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# Gender and entrepreneurial family business: decision-making, agency and empowerment.

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**Gender and Entrepreneurial Family Business – Decision-Making, Agency and Empowerment**

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## Gender and Entrepreneurial Family Business – Decision-Making, Agency and Empowerment

### Introduction

As the most prominent form of business organization, the family business has intertwining priorities related to the family, business, and the firm (Tagiuri & 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, Astrachan & Smyrniotis, 2018). As a result, family firms possess non-economic goals and financial objectives (Chrisman et al., 2014). Family firms contribute significantly to the world economy with providing jobs, quality products and excellent services supporting their business longevity (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2021). 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 & 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

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3 the scenes. Due to gender roles, women often have dual responsibilities for the business  
4 and household. They have been relatively 'invisible' in their family businesses yet taking on  
5 enormous amounts of administrative work and providing informal support in both the  
6 business and the family (Martinez Jimenez, 2009; Rowe and Hong, 2000). Women  
7 sometimes played the "Chief Emotional Officer" role in providing emotional stability and  
8 support in the family firms (Calabrò, Conti & Masè, 2023).  
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18 Nevertheless, women have taken more prominent positions in family business in  
19 recent years. While women are often excluded from the succession process, some works  
20 have examined the role of women and daughters in succession planning (Cesaroni &  
21 Sentuti, 2018; Xian, Jiang & McAdam, 2021). Similarly, there is growing interest in looking at  
22 the impact of gender diversity in the family board of directors and board of governance,  
23 women's role in innovation and firm-level decision-making process (Maggi et al., 2023;  
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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 masculinized family business  
culture and to transform the way gender is being considered in family business literature  
(Kubiček & 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

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2  
3 elevate women's position and power in family business. Hence, this special issue addresses  
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5 this gap in the extant literature.  
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### 10 **Rationale for the special issue**

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12 Research suggests that women tend to show more devotion to the family business, concern  
13  
14 for family members, and are more thoughtful towards the needs of others (Curimbaba,  
15  
16 2002). Hence, joining the family business is a more welcoming option than starting their  
17  
18 own ventures for women. Given their active role in supporting the family and firm, it is  
19  
20 essential to understand what women can gain individually from their involvement in the  
21  
22 family business. Shifting the current focus from what women can contribute to family  
23  
24 business, this special issue takes the next step to encourage more work examining how the  
25  
26 context of family business supports women in their agency, decision-making and  
27  
28 empowerment. By uncovering more women's voices in family firms, the special issue  
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30 advances theoretical contributions in family business literature using gender as a theoretical  
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32 approach.  
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40 While research has observed the active participation of women in family business in  
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42 recent years (Bauweraerts et al., 2022), there is a need to consider women's role in family  
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44 business beyond entrepreneurial entry, succession, career dynamics, and presence in a  
45  
46 family firm (Campopiano et al., 2017). This special issue, therefore, puts forward the  
47  
48 question of whether these women are empowered in their roles in the family firms. This  
49  
50 evaluation allows researchers and practitioners to verify the enablers and deterrents for  
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52 women to pursue an active role in the family business. In addition, it is also essential to  
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54 understand how family business supports women in leadership development, gaining  
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56 recognition, achieving agency and being empowered. The benefits of women's participation  
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3 in family business should not be limited to firm and family level but extend right across to  
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5 include consideration of the individual level.  
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8           Recent works have started to examine individual influence on family business in  
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10 several contexts (Kelleci et al., 2019) and how women's participation impacts family firms'  
11  
12 outcomes (Bauweraerts et al., 2022). Women are also found to have a long-term orientation  
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14 in facing the COVID-19 pandemic (Anggadwita et al., 2023) and influence participation in  
15  
16 community and social responsibility (Peake et al., 2017). The contribution of women in  
17  
18 family business is becoming more evident through these empirical studies, but how family  
19  
20 business operates as a medium to promote women's agency and empowerment remains  
21  
22 unexplored. Spotlighting women's experiences in gaining personal agency would elevate  
23  
24 their willingness to bring meaningful impacts to the firm, family and other women in the  
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26 same context.  
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32           This special issue offers a vital research platform to expand the current discourse on  
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34 gender equality, as established in United Nations SDG#5 in a family business context.

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36 Aligned with the global goals, there is a need to challenge the societal prejudice,  
37  
38 (un)conscious gender bias and family traditions in family firms. As the main contributor to  
39  
40 the economy and social development, the family business could exert its influence as a role  
41  
42 model to support gender equality. Family business literature must move from taking gender  
43  
44 as just another variable to understanding the gender approach and its impact on family  
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46 firms. Through gender theorizing that reflects the impact on the individual (the women)  
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48 rather than the firm, family or the family firm, this would lead to more prominent roles held  
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50 by women in family firms.  
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56           With these rationales in mind, the special issue is guided by the following research  
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58 questions:  
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- 3 • How do women see themselves in a family business?
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- 6 • How do gendered processes impact women's engagement and participation in family
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- 8 businesses?
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- 11 • How do women contextualize their experiences in family business?
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15 There are four papers accepted in this special issue. These papers show empirical evidence  
16 of women's involvement at different levels in family firms. The family firms examined are  
17 also of various sizes, ranging from micro-enterprises to public-listed family firms operating  
18 in Ireland, South Korea, India and a global dataset survey.  
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### 26 **Special issue contributions**

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28 The first paper in this special issue is "Women's Entrepreneurial Resistance to COVID-19  
29 Pandemic inside Handloom Family Enterprises: A Case Study of West Bengal, India" by Sayana  
30 Basu. This fascinating paper documents the experiences of 66 women involved in 26 family  
31 handloom businesses in West Bengal, India. The labour crisis caused by the Covid-19  
32 pandemic may be reminiscent, for Western readers, of the pressures faced by women when  
33 men returned from the world wars. In this case, men had left the family businesses to work  
34 in the city, and the women took over the management and running of them. When the men  
35 returned home, due to covid-related job losses, these talented women faced relegation and  
36 potential collapse of their agency due to prevailing gender realities. This was a common  
37 phenomenon worldwide as the 'gains' many women and societies imagined they had made  
38 experienced truth put to the lie. These women, through various coping strategies, including  
39 bargaining and passive resistance, rode out the threats to their business internally (family  
40 pressures, increased childcare and schooling responsibilities) and externally (collapsed  
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3 markets, storage issues) by collectively acting, taking this opportunity to reinforce community  
4 and responding innovatively to the new market realities. In the face of pressures from  
5 relatives, and exhortations to concentrate now on family safety and their parenting duties,  
6 leaving the business actions (meetings and marketing) to their husbands, and the loss of  
7 markets for their expensive, export-oriented offerings the women both pivoted to producing  
8 new, cheaper items (scarves) and also used their talents to produce face masks – all the while  
9 encouraging their fellow artisans to do the same.  
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21 "...I was reprimanded by my husband when I encouraged my neighbours (other women  
22 artisans) to propose this idea [making covid masks] to the marketing agents they were  
23 working for. In a few weeks, I practically saw all weaving households making them. But I  
24 'wasn't jealous at all; I was just so very happy to see women smiling again after such a long  
25 time. I was exalted to hear the sound of loom in every household. He (her husband) 'doesn't  
26 understand this is not about winning; this is about surviving together".  
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36 This paper highlights the role of women in social cohesion and their collective approach to  
37 business and community. It also illustrates the choice the men made to 'strengthen their  
38 individual identities and power positions by trying to regain control over the family business'.  
39 The entrepreneurial resilience of these women is an important example of sustainable  
40 entrepreneurship/business and ensuring the survival of this artisanal community over this  
41 crisis.  
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54 In the second paper- "Women in the family business: Self and family's influence on their  
55 perceptions of financial performance", Ana Gonzalez, Yeny Rodriguez and Carol Sanchez look  
56 at perceptions of financial performance, including the concept of socioemotional wealth and  
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3 its influence on the perceptions of both families and individuals. Utilising the STEP (Successful  
4 Transgenerational Entrepreneurship Practices) survey and combining the socioemotional  
5 wealth considerations of identity, exercise of family influence, family goals and continuation  
6 of the family dynasty overlaid with the social construct of gender, this paper points to how  
7 financial evaluations vary according to gender – a fact often overlooked in research design.  
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16 Highlighting an important theoretical area in the literature on entrepreneurship, these  
17 authors point to a lack of theory which regards gender as a social construct and so either data  
18 on the gender of respondents is treated as merely a variable – or not at all – which leaves  
19 important gaps in our understanding: are these respondents women, men, leaders, family  
20 members? They find that gender is very significant in terms of financial perceptions, with  
21 women tending to be more positive – but not if they are leaders. In that case their perceptions  
22 decrease, even becoming negative. Socioemotional wealth amplifies these tendencies.  
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34 Women, consistent with their gendered socialisation, can overstate the financial performance  
35 of their family business, with their relational-oriented and optimistic view of financial  
36 performance and reflective of their gendered context of being more loyal and unconditional  
37 towards the family firm than men. This means they may overestimate financial performance  
38 when asked for the purposes of scholarly research. As leaders, women reflect their  
39 socialisation by being less optimistic than men, possibly due to the challenges they face as  
40 women leaders, the lack of support they may endure in striving towards strategic goals, and  
41 with a wish to temper expectations. This position may cause others to question their  
42 competence to lead. In keeping with this finding, Gonzalez et al find that the theoretical  
43 perspective of "precarious manhood" is supported, as men overstate financial expectations  
44 to reinforce their gender socialisation as men when they are in leadership positions. In terms  
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3 of socioemotional wealth, only family continuity was influential on overestimation of family  
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5 business performance. For women leaders, family continuity and enrichment both negatively  
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7 influenced perceptions of financial performance. These results further support the claim of  
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9 multidimensionality for the socioemotional wealth construct.  
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13 Overall, the paper contributes to several areas including how social constructs of gender lead  
14  
15 to differences in perceptions of financial performance as well as self-promotion and self-  
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17 evaluation related to gender. Further, it reinforces the socioemotional wealth construct as  
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19 one which is multidimensional, with different elements affecting the different genders in  
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21 different ways and at different intensities.  
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30 The third paper: "Vying for and forgoing visibility: female next gen leaders in family business  
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32 with male successors" by Martina Brophy, Marua McAdam and Eric Clinton present the topic  
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34 of visibility and invisibility in family business when there are male successors. In this  
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36 consideration of identity, women use their tactic of visibility/invisibility to establish their  
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38 legitimacy and use power and humility to work in concert with the male next generation. This  
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40 study involved in-depth interviews with 13 next generation family business leaders and offers  
41  
42 a model to show how these women establish their legitimacy with the male next generation  
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44 in power by balancing their visibility/invisibility as leaders themselves – humility in  
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46 partnership and endorsement of their brother as leader, so leveraging power in partnership.  
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48 In this way, specific strategies used by these women are uncovered herein.  
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55 Answering the calls within the literature for more work on developing and identifying gender  
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57 as a social construct within the family business area, this paper addresses how women  
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59 manage the gender dynamics in their daily lives – especially when the preference for sons to  
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3 succeed to leadership in family business environments is well documented – resulting in  
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5 women investing much time and effort into their identities. This is particularly true as they  
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7 navigate exclusion (invisibility) and difference (visibility) whilst working alongside their male  
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9 next generation leaders.  
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13 Gender based differences manifest, for these women, in not being considered as the  
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15 successor and/or joining the family business later in their careers than their brothers. This  
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17 leads to respondents framing their failure to succeed or be considered a successor as a result  
18  
19 of ‘time served’, area of specialisation and/or something they themselves don’t want.  
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21 Differences which cause highlighted visibility can be related to childcare/family obligations,  
22  
23 characterised as a lack of commitment when compared to the ‘workaholic’ brothers. Women  
24  
25 who successfully balance these visibilities are often the (silent) advisor to (younger) brothers  
26  
27 who fulfil the main leadership position in the family business. “By maintaining the outward  
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29 impression of the male-in-power as sole decision-maker, female next generation were able  
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31 to challenge male family members in a way that reduced the possibility for confrontation”.  
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39 Through the analysis of the three concepts of identity work, gender practices and (in)visibility,  
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41 this paper is able to illustrate the underlying processes that contribute to the invisibility of  
42  
43 women in their family businesses with the male next generation as leaders. It also gives  
44  
45 important and empirical insights into the way gender dynamics shape everyday interactions  
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47 and activities for women in their family businesses exposing hidden power imbalances as it  
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49 does so.  
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57 The final paper- "Gender inequalities in Korean family business: contradictions between show  
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59 and tell" by Amee Kim and Poh Yen Ng examines how gender-related issues are  
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3 communicated in *chaebols* (Korean family-run conglomerates) to understand how the public  
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5 communications of these companies reflect the perception of gender representation within  
6  
7 them. Using annual reports to examine what is written and illustrated about gender issues  
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9 and using a Foucauldian framework, these authors find that the plans *chaebols* refer to with  
10  
11 a view to improving female career prospects are vague and under-evaluated.  
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16 Data was collected from 5 purposively chosen *chaebols* (Samsung, LG, CJ – Cheil Jedang,  
17  
18 Korean Air and Hyundai) using reports covering a 12-year period. These family businesses had  
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20 between 9 and 18% women on their Boards. Considering employment ratios, talent  
21  
22 development and management, female employee retention and female leadership  
23  
24 representation in the glottographic (text) and non-glottographic (charts/visuals) material in  
25  
26 the reports, these authors found information unclear, inconsistent and potentially  
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28 misleading.  
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34 Although the reports show an awareness of gender issues and have increased their reporting  
35  
36 on the topics in more recent years, many of the strong claims made across the *chaebol's*  
37  
38 reports are not at all clear, especially in glottographic statements. In non-glottographic  
39  
40 statements numbers are frequently provided without any details around how these were  
41  
42 derived, leading to question: "Is the (glottographic) truth being told or are the (non-  
43  
44 glottographic) numbers being calculated correctly?"  
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48  
49 Female employment in the *chaebols* is at a low level. Although 65% of Korean women  
50  
51 participate in the workforce, the approach of the *chaebols* still reflects the cultural societal  
52  
53 expectations on female gender roles. Women are often over-represented in lower-level jobs,  
54  
55 including manufacturing. Women are frequently categorised under the title 'manager'  
56  
57 without any breakdown of the level of manager. There is a strong preference for masculinity  
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3 in full-time work in Korea, and so the rise of part-time work is likely to be performed by  
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5 (married) women. These workers are unlikely to have opportunities to progress in their  
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7 careers or be paid salaries, rather than hourly wages. The authors conclude that many issues  
8  
9 surrounding women and their progression up and through work is a 'ticking the box' exercise,  
10  
11 particularly when women return to work after childbirth.  
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16 As they note, "silence can be perceived as the source of resistance to gender equality from  
17  
18 dominant groups in society" and there is no doubt that the *chaebols* are hugely important in  
19  
20 Korean society. As such, they are missing out on providing a leadership role in improving and  
21  
22 equalising the lives of Korean women at work. In fact, they are doing the opposite, and  
23  
24 constructing gendered hierarchies. In time, this may affect their global competitiveness, due  
25  
26 to failing to see and support women workers potential and developing programmes to help  
27  
28 them succeed to the highest levels in their companies as they go through bearing, and raising,  
29  
30 the next generation of Korean people.  
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### 39 **Conclusion and Future Directions**

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41 This special issue addresses the role of family business to support women's agency, decision  
42  
43 making and female empowerment. As such it also serves as podium to debate questions of  
44  
45 gender equality in family businesses. The four articles published in this special issue reveal  
46  
47 persisting societal and organizational gender disparities in family business contexts, which are  
48  
49 highly challenging for women. The articles describe women who have been successful in  
50  
51 managerial as well as leadership roles in their respective family business; they also show  
52  
53 women who proved to be exceptionally resourceful and innovative in face of adversity.  
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56 Nevertheless, the studies point to a persistent disregard for women's contributions to the  
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3 wellbeing of family businesses across diverse national contexts. From West Bengal to Ireland  
4  
5 to Korea and beyond the research articles in this special issue reveal examples of how women  
6  
7 operationalize 'coping strategies' to be 'invisible' or 'not too visible', how women 'downplay  
8  
9 their contributions as leaders to firm performance'; and how they have to negotiate their role  
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11 a managers and leaders with gendered societal expectations, that push them to behave in a  
12  
13 way that is humble, conciliatory and small to not threaten the 'precarious manhood' of their  
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15 male counterparts in business and society.  
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21 Further work on the construct of female visibility as well as identity work of women in family  
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23 business is needed. The prevailing view tends to assign women a more supportive or  
24  
25 secondary role in the business, compared with their male counterparts. Moreover, women  
26  
27 are still perceived as marginalized contributors to firm performance and development. Such  
28  
29 gendered assumptions are embedded within cultural contexts, and they impact expectations  
30  
31 and business practices (Xian et al 2021) worldwide. As well, they trickle down to the cognitive  
32  
33 social constructions of individual women and influence definitions of their own professional  
34  
35 identities within family businesses. More studies are needed that address and illustrate the  
36  
37 dynamic processes that shape female visibility or invisibility in family businesses, which is  
38  
39 intrinsically related to variations and changes in women's role identity within different  
40  
41 contexts and over time (Mc Adam et al 2021). Constructions of women's leadership differ  
42  
43 with cultural context and more work is needed that challenges prevailing Western-hegemonic  
44  
45 assumptions regarding female empowerment, leadership and entrepreneurship (Wood et al.  
46  
47 2021) which would add to a more complete picture of change processes within collectivist  
48  
49 cultural settings as well as developmental and transitional economic contexts.  
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3 Similar to entrepreneurship, prevalent concepts of leadership and management in family  
4 business are defined as male, where women take the place of “the other” (Ahl 2006). Thus,  
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6 research on gender and family firms needs to go beyond analyzing and understanding  
7  
8 gendered social orders and also address the mechanisms by which these orders can be  
9  
10 reconstructed (Ahl 2004) to become more inclusive of female conceptualizations. This  
11  
12 requires including male perspectives and considering how gendered expectations and norms  
13  
14 also impact male family members. Involving men more to advocate gender equitable  
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16 environments, policies and procedures in a family firm context can enhance processes of  
17  
18 change. Men still hold preponderant power in most areas of life and in most contexts. As such  
19  
20 they play a pivotal role in shifting attitudes and ideas about gendered norms and practices.  
21  
22 Recent research on women entrepreneurs in the Arab world revealed how male family  
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24 members –fathers, brothers, husbands – have been instrumental for women’s startup  
25  
26 success, as they provided women with access to key resources, such as social capital, financial  
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28 resources and skills. They also provided strong emotional and companionship support that  
29  
30 was directed at women’s entrepreneurial autonomy (Bastian et al. 2023).  
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40 Significant by their number and/or size, family businesses are in a perfect position to  
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42 reimagine, reconstruct and reenergize gender/ed hierarchies by championing women and  
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44 policies which directly affect their work lives, while they directly affect the progress of the  
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46 society overall in terms of management and leadership styles, procreation and expertise.  
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48 With this Special Issue we hope to have curated a serious, impactful issue of the International  
49  
50 Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship, which contributes to the balancing of a heavily  
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52 (male) gendered literature and the lived reality for women contributing to their own, and  
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54 other, family businesses.  
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