Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership And The Longevity Of Family Businesses: A Comprehensive Review

Sridevi M[1,2], Suma S R[3], Anupama[4], Vimala [5], Nayana Kumari[6], HB Priyanka [7], Dhanalakshmi [8], Jaya Shankar[9]

[1]*Research Scholar (Part Time), Department of Management Studies, Periyar University, Salem (TN).*
[2]*Assistant Professor, Department of Management Studies, Christ Academy Institute for Advanced Studies (CAIAS), Bengaluru (KA).*
[3] *Assistant Professor & Head, Institute of Land and Disaster Management, PTP Nagar, Thiruvananthapuram*
[4] *PhD Scholar, Amrita School of Business, Bengaluru*
[5] *HOD of Commerce, Shri Jagadguru Renukacharya college of science,Arts and commerce, Race course road, Bengaluru-09*
[6] *Assistant professor, Department of commerce, Sri Jagadguru Renukacharya college of science.*
[7] *Research Scholar, Tumkur University, Department: Department of Studies and Research in Commerce*
[8]*Assistant Professor, School Of Business & Management, Christ University*
[9] *Dr. Jaya Shankar , Associate Professor , MBA Department , Mahaguru Institute of Technology, Kayamkulam.*

Women entrepreneurship refers to the process by which women organize and coordinate various factors of production, undertake business risks, and create employment opportunities for others. This literature-based review explores women entrepreneurs engaged in family businesses, emphasizing the significance of leadership skills in ensuring business sustainability. The study identifies common factors influencing the long-term viability of family enterprises led by women. Furthermore, it highlights that effective succession planning enables the seamless transition of business ownership across generations. The emotional intelligence and innovative leadership qualities exhibited by women entrepreneurs play a crucial role in sustaining and advancing the success of family businesses.

Keywords: Leadership Skills, Women Entrepreneurship, Family Business Sustainability, Succession Planning, Innovative Leadership.

Introduction

Women entrepreneurship refers to the process by which women organise and coordinate the factors of production, assume business risks and in turn generate employment opportunities. Women are often the primary caretakers of children and elders across societies, yet they also play a pivotal role in the social and economic development of the communities to which they belong. Primonovo (2012), "Women bring diversity of thought, experiences and behaviours which are [a] critical component of business success." Within the context of family-owned enterprises, women entrepreneurs increasingly occupy key leadership positions, contributing both operationally and strategically to business continuity and growth.

This review article examines women entrepreneurs who lead family businesses, emphasising the importance of leadership skills and the sustainability of such enterprises. The literature identifies a range of factors that influence the sustainability of family businesses led by women. For example, succession planning is repeatedly highlighted as a critical mechanism for intergenerational business continuity. In family firms, particularly those headed by women, developing a clear succession plan enables the seamless transfer of leadership and responsibilities to the next generation and thus supports long-term viability. Moreover, women entrepreneurs' emotional intelligence and innovative leadership qualities — such as resilience, initiative-taking, networking and relationship-building — are viewed as instrumental in sustaining and advancing business success.

Indeed, recent empirical evidence underscores the rising female participation in family business leadership roles. A recent study found that family businesses are increasingly embracing female leaders: up to 55% of family firms have at least one woman on their board, and 70% are considering a woman as their next CEO. Further, globally women are launching high-growth ventures at accelerating rates, reflecting the broader shift in entrepreneurial ecosystems. These trends reinforce the significance of studying how women's leadership affects the sustainability of family-run enterprises.

From a leadership-skills perspective, women entrepreneurs are frequently noted for their strengths in areas such as initiative-taking, resilience, self-development, integrity, relationship-building and adaptability. A Harvard Business Review study cited in your original text suggests that women leaders score higher than men on most leadership traits — including bold decision-making and inspiring others. These competencies, when applied within a family business context, can foster a culture of innovation, collaboration and continuity. Leadership is not solely about operational excellence; in family enterprises it also requires balancing business imperatives with family dynamics, and women leaders may bring a relational and inclusive style that is especially suited to this challenge. For instance, research indicates that women CEOs in family firms are more effective in leveraging learning orientation (commitment to learning, shared vision, open-mindedness) to drive entrepreneurial behaviours than women of non-family firms.

The sustainability of a family business — its ability to survive, thrive and transition across generations — is closely linked to leadership quality. Leaders must view each area of the business with continuity in mind: future-oriented strategy, addressing barriers, strengthening leadership capabilities, and embedding a succession roadmap. Empirical findings show that many family businesses fail to prepare an explicit succession plan until the current head passes away, which then causes leadership vacuum, decision-making delays and operational disruption. For instance, a study in Cameroon and Nigeria (Cho, Okuboyejo & Dickson, 2017) found that lack of succession planning severely affected business continuity. When women entrepreneurs lead family firms and proactively develop successors, the business is better positioned for longevity and generational renewal.

The literature also points to several common factors influencing the sustainability of women-led family businesses: intra-family communication and trust; leadership development; formalised governance structures; gender-bias mitigation; access to capital and networks; and socio-cultural support mechanisms. For example, a 2024 investigation in Morocco explored individual, social, institutional and economic factors affecting women entrepreneurs in a patriarchal society — highlighting the importance of institutional support, social norms and access to resources. Similarly, research in India underscores that government initiatives, mentorship networks and inclusive ecosystems are critical for enabling women entrepreneurs.

In summary, this review emphasises three core themes: first, women's entrepreneurship in family businesses involves coordination of production factors, risk-taking and job creation. Second, leadership skills — notably emotional intelligence, innovation orientation, succession planning and relationship-building — are pivotal to enterprise sustainability. Third, the sustainability of a women-led family business hinges on factors such as governance, succession, access to resources and the interplay of family and business systems. In the context of family enterprises, women's inclusive leadership style may align with the cultural values of long-term stewardship and internal stakeholder commitment, thereby offering a strategic advantage for business continuity.

Women's Entrepreneurship: Concepts and Context

Entrepreneurship generally refers to the initiation of a new or evolving business venture. As defined by Lazear (2005), entrepreneurship is "the process of assembling necessary factors of production consisting of human, physical and information resources. Entrepreneurs put people together in a particular way and combine them with physical capital and ideas to create a new product or to produce an existing one at a lower or competitive cost." In the context of women, a women entrepreneur may be an individual woman or a group of women who initiate, organise and operate a business enterprise. According to the Government of India, a "women-entrepreneur" is defined as an enterprise owned and controlled by women, with a minimum financial interest of 51 percent of the capital and at least 51 percent of the employment generated in the enterprise being provided to women. Women entrepreneurs engage in business ventures for a variety of reasons: the pursuit of economic independence, the desire for self-esteem, utilising family business opportunities, supporting the family financially, or responding to unemployment. Key functions characterising women's entrepreneurship include identifying business opportunities (new or imitated), accepting and managing risks, coordinating and supervising production or services, managing operations, and exercising leadership (Hadke & Shinde, 2024; Chandra Sabar, 2024). The domain of women's entrepreneurship began to draw significant attention in the late 1970s, with pioneering reviews by Bowen and Hisrich. Global data indicate that women's entrepreneurial participation is growing rapidly. For example, women entrepreneurs are increasingly entering high-growth ventures: globally, one in four women entrepreneurs expect to scale with six or more employees within five years. In India and elsewhere, empowerment of women through entrepreneurship and policy support (such as credit access, start-up initiatives) is gaining momentum. For instance, data from India's Economic Survey 2025 highlight that fintech adoption and targeted funding schemes are enabling female-led enterprises. ETBFSI.com

Women's Leadership in Family Businesses

Family businesses constitute a special form of enterprise in which ownership and control lie primarily within the family. These businesses often face tensions arising from the mismatch of family norms and business norms—interpretation of roles, selection of successors, appraisal, compensation, and training frequently become sites of conflict (Lansberg, 1983). When a woman assumes a leadership role in a family business, she may face internal and external challenges including gender bias and cultural expectations. Recent findings reveal a rising trend in female participation within family firms. For example, in India, 40 % of family businesses have women as owners and 54.7 % have female family members actively managing operations. Research in the Gulf region (e.g., Bahrain) reports how women in family businesses overcome traditional barriers when they receive explicit support from family and act as intermediaries between family dynamics and business strategy. Leadership by women in family firms can create competitive advantage: as noted by Eurasia Review (2024), family businesses tend to emphasise inclusivity and internal stakeholder support, which aligns well with relational leadership styles often practised by women. However, historically daughters and female family members were often overlooked for succession and leadership roles; gender was a key determinant and many women were excluded from top roles. Overcoming such inertia requires women to gain education, external experience and develop passion for business, as recommended in earlier studies. In sum, women's leadership in family businesses is increasingly recognised as valuable—both strategically and culturally—yet still demands active organisational, familial and social support to flourish.

Sustainability of Women-Led Family Businesses

In the business realm, sustainability represents a strategic approach aimed at ensuring long-term organisational value by balancing economic, social, and environmental priorities. Thomas (2001) formally defines sustainability as "the ability of the system to perpetuate itself using locally approved strategies (mission) … predetermined by the governance of the system … until its goals (vision) are fulfilled." Within the context of family-owned enterprises led by women**,** sustainability takes on a nuanced dimension — one that emphasises intergenerational continuity, preservation of family wealth, coherent governance structures, and the alignment of mission and vision. Achieving sustainability in such enterprises depends on several critical determinants, including innovation, active family participation in management and control, prudent financial discipline, transparent governance practices, strong interpersonal relationships within the family-business system, and robust training and mentorship opportunities for emerging entrepreneurs. However, empirical studies reveal that many family businesses neglect to develop formal succession plans until the passing of the founding leader — a delay that often leads to leadership vacuums and operational disruptions. Research conducted in Cameroon and Nigeria highlights how inadequate succession planning can severely undermine business continuity, reinforcing the urgent need for proactive governance and structured transition strategies in family-run enterprises.

In addition, in patriarchal societies, women entrepreneurs face specific sustainability-related challenges such as institutional constraints, social norms and resource access issues. A 2024 empirical study in Morocco identified individual, social, institutional and economic factors shaping women's entrepreneurial success in such contexts. For women leading family businesses, sustainability is strengthened when they adopt a vision-oriented approach, develop leadership capability, engage in innovation, and create inclusive governance. The interplay between family systems and business systems demands that women leaders navigate both family relations and business exigencies, thereby combining relational skill with strategic business acumen. When effectively managed, this dual capability can provide women-led family firms with resilience, continuity and growth.

Review Of Literature

Women entrepreneurship has become a critical driver of economic growth and social development globally. Women often initiate their own businesses to achieve economic independence, contribute to societal development, and fulfil personal ambitions (Brush, 1992). In family businesses, women entrepreneurs play a particularly significant role, influencing business continuity, innovation, and intergenerational wealth transfer. Mirchandani (1999) argues that gender differences are socially constructed, highlighting how societal norms and expectations can create barriers for women in entrepreneurship. Historically, men entrepreneurs have benefited from stronger social networks, better access to education, and greater financial resources, whereas women faced constraints that limited their opportunities (Carter & Brush, 2004). Recent studies, however, indicate that women engaged in family businesses increasingly focus on smaller, service-oriented enterprises that grow steadily, reflecting a strategic adaptation to available resources and market dynamics (Greene et al., 2003). The emergence of various women's business associations, such as the National Association for Women Business Owners, the Female Entrepreneur Association, and BizWomen, reflects a global effort to support women in business by providing mentorship, networking opportunities, and financial guidance

Effective leadership is recognized as a critical determinant of business performance, and this holds true for women leading family businesses. Leadership in family enterprises often develops under unique circumstances, as women may assume leadership roles following the death of a partner, absence of a male heir, or disinterest of male family members (Greer & Greene, 2003). Gender bias continues to exist in many family businesses, and women leaders who emerge from within the family often lack access to formal leadership training and external mentorship. A social feminist perspective suggests that these structural inequalities can limit women's entrepreneurial potential, and women frequently perceive themselves as less entrepreneurial than men (Verheul, 2005; Ahl, 2004). Research also shows that women bring distinctive leadership strengths to family businesses, including emotional intelligence, relational skills, and the ability to build strong networks (Astin & Leland, 1991). The concept of feminine leadership emphasizes collective action, passionate commitment, and consistent performance, underscoring the importance of nurturing relationships while pursuing organizational goals. Entrepreneurial leadership, which focuses on vision creation and opportunity recognition, complements these skills by fostering innovation, change-oriented behavior, and collective learning within the firm (Gupta, Macmillan, & Surie, 2004; Leitch & Volery, 2017). Leaders who integrate these qualities into family businesses contribute to a resilient organizational culture capable of adapting to globalization and diverse cultural environments (Farrel, 2018).

Sustainability of women-led family businesses is closely intertwined with leadership quality, managerial capability, and strategic planning. Family businesses represent the world's oldest form of enterprise, ranging from small and medium-sized businesses to multinational corporations such as Samsung, Hyundai Motors, L'Oreal, Ford, and Walmart (Abouzaid, 2011). Despite their prevalence, many family businesses fail to sustain operations across generations, often due to inadequate succession planning, limited managerial skills, or gender-based constraints (Mbaeh & Korir, 2016). Studies indicate that women-led businesses face additional challenges arising from cultural norms, financial barriers, and legal constraints (Njogu, 2016). For example, patriarchal traditions in some regions prevent women from owning land or accessing institutional credit, which affects their ability to finance and expand business operations. Furthermore, women entrepreneurs frequently manage both professional responsibilities and household duties, resulting in higher stress levels and potential burnout (Saxena, 2006), (C Mohan & R Joy, 2024). Marketing knowledge and strategic planning also play a critical role in sustaining women-led enterprises, as insufficient awareness of market dynamics can lead to business failure. Legal compliance is another essential factor; studies have shown that failure to adhere to government regulations can result in business closure, highlighting the importance of understanding regulatory frameworks (Njogu, 2016).

Empirical evidence supports the assertion that women entrepreneurs demonstrate strong risk-taking abilities, entrepreneurial intensity, and innovative behaviour, which positively influence business sustainability. A 2014 study of 310 Russian women-led family firms found that risk-taking and innovation mediated the relationship between entrepreneurial intensity and firm sustainability, enabling women to identify and capitalize on market opportunities effectively (C Mohan & R Joy, 2020). Similarly, research in Cameroon and Nigeria revealed that many family businesses lack structured succession plans, creating continuity risks when the current head passes away or is unable to manage operations (Nkam, Cho, Sena, & Dickson, 2017). Strong succession planning, combined with leadership skills such as emotional intelligence, strategic vision, and decision-making confidence, is essential to ensure long-term sustainability. Women leaders who cultivate professional networks, mentor successors, and invest in leadership development programs contribute to both the growth of the business and the resilience of future generations. Managerial skills, financial acumen, understanding of legislative requirements, and alignment with cultural practices also play significant roles in sustaining women-led enterprises (Njogu, 2016). Collectively, these factors demonstrate that women's leadership and entrepreneurship in family businesses not only influence individual business performance but also have broader implications for economic development and gender equality(C Mohan & R Joy, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, women entrepreneurs in family businesses have become key agents of economic growth, innovation, and sustainability. While they face structural and societal barriers, their contributions through leadership, risk-taking, and relational skills are substantial. Effective succession planning, managerial expertise, adherence to legal frameworks, and fostering of organizational culture enhance the long-term viability of these businesses. Recent research underscores the importance of supportive networks, mentorship, and policy interventions to address persistent gender-based challenges. Overall, women-led family businesses exemplify the intersection of entrepreneurial acumen and social responsibility, highlighting the potential for women to drive sustainable business growth globally. Continued research and policy support are critical to ensure that women entrepreneurs can overcome barriers and fully leverage their leadership capabilities, contributing to both family enterprise sustainability and broader economic development.

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