

Women in Family Firms: Characteristics, Roles and Contributions

– Cathleen Folker

Women's Contributions in family business were often not acknowledged earlier because their traditional family roles overshadowed their business roles. Cathleen Folker of University of Wisconsin (Parkside) studied the role of women in family firms and developed a conceptual model of the impact women make on family firms. This paper integrates research from sociology and leadership.

Theoretical Contributions

Theorists suggest that since women are socialized to nurture, they humanize the workplace. Quoting existing literature, the author states that women are the carriers of the family culture within the firm. Literature also establishes that women's lives are organized more around their family and its needs whereas men's lives are organized more around their work. Women are found to be loyal to, and concerned about, both the business and family. These characteristics help women in family firm to solve problems, resolve conflicts, provide support, hold the family together and maintain peace. Though women may not hold a formal role, they often wield unacknowledged power and influence in the family business.

Conceptual Model

The author suggests that women not only influence their family firms but also the target community. The author presents a conceptual model of women in family firms, their characteristics and impact. The model identified three distinct roles of women in family business (see Figure 1). First is that of a **founder**. Research proves that women entrepreneurs are equally successful as their male counterparts. Women were found to effectively prioritize the business or family needs and that contributed to their success. There were low levels of family/business tensions in ventures founded by women.

The second role is that of a **co-preneur** (or collaborative entrepreneur) wherein women noted the importance of collaborative decision-making. Co-preneurs were found to be more traditional in roles they performed. These women saw their purpose as one of being steward for the family and bringing a sense of community for all. They integrated their values of family, business and community and passed those on to their children.

The third major role played by the women is that of a **daughter**. Daughters tend to struggle with self-identity and proving their competence in family firm. Despite being educated and experienced, daughters find their identity through the care of their father and his business. In most cases, daughters had played the role of silent caretakers. They had difficulties in work-life

balance and did not expect themselves to be the business successors. Daughters succeeding their mother in business were often found to face comparisons with their mother’s managerial style.

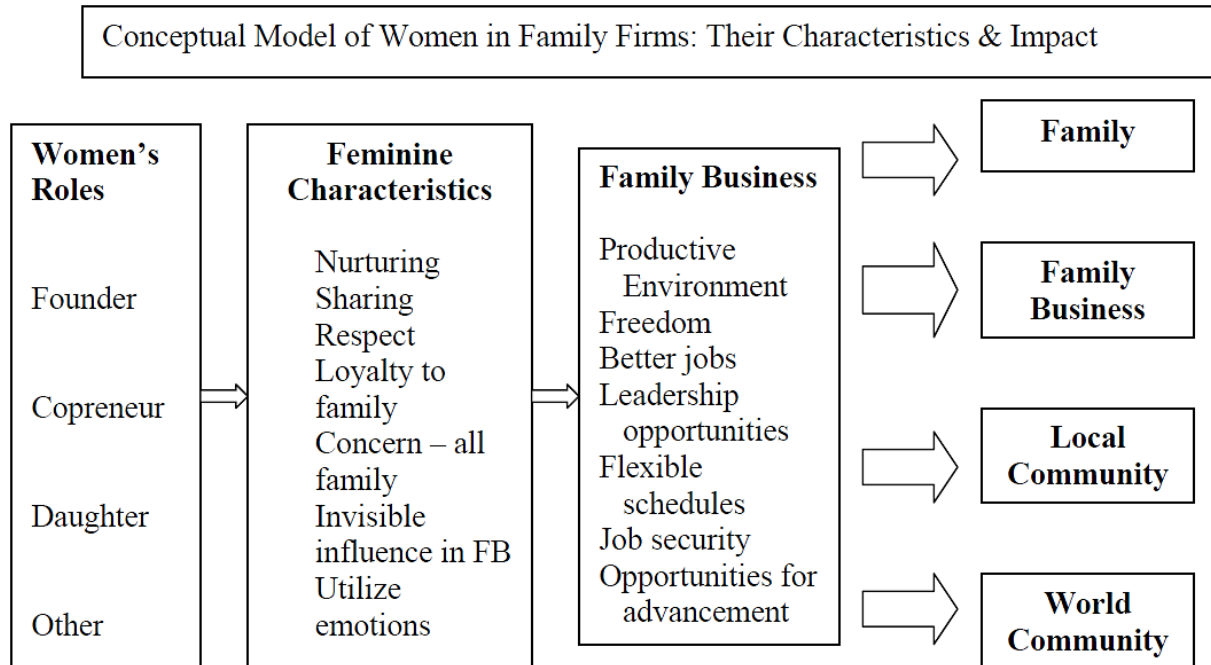


Figure-1

Conclusion

The author concludes that women progress as fast as men do, if they chose to progress. Within the family, women focus on nurturing relationships, involving family members in business and help them understand the importance of business to family and vice-versa. They bring forth a positive impact on business performance and reputation. Women also have positive impact on other stakeholders and community at large due to their relational focus.

Source: Small Business Institute Research Review, Volume 35, 2008, pg. 157-168.