Women’s roles in family businesses: some empirical evidence from Italy

Abstract

Purpose – As women are still promoted to C-level roles at far lower rates than men, this paper examines whether there is a clear and direct relationship between women’s formal roles and the effect of the socio-cultural context on their participation in strategic decisions in family businesses.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts a quantitative research design and logistic regression to analyze empirical data from a randomly selected sample of 800 firms in Sardinia.

Findings – In general, the results show that women’s formal roles and participation in the decision-making process are not related, except in a specific sector (agriculture and farming), and that the local context plays an unquestionable role in terms of replicating local customs and traditions in the workplace.

Research implications/limitations – Although limited by the sample of firms in the same territory, this study shows that women participate in strategic decision-making both when tasked to by virtue of their leadership role and when playing a minor role by way of implicit decision-making power. However, the sector can hinder women’s participation, especially when strongly rooted in local culture.

Originality/value – The study shows that the socio-cultural context has a strong influence on women’s involvement in strategic decision-making, highlighting the “silent” way women make the most relevant decisions. Therefore, this study questions whether it is still relevant to discuss the formal role of women or whether it is more pertinent to investigate their explicit or implicit power in making strategic decisions in family businesses.

Keywords: women roles, family businesses, C-level roles, strategic decisions, context

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There are persistent gaps of women in C-suite roles, namely high-ranking executives. In fact, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions (Krivkovich *et al*., 2021; Hassan *et al*., 2020). The numbers speak for themselves: for 48% of entry level women, only 24% arrive at the C-suite level, while for 52% of entry level men, 75% have C-suite roles

(Krivkovich *et al*., 2021). This clearly indicates the lack of women in leadership positions, with women representing only 27% of all managerial positions (Gap, 2020).

The debate among scholars, practitioners, and the press on why so few women occupy leadership positions is ongoing (Fitzsimmons *et al*., 2014). Prior studies maintain that the reasons for this gap include the different upbringing of boys and girls in terms of risk-taking, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Pallier, 2003), which leads to disadvantages for women in judging their ability to seek promotion opportunities in the workplace (Guay *et al*., 2003). Stereotypically, men are expected to be aggressive and competitive, while women are seen as sensitive (Vinkenburg *et al*., 2011), and the most persistent stereotype sustains the notion "think manager–think male" (Kark *et al*., 2012; Schein, 1973).

This is also replicated in firms owned and managed by families where only 42% of women working in a family business occupy C-level positions, and of 57% of wives working in the business, 47% are paid (Danes and Olson, 2003). Women in family businesses are often labeled as invisible (Curimbaba, 2002; Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990) or working behind-the-scenes (Martinez Jimenez, 2009). However, women are more likely to work in family businesses compared to their nonfamily counterparts, and family firms tend to involve women more rapidly in leadership roles (Barrett and Moores, 2009) and top management teams (Montemerlo *et al*., 2013). This also emerges in the Ernst and Young's report (2017) indicating that 55% of family businesses have at least one woman on their board, and 70% are considering a woman for their next leader. Notwithstanding that women are still generally underrepresented as leaders compared to men, family businesses appear able to create a more apposite environment for involving women in C-suite positions compared to nonfamily businesses (McAdam *et al*., 2020). Yet, women have been supporting family businesses for centuries (Minoglou, 2007) in gendered roles, unconsciously incorporated and reproduced within family businesses with informal, loosely defined roles, generally unpaid (Danes and Olson, 2003; McAdam *et al*., 2020), and often as a result of a sense of guilty (Floris and Dettori, 2021). In this context, gender roles dictated by traditional values and societal expectations would seem to be exacerbated in family businesses due to the crossover between women's professional and family lives (Hamilton, 2006).

Studies show contrasting results and suggest that although scholars increasingly pay attention to the distinct environment of family businesses with regard to women's involvement (Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017; Amore *et al*., 2014; Floris and Dettori, 2021), research on female leadership in the family business literature is still relatively underdeveloped

(Campopiano *et al*., 2017; Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017; Chadwick and Dawson, 2018; Maseda *et al*., 2022).

Intending to problematize and contribute to this ongoing debate (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011), this paper aims to answer the following research question: *Is there a relationship between women's roles in family businesses and their participation in strategic decision-making?*

Strategic decisions, here considered "intentional choices or programmed responses about issues that materially affect the survival prospects, well-being and nature of the organization" (Schoemaker, 1993, p. 107), are generally taken by those in leadership positions (Bergner and Filzen, 2021; Bettis and Prahalad, 1995). However, very few studies deeply investigate whether individuals in minor roles make strategic decisions (i.e. Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014). Deeping our understanding of this challenging topic allows us to investigate the still-low presence of women in C-suite level positions from a different perspective. In particular, family firms deeply rooted in family culture, hierarchies, practices, and familial ideology (Ram and Holliday, 1993b, 1993a; Ainsworth and Cox, 2003) are likely influenced by the replication of gender hierarchy (Floris *et al.*, 2019), highly embedded in the family history and dynamics (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003), as well as the context from which they draw their traditions, customs, and values (Granovetter, 1985). Specifically, following Post and Byron (2015), and Hoobler *et al.*'s (2018) call for a closer look at socio-contextual factors to understand how these affect women's involvement in leadership positions, our study responds by conducting a logistic regression on a random sample of 800 small family firms embedded in the same geographic context.

The results show that generally, regardless of the role played, women actively participate in the strategic decision-making process, without a clear and robust relationship between C-level roles and participation in decisions. The data analysis shows that only the traditional agriculture and farming sector is more closed to women's involvement in strategic decision-making when they have less powerful roles. In particular, the results show that local culture carries considerable weight in women's involvement, that playing a specific (apical or minor) role is not relevant for strategic decision-making, except in a particular historically male-dominated industry, and that being firmly rooted in local customs and culture hinders the involvement of women in strategic decision-making when they occupy minor roles. These results contribute to the literature in two way. First, the findings introduce the concept of implicit decision-making power, namely the informal way women make strategic decisions when they are not formally tasked to, suggesting that family firms engage in shared leadership with women regardless of their formal role, replicating what occurs within families as a result of socio-cultural customs.

Second, the results reveal that the socio-cultural environment has also a direct influence on women's involvement in a traditionally male-dominated sector strongly rooted in local culture – agriculture and farming – highlighting a considerable gender gap in women's involvement in C-level positions and their participation in strategic decision-making.

Theoretical background

Women's involvement in family firms

Understanding the degree of women's involvement is a crucial issue for managers and directors intending to promote good corporate governance (Gallego-Álvarez *et al.*, 2010) by increasing the percentage of women on corporate boards. For this reason, a growing number of empirical studies (Reddy and Jadhav, 2019) seek to unpack the reasons for the low presence of women on boards, referring to the "glass ceiling" (Burke and McKeen, 1995; Albrecht *et al.*, 2003), real or perceived (Cohen *et al.*, 2020), and to the difference between female and male leadership (Burke and Collins, 2001; Adams and Funk, 2012) in terms of concerns and opportunities. Scholars have found that women are disheartened by their double burden (Kengatharan, 2020) and lack of confidence (Kirkwood, 2009). Conversely, numerous studies find that women on boards ensure good business performance (Lückerath-Rovers, 2013; Campbell and Vera, 2010), likely due to their considerable efforts in facing daily challenges, even if perceived as an out-group in the business elite setting (Elstad and Ladegard, 2012).

Recently, scholars have found that family ownership and board size have a positive effect on board gender diversity (Nekhili and Gatfaoui, 2013; Rubino *et al.*, 2017), showing that strong family connections (Bianco *et al.*, 2015) and solid family ties differentiate the behaviors of women directors in family firms compared to their non-family counterparts (Ruigrok *et al.*, 2007).

Women in family businesses have traditionally played contradictory roles in decision-making to ensure continuity, growth, and productivity (Martinez Jimenez, 2009). Family-owned businesses are firms in which the family (usually the founder) has ownership and decision-making power (Villalonga and Amit, 2006; Anderson and Reeb, 2003; Sharma, 2004), aiming to transfer the business to future generations (Astrachan and Shanker, 2003), and preserving the values, visions, intentions of the dominant coalition (Chua *et al.*, 1999). The analysis of women's involvement in family business is challenging, as the family culture and hierarchy (Floris *et al.*, 2019; Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017) strongly influence the roles, processes, and relationships in these firms (Martinez Jimenez, 2009).

Scholars find that women in family businesses experience different approaches due to the intertwining between the family and business that generates unique dynamics, affects management and corporate relations, often replicating anthropological roots (Floris *et al.*, 2019). Thus, women's roles and involvement range from leadership positions (Barrett and Moores, 2010) to family delegates (Abdullah, 2014), from minor and unpaid roles to providing psychological support (McKie *et al*., 2004; Salganicoff, 1990), hence their invisible presence (Cole, 1997; Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990). On the one hand, women in family businesses meet their career expectations, exercise visible decision power, hold leadership positions, and manage conflicting socioemotional and financial goals (Cruz *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand, family businesses hinder women's involvement and careers, anchoring them to traditional roles (Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017). However, the overlap between the private and professional contexts in family businesses can reduce the gender gap and enable women to take formal roles when they become familiar with the business (Bjursell and Bäckvall, 2011).

As several scholars underline (e.g. Sentuti *et al*., 2019; Campopiano *et al*., 2017; Gupta and Levenburg, 2013; Floris *et al*., 2019), interest in this topic has grown to the extent that the number of studies has tripled in the last three decades. According to Gupta and Levenburg (2013), studies on women's involvement in family businesses can be divided into three main waves. The first focused on the difficulties and challenges that women faced in being recognized in family firms (Martinez Jimenez, 2009), appearing invisible (Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990), seen as family caregivers (Moen, 1992), and obliged to play traditional and stereotypical roles (Cole, 1997; Salganicoff, 1990). The second wave of studies analyzed women's careers and whether family businesses stimulate or inhibit women's power attribution (Curimbaba, 2002; Martinez Jimenez, 2009) and ownership succession (Vera and Dean, 2005). The approach adopted was more optimistic than in the first wave due to the empirical observation of women's increasing leadership roles. The third wave registered the highest increase in number of published papers, using large samples and new perspectives, extending the analyses of studies in the previous waves with specific attention to women's involvement and the effects of their participation in leadership positions (Amore *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, an optimistic perspective of improvements in the role of women prevailed in the contextualization of the phenomenon (Gupta and Levenburg, 2013).

This brief and non-exhaustive literature review suggests that despite gender playing an important role (Al-Dajani *et al*., 2014; Palalić *et al*., 2017), research on women in family business is fragmented and conceptual, providing contrasting results (Danes and Olson, 2003; Sharma and Irving, 2005; Martinez Jimenez, 2009; Bjursell and Bäckvall, 2011), especially regarding their involvement in top management (Cappuyns, 2007; Lerner and Malach-Pines, 2011), and hence the call for further studies (Campopiano *et al*., 2017).

Effects of the social-culture context on women's involvement

Challenges to women's involvement in business are often ascribed to socio-cultural (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014) and anthropological reasons that hinder opportunities to assume leadership or operational roles and making strategic decisions (Lerner and Malach-Pines, 2011; Floris *et al*., 2019). In particular, stereotyping and discrimination are not the only reasons for allocating women to minor roles, as the socio-cultural context plays a fundamental role (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014; Rezaei *et al*., 2021), and still constitutes one of the main gender-related concerns in family firm succession (Kubíček and Machek, 2019; Ramadani *et al*., 2017a, 2017b).

In this regard, several scholar (e.g. Anggadwita *et al*., 2021; Post and Byron, 2015; Hoobler *et al*., 2018) analyze the socio-cultural context or environmental patterns consisting of lifestyle-related situations, structures, and schemes that affect the social dynamics and roles of women. For example, Hofstede (2011) proposes power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation as cultural dimensions affecting the habits and behaviors of individuals and organizations. The culture in family firms tends to reflect the gender role beliefs of families and society, replicating the common perception of men's and women's social roles and rules (Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990). Indeed, rules are often based on "power distance, individualism and masculinity", and influence the entire family firm's life, for example, when succession occurs, the old generation prefers sons (Bennedsen *et al.*, 2007) over daughters (Martinez Jimenez, 2009) as successors, particularly the first-born (Jaskiewicz *et al.*, 2013). In addition, women are more divided between family and work than men, with fewer career opportunities due to their traditional and socially constructed roles (Dardha, 2016), invisibility and over-nurturing (Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990; Cole, 1997), and "uncertainty avoidance". Over-nurturing refers to the traditional role of women taking care of the family (Dumas, 1998), negatively affecting their career advancement intentions, even if also considered a male characteristic. Fathers, in their role as protectors of their "little girls", are often reluctant to bestow decision-making power, inhibiting authority transition and building a "long-term orientation". Invisibility refers to the beliefs regarding women as family members, wives, mothers, spouses, daughters, and nieces, active within family firms without occupying apical positions (Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990; Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990), and managing from behind the scenes (Barrett and Moores, 2009). Moreover, invisibility implies that family members tend to ignore skills, abilities, and professionalism, seeing women in subordinate roles (Bjursell and Bäckvall, 2011) or as needing protection (Dumas, 1992). Therefore, daughter are "invisible successors" traditionally not considered as potential successors in the business (Dumas, 1989; Vera and Dean, 2005).

Ahl (2007) points out that women's role as primary caregivers and their invisibility reflect the real challenges in women's entrepreneurial endeavors, grounded in social norms and traditional approaches to gender diversity.

When analyzed under the lens of the social-cultural context, women's involvement needs to be contextualized in defined areas as a result of shared norms, languages, and beliefs, and thus as a bundle of social and cultural perspectives influencing gender diversity management.

Methodology

Research design

With the aim of analyzing women's role in family businesses in a specific context, this paper attempts to answer the following research question: *Is there a relationship between women's roles in family businesses and their participation in strategic decision-making processes?* To do so, we adopt a quantitative research design using logistic regression (Kleinbaum and Klein, 2010), a particularly appropriate method employed in studies of female entrepreneurs and women in family businesses (Welsh *et al*., 2013; Tundui and Tundui, 2020; Shastri *et al*., 2020).

Research context

Our research context is Sardinia, as women have always played an important role in this Italian island in the Mediterranean, as reflected by the typical Mother Goddess archetype. Her roundness recalls the "germinal" sense of the female form and her propensity for motherhood, and in its broad meaning, the mother of everything and everyone (Lilliu and Moravetti, 1999). The female representations generally depict her with her arms on her lap or hips, recalling a particularly female gesture, and according to anthropological studies, representing the female body capable of procreating.

In Sardinian myths, the female figure is highly recognized as a unique entity able to ensure descendants and manage natural events, hence her sacredness. Women's disparity and subordination began with the social changes that historical-archaeological data indicate in the transition from the Paleolithic to the beginning of the Neolithic age and the agricultural revolution, then exploding in the Metal age when social structures became more organized. In this era, territorial controls started to protect subsoil resources when men took care of working the land, taking away managerial and economic autonomy from women.

In other words, woman represented the essence of life, and only later, with the structuring of society into roles, were they assigned a lower social and economic rank to men, up to positioning them almost exclusively within the home.

Several scholars underline the matriarchal society that developed from the Neolithic to the Phoenician age, handed down to the modern era, contributing to the phenomenon of the so-called "barbaricino matriarchy" (Fiocchetto, 2002), a social system in which women held primary power positions in roles of authority. Sardinian traditions and legends revolve around the importance of the Sardinian woman, considered an esteemed and feared seer until the first half of the twentieth century (Turchi, 2001).

The female image of the past is that of a beloved and feared being, on the borderline between reality and imagination, but particularly the role and power she is conferred, in contradiction to the current female condition that is more modest and less robust than her male counterpart. This highlights an important aspect that places Sardinian women in a more favorable position than women elsewhere, and allows them to appreciate the evolution of their role and society in a unique way.

Due to these idiosyncrasies, deepening our understanding of the Sardinian family business context is particularly interesting and paves the way for studies focused on contexts with unique characteristics from a historical, anthropological, cultural, and social perspective.

Sample and data collection

Our empirical data originate from a study exploring a sample of 800 firms randomly selected from a Sardinian family businesses database. Aside from the historical role of women and data availability, we focus on Sardinia because family businesses are an important part of the island's economy. Indeed, their growth and survival depend on the families' influence and dynamics as well as the desire to pass the business down to the next generation, despite global pressure and the competitiveness challenges (CNA, 2017).

Regarding the data collection, taking into account the restrictions put in place to stem the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, we conducted an internet survey (CAWI – Computer Assisted Web Interview) using a structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions.

For this study, we designed a questionnaire based on the literature, divided into 3 sections and 11 questions, with data collected in the first semester of 2020. Section 1 consisted of four questions concerning the firms' legal form, sector, years of activity, and generation in charge.

Section 2 included three questions about human resources, namely how many people work in the firm, how many of these are part of the family, and whether or not there is a prevalent gender among workers. Table 1 provides the main details of the sample analyzed.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

Section 3 included four questions concerning the number of women working in the family firm, their role (C-level or other minor roles), frequency with which they are involved in the most strategic business decisions, and number of women on the board of director, as summarized in Table 2.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

We pilot tested the questionnaire on 20 family firms before conducting the main survey. Following several modifications to the layout, order, and wording of some items, the questionnaire's internal reliability had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76. Following content validity (Churchill and Hatten, 1997), the final version of the questionnaire was approved by two academic experts in management, then submitted to the sample. The sample size was considered sufficient to obtain reasonable statistical results (Hair *et al*., 1998, 2006).

Data analysis

To achieve our objectives, we conducted a logistic regression, "a modelling approach mathematics that can be used to describe the relationship of independent variables with a dichotomous dependent variable" (Kleinbaum and Klein, 2010, p. 5), analyzing the data using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22.0 (Corp, 2013).

Although the sample selection was random, to test the quality of the data gathered, we conducted a non-response test to check for bias. Following Armstrong and Overton (1977), no significant differences were found in the study variables between early and late respondents, suggesting response bias is not a problem in our study (Kanuk and Berenson, 1975; Oppenheim, 2000).

A description of the variables included in the analysis is presented in Table 3. We adopt a multi-criteria definition of women's role in family businesses following prior literature (Curimbaba, 2002; Martinez Jimenez, 2009). In the logistic regression, the dependent variable is the frequency with which women are involved in strategic decisions, and the independent variables are the role women play in the firm and their presence on the board of directors. To explore the moderating effect of involvement, following Hoetker's (2007) recommendations, we opted for a logistic analysis and tested for $\chi 2$ differences.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

Findings

Considering that the dependent variable is qualitative, we used logistic regression to examine the relationships where a significant coefficient means that the variable is a predictor of the dependent variable. As in any other non-linear regressions, the logistic model parameters are not necessarily the marginal effects we are used to analyzing (Greene *et al*., 2015; Greene, 2003). For this reason, data on the odds ratio are also shown and indicate how the involvement of women increases with the variable in question, assuming all other factors are constant.

The overall model test with *p* value <0.05 and R^2_{McF}= 0.367 (see Table 4) highlights there is at least one independent variable that contributes to explaining the value of the dependent variable, in this case, the frequency with which women are involved in making decisions.

(Insert Table 4 about here)

The logistic regression (Table 5) summarizes the standardized coefficients for each independent variable along with the odds-ratio.

The results show that women belonging to the first generation are six times more likely to participate frequently in strategic decisions than women belonging to second-generation firms. Furthermore, women belonging to the third generation are 15.932 times more likely to participate frequently in decisions than women belonging to the second generation with a significant *p*-value equal to 0.029 ($p < 0.05$). The fourth and fifth generation are not calculated because the sample sizes are smaller with respect to the first, second, and third generations.

Statistically, the analysis clearly shows that women's role in the firm does not significantly affect the frequency of women's involvement in making strategic decisions. Conversely, women's presence on the board of director significantly affects the frequency of women's participation in strategic decision-making. Indeed, where women's presence on the board of director is > 50%, women are 23 times more likely to participate frequently in strategic decisions than when the presence is < 50%, regardless of their role in the firm.

(Insert Table 5 about here)

Looking at the correlation between the role and the generation variable, an interesting fact emerges (see Table 6): in the first, third, and fourth generation, women with a minor role frequently participate in making strategic decisions, respectively 90.9% for the first generation, 87.5% for the third generation, and even 100% for the fourth generation. On the other hand, in the second generation, women with a minor role make strategic decisions frequently only for 40%.

(Insert Table 6 about here)

The χ^2 test (Table 7) confirms that the involvement of women is lower in family firms in the second generation with $p < 0.025$ ($\chi 2$ for the difference is significant at $p < 0.05$). The χ^2 tests of fourth and fifth generation family firms are not calculated because the sample size is small (respectively, 56 and 8 firms).

(Insert Table 7 about here)

To understand this difference, we analyzed the sample of firms belonging to the second generation. We found that these firms mainly operate in agriculture and farming, which is a traditional industry always more closed towards women's involvement in decision-making when they play minor roles. These characteristics explain the different results obtained in the analysis (see Table 6) regarding the frequency of women making strategic decisions regardless of their position in the firm.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study show that in our sample, women are generally involved in strategic decisions, regardless of their role in the firm. In other words, while a relationship is clearly delineated between the C-level role exercised, presence on the board of directors, and participation in decisions, women with minor roles are also involved in strategic decisions. However, this does not occur in the specific agriculture and farming sector where firms offer women fewer opportunities to participate in strategic decisions.

Thus, in answer to our research question, there is generally no precise relationship between the role played by women in family businesses and participating in strategic decision-making, except for women with minor roles in family firms that operate in the agriculture and farming sector that strictly replicate traditional male logics. Furthermore, local culture considerably affects women's involvement, highlighting that playing a specific (apical or minor) role is not relevant in terms of making strategic decisions, except in a historically male-dominated industry firmly rooted in local habits and culture, which hinders the involvement of women in strategic decision-making if they occupy minor roles. More in detail, in the very traditional agriculture and farming sector, still anchored to the past and traditional gender role divisions, Sardinian culture heavily affects women's involvement. This sector is historically characterized by male-dominated dynamics and only men are deemed entitled to make strategic decisions and actively work, while women are underrepresented, perform minor roles, and are not generally involved in strategic decisions. In the other sectors, the results indicate that women are involved in strategic decisions, even if they formally hold non-leadership roles. At first glance, this might bring to mind the concept of invisibility widely discussed and debated in the literature (Ahl, 2007; Cole, 1997; Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990). Nevertheless, it highlights a clear link between the culture of the Sardinian territory and the history of its people who have always recognized a fundamental role in society to women, differentiating them from other cultural contexts, and conferring them silent powers within and outside the family. In this perspective, the findings suggest that women have *implicit decision-making power* that allows them to engage and be involved in making strategic decisions even if formally playing a minor role. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the family firms in our sample adopt shared leadership in accordance with what takes place culturally within Sardinian families where women exercise a well-recognized leadership role and actively participate in making the most important decisions.

Scholarly and managerial implication

The findings provide interesting academic and practical implications for scholars and practitioners.

For scholars, the contributions are twofold. First, although women's involvement in family businesses is increasingly studied and analyzed in its many facets, our study shows the merits of jointly analyzing three different variables observed separately in previous studies. The joint analysis of the presence of women on the board, the role they play in the firm, and the frequency with which they are involved in strategic decisions allowed investigating how women are called to make decisions despite the role they formally play. Thus, we contribute to the family business literature by responding to recent calls for further studies on women in family businesses (Campopiano *et al*., 2017; Sentuti *et al*., 2019), focusing on contextual factors, as numerous scholars suggest (e.g. Anggadwita *et al*., 2021; Post and Byron, 2015; Hoobler *et al*., 2018). Our study introduces the concept of *implicit decision-making power*, namely the informal way women make decisions when not formally tasked to, suggesting that family firms adopt shared leadership that involves women regardless of their formal role. These results extend prior studies on women's invisibility (Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990; Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990) and their ability to manage from behind the scenes (Barrett and Moores, 2009). Our study supports that women contribute to strategic decisions despite having minor roles, underlining their inclusion in managerial decision-making in both new and old family firms. Second, the results reveal that the socio-cultural environment has a negative direct effect on women's involvement in C-level positions and strategic decision-making in a particular sector strongly rooted in local culture (agriculture and farming) that is traditionally male-dominated, giving rise to a deep gender gap. These results extend prior studies that do not observe sectoral effects on women's involvement. Indeed, the agriculture and farming sector seems to be less favorable to the participation of women in decision-making, a relevant variable that negatively influences women's involvement in small family firms.

For practitioners, this study is particularly interesting in relation to understanding the roots of gender differences and how these are experienced in family businesses. For example, entrepreneurs and consultants could draw stimulating reflections from this work in terms of the prevention and prospective analysis of gender dynamics. In particular, our study presents an evolutionary analysis of women's decision-making potential during the life of a family business. Preventing the obstacles to women's involvement during succession and in highly traditional sectors could allow policymakers to devise active measures to ensure gender equality.

Limitations and future research

Notwithstanding our contributions and implications, this study is not without limitations. In particular, although specifically selected as our research context, the sample is composed of firms in the same territory, thus future scholars are invited to conduct cross-cultural analyses to observe the influence of different cultures. In addition, despite the internal validity of the sample highlighting the impact of the industry and the dynamism of women's involvement in the life of a family business, future studies could focus specifically on cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses capable of observing the same firms over time and verifying whether and what measures used in this study are confirmed. Moreover, future studies could build on time-based role-conflict theory to understand whether and to what extent the firms' sector is a variable that influences women's involvement, and above all, answer other research questions based on a dynamic analysis of women on boards. Finally, future research might consider whether it is still relevant to discuss women's formal roles or whether it is more pertinent to investigate their implicit or explicit potential in making strategic decisions in family businesses.

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