

The dynamics of women's roles as family business managers

– Florence Curimbaba

Women traditionally had limited roles to play if at all, in managing the affairs of family business. Sons were viewed as potential successors and daughters had little or no role to play in the family business. Rarely there arose a women successor in family businesses that too more often due to an accident of chance than by design. However, things have started changing in recent times and daughters are now given the right to equality in terms of family business succession. Family business researchers have developed a keen interest in studying the varying roles of women as family business heirs. Florence Curimbaba (*Vice-President of Elfusa Geral de Eletro-Fusao, Sao Paulo, Brazil*) studied how family and business structures affected female heirs in managerial positions in Brazilian family businesses. Instead of studying the issue from a disadvantaged perspective of inequality, this research focused on how hierarchies are formed given the gender relations in family businesses.

General Framework

The study was qualitative in nature and involved in-depth interviews with twelve females (all daughters in their respective families) identified as potential family business heirs. The three developmental dimensions of a family business – i.e. family, business and ownership were considered as one of the theoretical foundations for the study. Information gathered through these interviews on the respective dimensions included the following –

- A. **Family** Dimension – Composition of family, its culture, its values and influence on formal education and careers in the family business. The age, marital status and size of the family that the heir has raised.
- B. **Business** Dimension – Main business of the family, size of the family, company's phases of growth, family members' access to careers in the company and the degree of company's professionalisation.
- C. **Ownership** Dimension – How much power in the company the daughter's nuclear family had, whether the daughters owned shares in the business, importance of ownership for their representation in the business and significance of effective participation in terms of representation on board of directors of the company.

Insights Gained from Findings

The information collected in the interviews was analysed and it was found that the **family** dimension played the most important role in determining the structure of job opportunities for family members in family run businesses. **Family** dimension was also found crucial in determining the female heir's visibility in the business system which was found dependent on the number of men in the family and the birth order. Based on these findings the female heirs to family businesses were categorized into three distinct groups described below -

1. **Professional Heiresses** – This group included women working in mature companies with complex ownership structures and considerable number of family men. Their inclusion in business was more political, often a result of conflict resolution among different family branches. They were qualified and educated. They interacted very professionally with the business; keeping it distinct from family affairs. They upheld the ideas of merit and competency. However their extreme commitment to professionalism made them lose the sense of organisational and family politics that created problems for them.
2. **Invisible Heiresses** - This group included heiresses who were part of large families. Due to large family size, the inclusion of women in business was difficult. They were not trained for a business role. They complained about discrimination in the company. They were concerned more about their job positions than the company's businesses. Their involvement was more as an heiress and less as a business manager. Therefore, they could not identify themselves with managers and entrepreneurs. They viewed their company as a stock of previously amassed wealth that they had the right to enjoy. They owned considerable stock in the company, which gave them the option to have good income even if they chose to move out of the job.
3. **Anchors** – This group of heiress came from the families with predominantly female offspring, daughters as first child and few men. Their presence became essential for the continuity of the business. From a young age, they were guided to work at the family company. Thus, they developed an identity closer to that of an entrepreneur. They had solid educational backgrounds and put the company ahead of their personal lives. They worked with autonomy and freely expressed their concerns without worrying about gender issues. They had the smallest shareholdings. They felt that no other alternative to family business would have made sense for their lives.

Interestingly, the study suggests that these roles are dynamic over time. For instance, an anchor who has lost importance over time can become invisible. An anchor can later also turn into a professional. In other cases an invisible woman can become an anchor or professional over time. The study concludes that these role changes come over time and heiresses are often ill prepared to handle these role dynamics.