. (2019) analysed daughters' self-positioning in male-dominated family firms once succession has occurred. The authors identified four typologies of daughters' succession: the obvious choice (refers to the daughter's perception of being part of a system and thus a means to replicate family norms and family firm rules); the daddy's girl (includes daughters who perceive pressure to replicate their father's decision-making style and feel a sense of non-acceptance, particularly from male employees); the backgrounder (refers to daughters who perceive their skills and abilities and intend to break with their father's leadership style) and the troublemaker (daughters who are aware of their abilities with high education and work experience and who challenge gender norms).

The mentioned studies focused on daughters' involvement or exclusion in the succession process and considered different roles and typologies of daughters and their perception as successors, to our knowledge. However, no studies investigated what happens once daughters are in the firm and they become mothers after that. In detail, how motherhood affects the experience of daughters involved in the firm is unexplored.

Family dynamics and gender assumptions are generally embedded in family rules, norms and expectations and are reflected in business practices (Floris et al, 2019). Therefore, the family embeddedness perspective appears particularly useful for a more in-depth study of daughter succession.

### 3. Family embeddedness perspective and daughters' succession

In their seminal article, Aldrich and Cliff (2003) highlighted the relevance of incorporating the family in entrepreneurship studies. The authors established that family business scholars often consider family and business as two separate entities. This trend may hinder an adequate understanding of the family business phenomenon. Family dynamics, rules, roles and various events influence the family business's actions, governance, management structures and entrepreneurial intent and propensity. Therefore, a joint, rather than separate, analysis of business and family is considered essential for the topic here analysed for at least two reasons. First, succession is considered an entrepreneurial process (Nordqvist et al., 2013), strongly influenced by personal goals of the owners, family structure, ability and ambitions of potential successors and family resources (De Massis et al., 2008; Le Breton-Miller et al., 2004). Second, motherhood and childbirth force enormous changes within the family and firm (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). The family embeddedness perspective, in its initial purpose, focuses on the effect of family system characteristics (transitions, norms and values and resources) on new venture creation, and vice versa. Focusing on transitions, Aldrich and Cliff (2003) identified marriage, divorce, death, employment, retirement and childbirth as the main family dynamics that are strictly related to norms and values and resource mobilisation. However, to our knowledge, very few studies focus on childbirth even if motherhood represents an extraordinary event that has the potential to affect the family and firm by destabilising the balance between them and, sometimes cause the reinforcement of gender bias. Mothers are generally less visible than women without children (Gillis-Donovan & Moynihan-Bradt, 1990). From this evidence, daughters perceive potential motherhood in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, they feel the parents' expectations, and on the other hand, they know that work performance tends to decrease after they give birth (Cole, 1997).

Moreover, daughters who are mothers feel tensions associated with work–family balance and resort to making compromises to provide the right attention to the family and business (Baxter & Montgomery, 2000). Moreover, they sometimes experience frustration because of the commitment and hard work necessary to respond to the pressures of business (Day, 2013).

Evidently, the topic deserves additional attention, specifically investigating the unexplored area regarding the fallout from daughters' entering the family firm and the effects of their becoming mothers after succession. The family embeddedness perspective can help investigate the topic considering the family and business together and focusing on how and why the bundle of kin relationships create fertile or sterile soil to support daughters in their dual role as workers and mothers.



The study was conducted considering the behaviours, perceptions and beliefs of predecessors and daughters resulting from shared family values and cultures. Consequently, the concept of motherhood and the daughter's role affected by relationships, attitudes and established norms of the family are exhibited in the firm. Specifically, deepening female succession and motherhood requires delving into family roots to disentangle the family effect from firm management and behaviour. Thus, this perspective appears suitable to address our research question.

## **4. Methodology**

### *4.1 Research design and sample*

Given the unexplored topic, a qualitative methodology for this research was chosen and executed by analysing four case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). Family firms represent a fertile ground for qualitative analysis (Litz, 1997; Mc-Collom, 1990) and are particularly appropriate for this study, the reason being that the focus on motherhood and female succession requires an in-depth analysis and has to penetrate the barrier of family resistance. Moreover, the use of case studies allows for an analysis of real, unique phenomena, that of observing a particular scenario and its interactions within the boundaries of the context wherein they develop and act (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2008). The usage of such studies represents a form of qualified investigation aimed at seeking the 'meaning' of reality in the experiential lives of people and organisations (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2008). A comparison of case studies is particularly useful in this research study to understand mechanisms through which a family sustains or inhibits women-mothers in their firm's roles. The choice of sampled firms is in line with Patton's (1990) recommendation that the 'logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research' (Patton, 1990, p. 169). In detail, we selected family firms that possessed the following characteristics: (1) at least at the second generation with succession already completed, (2) predecessor(s) still alive, (3) at least one daughter involved in the firm and (4) the daughter experienced motherhood after she entered the firm and at least three years before the research study. Through personal contacts, we approached the first family firm and then proceeded through snowball sampling, asking our informants to sug-

gest to us other family firms with the defined characteristics. This way, we involved four firms and progressed to obtain their availability, presenting the objective of the study. This dimension of the sample was adequate, in line with Eisenhardt's suggestions (1989, p. 545), that is, 'while there is no ideal number of cases, a number between 4 and 10 cases usually works well'. Considering proximity and the COVID-19 health emergency, firms based in the same regional Italian area were selected to conduct face-to-face interviews, considered the most suitable way of acquiring relevant, sensitive and confidential information. Afterwards, we retrieved information on ownership through company websites and demographic details through phone calls.

Then, we focused our attention on the daughters and their predecessors as the subject of our analysis representing the informants best suited to report data on their firms and allow the investigation of the effect of motherhood on women and their position within the family firm.

Tab. 1 describes the main details of the sampled firm and the daughter's characteristics.

*Tab. 1: Firms' details and characteristics of daughters*

#	Sector	Foundation / Generation	Date of the last succession	Number of family members involved in the firm and roles	Number of employee	Age of daughter	Role of daughter-mother	Current age of child	Revenue in Euros
1	Artisanship	1945/4	2002	2 (1 brother—CEO and 1 sister)	12	44	Employee	4	250,000
2	Agrifood	1935/5	2003	4 (3 brothers—Production Manager, Plant Manager and Quality Manager—and 1 sister)	15	47	CEO	5	320,000
3	Tourism	1960/4	2012	3 (2 brothers—Receptionist and Marketing Manager—and 1 sister)	10	42	CEO	4	280,000
4	Manufacturing	1980/3	2009	2 (1 brother—CEO—and 1 sister)	8	40	Marketing Manager	4	400,000

*Source: Authors' elaboration*



## 4.2 Data collection

Our study mainly relied on primary (interviews) and secondary data sources (archives, personal documents, websites and others). Primary data consisted of eight in-depth interviews: first were four interviews with family owner–managers belonging to old generations not currently involved in the firms. These data are useful to understand the firms' history, dynamics and above all the viewpoint of the predecessors on the role of the daughter during and after succession and possible changes that happened as a result of motherhood. Then, four interviews with the daughters were conducted to investigate their entry process and the changes and conditions they experienced from their motherhood. All interviews helped us understand whether and how family roots were (or not) reasons for specific aspects related to gender involvement within firms and for the consequent attitude adopted towards daughters.

Each daughter was interviewed alone to avoid mutual influence that could have invalidated the sincerity of the accounts.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in person, in the Italian language, and then translated into English. An interview protocol (Legard et al., 2003) designed to obtain information related to the research question was followed. To define the interview protocol, we conducted a pre-study with a sample of 10 individuals to evaluate the efficacy of the questions. Some of them were changed to improve their comprehensibility. The final list of items excluded technical terms from the academic literature as it was intended to stimulate interviewees to freely and naturally discuss their experiences and personal viewpoints.

We began the interviews by asking the informants background questions about their industry, the firm's corporate and business strategy and their role in their family firms. We used open-ended questions (Eisenhardt, 1989a; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and we prompted the informants to provide additional details when their descriptions were brief or when novel strands of narrative emerged. All interviews (averaging 50 minutes) were recorded and transcribed in 120 double-spaced pages, mostly within 24 hours. We addressed potential informant bias in several ways. First, we interviewed informants belonging to the old generation and the current generation in charge. Second, we used 'courtroom questioning' that focused on factual accounts of what informants did or observed others doing (Huber & Power, 1985; Lipton, 1977). Finally, ethical aspects were considered and respected throughout the study, which included having all participants sign a written form of consent. The interview procedures were clearly expressed to the respondents before the interviews were conducted. Anonymity was guaranteed to the informants and their firms to encourage openness.

Moreover, authorisation was obtained from participants to gather data, transcribe interviews and use the collected information for scientific and academic purposes.

### *4.3 Data analysis*

We analysed data using an inductive approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt et al., 2016). In the first step, we reviewed the primary and secondary data independently, highlighting the material reflecting daughters' involvement, female succession and motherhood within the family firms. Then, we examined single cases, creating chronologically structured descriptions of each of the four firms with all relevant information. These documents comprised 10–20 pages per firm (a total of 75 pages) and provided a neatly arranged overview of each case.

In this step, considering that the interviewees' responses were the most important source of information, two independent coders first read through the interviews and additional materials and subsequently scanned them for emergent themes that appeared important to answer our research question (Reay & Zhang, 2014).

In the second step, we followed the recommendations of Eisenhardt (1989) and conducted a cross-case analysis to identify common patterns and contradictions across the sample (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We iterated amongst case pairs to sharpen similarities and differences and form tentative relationships between constructs. Furthermore, we shifted between empirical evidence and theory. As the theoretical framework grew more explicit, we compared it further with the literature to highlight similarities with and differences from prior research, strengthening internal validity and refining constructs and relationships (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Following this process, we surprisingly noted that the four daughters involved in the research had characteristics identified by four of the five daughter profiles identified by Cesaroni and Sentuti (2018a, 2018b): a. Leader by choice, b. Leader because 'she has to', c. Manager by choice and d. Invisible co-leader. Each of these daughters experienced different approaches when they became mothers, showing a strong tie between their profiles and how motherhood was experienced within the firm. In our study, we did not find the profile of outcasts because we referred only to daughters who have already taken over the family business.

In the third step, we interpreted the data achieving a strong match between the cases and emergent theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Eisenhardt, 1989; Silverman, 2001). When the process was complete, we developed our emergent theoretical framework (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

## 5. Findings

Analysing interviews and iterating with theory, as already mentioned, we noted that the daughters we interviewed showed the same peculiarities of four of the five daughter profiles found by Cesaroni and Sentuti (2018a, 2018b). Specifically, the daughter in Firm 1 appeared similar to an 'Invisible co-leader' [*I have always remained in the shadows. (...) I have never had essential roles, nor of representation*']. The daughter in Firm 2 possessed characteristics that reminded one of a 'Leader by choice' [*Since childhood, I have decided to manage the family business (...). Nobody could have made me change my mind. This is my life, my home, and I don't imagine I can realize myself far from here.*']. Concerning Firm 3, the daughter's showed similar characteristics to a 'Leader because she has to' [*I had to continue the family business. I couldn't disappoint my father's expectations. (...) no one intended to sacrifice their aspirations to take the firm's reins, so I did it (...)*']. Finally, the daughter in Firm 4 embodied the attributes of a 'Manager by choice' [*I could have aspired to a more relevant and apical role (...), but I would have had to dedicate all of myself to work. (...) in this way, I can also enjoy my freedom and have a life of my own that does not revolve solely and exclusively around the family business.*'].

They received a different family approach because of their motherhood, with relevant repercussions on their roles in the firm.

On the other hand, an in-depth analysis of predecessors' interviews showed how and why families adopted specific behaviours when daughters experienced motherhood. During these interviews, the relevance of family roots strongly emerged, thus highlighting how family embeddedness can help in understanding the family effect on firm management [*In our family, women have always been fundamental for family unity (...). In silence, they always worked hard, always taking a step back from their husbands, brothers, and obviously from their fathers. So, it is also for my daughter.*' (Firm 1); *'My mother was a revolutionary, a free spirit. My father admired this nature of hers and never clipped her wings. My sister also chose what to do with her life. And so, do I with my daughter: she decided to stay here, no one forced her to.'* (Firm 2); *'My daughter entered the business because we pushed her to do it. I don't regret it because I believe that everyone in life has to make sacrifices. She has experienced how even my mother and her mother have made many sacrifices for the family (...) you cannot always choose, especially if the choice falls on the whole family.'* (Firm 3); *'Our daughter has chosen an important role, but not a top one, to carve out spaces of her own. (...) I believe that in this, she was inspired by her mother.'* (Firm 4)]

From the daughters' and parents' interviews, three main common constructs have emerged: family support, family protectiveness and daughter self-efficacy.

Family support refers to psychological and intangible care, encouragement and assistance offered to the daughter during difficult moments [*My*

parents and husband still encourage me now, but their presence was even more essential to me some time ago' (daughter, Firm 2); 'My family did not support me even from an emotional point of view, let alone from an operational perspective' (daughter, Firm 1)]. The main aspects that constitute this construct are psychological support, inspiration and intangible stimulus.

Family protectiveness relates to a defensive response to shield the family, whereby the family member experiencing difficulties is the recipient of a preferential approach that causes them to be relieved of specific responsibilities to protect their well-being and allows them to perform their household activities [*'My family and my husband support me by giving me the opportunity to dedicate myself to the child'* (daughter, Firm 3); *'They support me emotionally, but I have no real help to engage in work as I did before I became a mother'* (daughter, Firm 4)]. The main elements that characterised this construct are tangible support, task substitutability and task reduction.

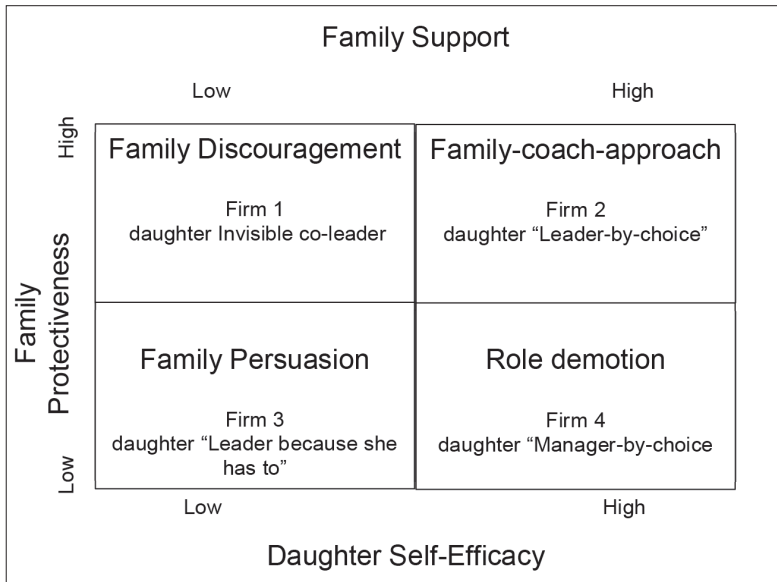
Daughter self-efficacy is the last construct that emerged from the interviews. Bandura (1986) highlighted that daughter self-efficacy refers to a soft skill related to subjective perceptions about qualities possessed concerning the task, considering its complexity, the conditions for carrying it out and expectations of getting a positive outcome [*'I am sure I will succeed in my intent. I have all the support of my family, and I am very determined'* (daughter, Firm 2); *'I don't think I can do it. It's all too complex for me'* (daughter, Firm 1)]. The most relevant elements that define this construct are determination, passion and self-esteem.

Surprisingly, no perceptual discrepancies were noted between predecessors and daughters; this is particularly interesting because the interviewees were interviewed separately to avoid mutual influences. Specifically, for instance, when family support was considered marginal or even absent on the part of the daughter, this aspect also emerged on the side of the predecessor, with the justification relating to decisions taken and behaviour displayed.

By cross-referencing the three constructs and their different manifestation in cases (high vs low), four different family approaches can be defined: family-coach approach, family discouragement, family persuasion and role demotion.

Fig. 1 summarises the approaches that daughters were recipients of during and after their motherhood and reports the constructs in three axes, underlining to what extent each of them concurs to generate the diverse approaches.

Figure 1: Approaches towards daughters



In the following section, we explain the different family approaches.

### 5.1 Family discouragement

This approach is observed in Firm 1, where the daughter shows similarities with the invisible co-leader profile (*'I work backstage (...) my brother is the leader, and I help him'*). Family discouragement here is represented by the absence of emotional support to the daughter, with the implicit intent of persuading her to leave her role within the firm to devote herself to the family. Specifically, as the daughter plays a minor role, parents consider her contribution within the firm as non-essential; thus, they encourage her to invest her time as mother rather than as a firm member. Following parents' view, family goals prevail on firm goals.

On the family's part, support is low, whereas family protectiveness is high. On the part of the daughter, self-efficacy appears to be low.

Family support is negligible and justified by the 'shadow' role played by the daughter. Moreover, this minimal or absent support seems almost oriented to demotivate the daughter from work, pushing her towards her mother's role and postponing her re-entry into the firm to the future, emerging from the following quotes:

*'I have not received much emotional support from my family. On the contrary, in some cases, I have felt almost guilty for being a woman and an entrepreneur at the same time. I have been discouraged to continue'* (daughter).

*'We do not encourage her to continue working within the company. By contrast, she has never had a top role in the company. She has always supported her brother. Therefore, she could have dedicated her time to her family and waited for better times to return to the firm'* (father).

Family protectiveness is high and probably excessive, and evidence of this is the fact that the family tries to replace the daughter in every task and every decision. That is to say, they stated that this behaviour derives from the desire to help the daughter, who has always played minor roles, supporting others *'without putting herself out there'* (father). The following quotes can help understand the concept:

*'Since she became a mother, she needs us even more. She is not strong enough to be able to do everything. This is why we are helping her, and we think it is more appropriate that she devotes herself to the child. My son-in-law agrees too'* (father).

*'Now I have no duties (...) I dedicate myself only to my son. They are convincing me to leave my job because they believe that I cannot look after business and family. (...) I feel discouraged'* (daughter).

Self-efficacy is low and derived from the lack of certainty in personal abilities. Specifically, the daughter experiences frustration because of her fear of *'not being up to the task'*, and consequently, she feels a sense of discouragement.

On the family's part, a low opinion of the daughter's abilities emerges, where the daughter is considered *'the weak member of the family'*. The following quotes explain the concept:

*'I'm not sure I can do both. Being a mother is very demanding. In the firm, I could become more of a burden than a resource. (...) my parents are probably right'* (daughter).

*'She needs a lot of help. She is the weakest of the family, and we are afraid she will collapse due to excess stress and responsibility'* (father).

## 5.2 Family-coach approach

This approach is identified by analysing Firm 2, wherein the daughter recalls features of the 'Leader by choice' profile (*'I have always wanted to take over our family business'*). Specifically, as the daughter is determined and passionate, parents motivate and encourage her in the dual role of a mother and a firm member. From this perspective, family and firm are considered two entities that equally require the daughter's commitment.

The family-coach approach is characterised, on the family's part, by high levels of family support and family protectiveness and on the part of the daughter by a high level of self-efficacy. Undoubtedly, this approach guarantees a woman-mother the right work-life balance. Specifically, the



daughter encounters strong *'encouragement and support that guarantee the possibility of achieving the dream of being a woman and a mother without having to give up career or family'*.

Regarding family support, interviewees highlight a high degree of psychological and emotional support the daughter has experienced since her entry into the firm and since the time she became a mother, as also underlined by the father, as follows:

*'I have received their support in the past, and I have received it after becoming a mother. They stimulate me to do my best now as well'* (daughter).

*'We would never allow her to get discouraged (referring to his daughter). We and her husband have always supported and encouraged her to move forward and not to live motherhood and her leadership role as if one excluded the other'* (father).

Concerning family protectiveness, the family demonstrates willingness to support the daughter during and after motherhood, trying to support her daily with childcare, housework and any tasks that could hinder her leadership role.

The following quotes can help in clarifying the mentioned concept:

*'When I got pregnant, I saw the joy, but also the concerns, in my family's eyes. Then, when my son was born, they did everything to relieve me of many responsibilities, offering to replace me in many tasks to make my life easier'* (daughter).

*'We can finally enjoy our grandchild and let our daughter feel gratified. Running a business is not easy, but it is feasible for a woman who has a family with the right support from everyone'* (father).

In this case, the daughter shows a high level of self-efficacy, and this quality was also recognised by the father. The proposed extracts clarify the concept:

*'I work hard to achieve my goals, and my son is a further incentive to do my best. I always tell myself that I can do it!'* (daughter)

*'We know our daughter's determination and passion very well. She doesn't give up easily, and her motherhood has made her even stronger'* (father).

### 5.3 Family persuasion

This approach is identified in Firm 3, where the daughter shows similarities with the *'Leader because she has to'* profile (*'I found myself practically forced because no one wanted to continue the family business'*). Family persuasion consists of low family support, low family protectiveness and low self-efficacy. The family manipulates the daughter's decisions, pressing her to stay in the firm because her presence cannot be replaced by anybody else in the family because other family members do not show interest. As it occurred when she entered the firm before attaining motherhood, even under such circumstances, the daughter is pushed to continue the business, hinging on her sense of responsibility and guilt. Firm goals prevail upon family interests in addition to the daughter's intentions and ambitions.

Family support is low and characterised by sustained pressure to maintain the role within the firm despite difficulties caused by the desire to achieve work–life balance. The daughter perceives the firm’s responsibility only on her shoulders because of the lack of family support. From the following sentences, the concept can be clearer:

*‘They almost forced me to take over the helm of the firm because nobody was interested. Since I was a mother, everything is much more complex. I was hoping for their encouragement, even if only psychological (...), but it didn’t arrive’* (daughter).

*‘We are pragmatic. (...) after all, even my wife has always done everything by herself’* (father).

Family protectiveness is absent, and the daughter has to rely exclusively on her efforts and determination, without receiving active support from the family. The duties of the leader and mother are both exclusively borne by the daughter, who feels the weight of responsibility and experiences a sense of *‘loneliness and abandonment’*.

*‘I have to divide myself between home and business. No one helps me. (...) I feel alone, and I do not deny that I would like to escape from this situation (...); however, my sense of duty does not allow me’* (daughter).

*‘She has to do it alone. She will succeed even now. It’s all a matter of organisation’* (father).

Self-efficacy is low. The daughter perceives extreme difficulty in balancing the business and the family because of the absence of emotional and active support. She tends to be discouraged and has no confidence in achieving positive results. The family shows *‘low determination’* but also believes that *‘with the improved commitment, she can do better’*. The following statements are particularly significant:

*‘There are moments in which despair assails me, and I am afraid of destroying what my father has built with so much effort. (...) I think I have underestimated what it means to be an entrepreneur and a mother at the same time. But I have to do it, and I owe it to my family (...) I would risk disappointing them’* (daughter).

*‘She had to take over because no one else wanted to. We put our trust in her commitment, but she lets herself go too often to discouragement. She should try harder’* (father).

#### 5.4 Role demotion

This approach emerges in Firm 4, where the daughter shows similarities with the *‘manager by choice’* profile (*‘I chose to enter in our family firm in a role that allowed me to balance work with my personal interests’*). Role demotion consists of high family support, low family protectiveness and high self-efficacy. The family shows emotional support but lacks practical efforts to assist the daughter in her duties as a mother and manager. They suggested

instead to *'change the role for another with minor responsibilities'* (daughter). However, the high self-efficacy ensures that the daughter can pursue her personal goals, with determination and hard work. Parents suggest that the daughter join the firm in a relevant, yet not apical, role and undertake a lesser role so that she can work within the firm without compromising on her role as a mother and in the family. In this case, family interests would appear to prevail over those of the daughters and the firm.

Family support is high, and the family shows the ability to provide emotional and psychological support to the daughter. The parents encourage their daughter not to give up and to continue within the family business, while, however, preferring a minor role for her to better reconcile working life with family life. The daughter perceives this suggestion as a form of attention and care towards her and agrees to play a less relevant role. The following exemplary quotes are particularly meaningful:

*'Our daughter doesn't hold a leadership role within the firm; however, she is the marketing manager. We encourage her to continue within the firm, but in a different role, to meet family and work expectations as best as possible'* (father).

*'I'm the marketing manager, and I like my role. (...); however, it's very hard to combine it with my role as mother. My parents try to encourage me, suggesting a minor role that could allow me more time for my son'* (daughter).

Family protectiveness is low, and the daughter does not receive active help from the family. Family members do not actively help the daughter in her role in the firm or the care of the child. She is forced into a lesser role with reduced responsibilities and visibility, as illustrated by the following extract:

*'My wife and I are finally retired (...) we no longer want to replace our children (...); it is a problem of responsibility. This is why we advised her to choose a less demanding role'* (father).

*'My parents and my husband encourage me a lot, but I don't get effective help from them. I accepted their suggestion to leave my position and take on a less important one. I hope it is only a temporary choice'* (daughter).

Self-efficacy is high, demonstrating the daughter's willingness to continue her business within the company with passion and determination. The family underlines this characteristic that, amongst other things, is considered a positive element, particularly after a demotion. The following extracts are particularly significant:

*'Our daughter is hardheaded. She is stubborn and determined. She will also find satisfaction in her new role for herself'* (father).

*'I am very determined, and I am sure that it is possible to reconcile being a mother and being a manager. The change of role is transitory, but what matters most is that I do well what I am doing now'* (daughter).

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

Our study, based on the family embeddedness perspective, has contributed to this Special Issue, analysing daughters' involvement in a dynamic perspective, that is, investigating how motherhood, which occurred after succession, influenced daughters' roles within the family business. Our research question was about what happens when a woman becomes a mother after being involved in the family firm.

We conducted a multiple-case study of four small family-owned firms on the basis of in-depth analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with predecessors and daughters. Our findings show four different approaches that daughters experience when they became mothers after being involved in the family firm.

These approaches, family-coach approach, family discouragement, family persuasion, and role demotion, are characterised by what extent family support, family protectiveness and daughter self-efficacy are intertwined.

In summary, the approach that undoubtedly offers additional opportunities to the daughter-mother is the family-coach approach. This approach is characterised by moral, psychological and operational support from the family and the awareness of the daughter of her abilities that allow her to overcome difficulties and perform at her best in her dual role as mother and entrepreneur. Family persuasion is not very stimulating for the daughter who tends to be almost manipulated by the family into making her decisions. Family persuasion is also not very stimulating to a daughter for whom the complete assumption of her responsibilities is almost imposed without any operational support and by leveraging on the feelings of guilt that could emerge from the choice to leave the company. This sense of guilt is perceived particularly by the daughter from Firm 3, who underlined that she maintained her leadership role for her family but without willingness. This case could underline that the fear of disappointing the family's expectations causes the daughter to continue managing the firm but without real aspiration and without obtaining personal satisfaction. The persuasion of the family and the fact of that is the assumption that the company must be perpetuated by the daughter regardless of her personal ambitions lead to conflicting feelings and constant tension between the sense of responsibility and the desire to leave the company. The combination of these two aspects would seem to generate a sense of guilt in the daughter. The other two behaviours that daughters are subjected to are characterised by a form of family 'abandonment'. That is to say, despite being aimed at supporting the daughter, in reality, family abandonment discourages and demotivates her with respect to her career prospects within the family business.

From the emerged empirical evidence, four propositions can be proposed to synthesise the main findings:

P1. When daughters become mothers and family support is low, family protectiveness is high and self-efficacy is low, they are recipients of the family discouragement approach.

P2. When daughters become mothers and family support, family protectiveness and self-efficacy are high, they are recipients of the family-coach approach.

P3. When daughters become mothers and family support, family protectiveness and self-efficacy are low, they are recipients of the family persuasion approach.

P4. When daughters become mothers and family support is high, family protectiveness is low and self-efficacy is high, they are recipients of the demotion approach.

### *6.1 Scholarly and managerial implications*

The findings show relevant academic and practical implications.

Scholarly contributions are at least threefold.

First, this study contributes to the family business literature, answering the recent call for further studies on women in family businesses (Campopiano et al., 2017; Sentuti et al., 2019) by focusing on the unexplored topic of motherhood and its effects within family firms.

Second, this study contributes to the family embeddedness perspective, opening a new niche of study that investigates an unexplored field—that of the child's birth event and its effects on female roles within the family firm. During childbirth, the family embeddedness perspective is identified as relevant. However, to our knowledge, this topic is not sufficiently explored in previous studies. This topic is necessary for a wholesome understanding of the effects that this event produces within the family firm for women in terms of their career and involvement. In addition, we found that family roots define how motherhood and daughters' careers are perceived. Family routines, roles and rules affect daughters' involvement and consequently how motherhood appears adaptable with their commitment within the firm.

Third, the findings contribute to the female succession literature, identifying four different approaches that women are exposed to when they become a mother after entering the family business. Specifically, we extend the study of Cesaroni and Sentuti (2018b) by uncovering that the profiles they identified beget different family approaches because of their motherhood. The results underline the close relationship between the profiles of women and the behaviour of families towards them. In other words, the more determined the woman to succeed in the family business the stronger the support from her parents and her partner during the experience of motherhood. On the contrary, the more the woman has been pushed to

take control of the firm the more she will be pushed to continue in her role as a leader. Furthermore, the more she holds an important but not necessarily senior role the more she will be discouraged from continuing within the firm and be persuaded to dedicate additional time to her family. Finally, the more invisible a woman is, the more she will be relegated to even more marginal and less important roles within the firm.

This study can be particularly interesting to practitioners for them to understand the roots of gender differences and how these are experienced within family businesses, focusing on the occurrence of motherhood. For example, entrepreneurs and consultants could draw stimulating reflections from this work regarding 'prevention' of certain aspects of gender dynamics and 'prospective analysis' of gender dynamics itself. This study presents an evolutionary analysis of women's roles because of childbirth. The findings can help identify effective gender-diversity management tools to sustain women in their work-life balance.

## *6.2 Limitations and future research*

Despite the contributions and managerial and practical implications highlighted, this study is not without limitations. The first and most relevant is the sample size, which is too small to allow generalisation of the findings. Subsequent studies could expand the sample under analysis, enlarging it numerically.

Future studies are encouraged to conduct longitudinal and cross-cultural analyses to observe the influence of time and different cultures.

Moreover, further studies are invited to build their analysis on time-based role-conflict theory to understand whether and to what extent a firm's generation represents a variable that influences the involvement of women. Above all, further studies could answer other research questions based on the dynamic analysis of women in family firms.

Finally, noticing that all daughters in the sample have only one child, further studies could deepen this aspect by investigating how a daughter's involvement in the firm affects motherhood. They could try to understand whether having only one child is a deliberate choice, scrutinising whether this situation could be a sort of vicious cycle created between motherhood and family businesses.



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