



Women's Roles in Middle Eastern Family Businesses: Identity Construction Amid Structural Inequality

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Abstract This study explores the roles of women—specifically daughters—in family businesses in the Middle East, a context marked by pronounced structural gender inequality and limited scholarly attention. Drawing on identity theory and a multiple case study approach, we examine how daughters in 17 family firms construct and navigate their professional identities. Our analysis identifies 26 distinct roles, which cluster into six categories: (1) management and leadership, (2) transformative and innovative, (3) ownership and succession, (4) facilitative and social responsibility, (5) identity, continuity and sustainability, and (6) operational and executive roles. The findings reveal that daughters often adopt multiple, layered, and context-dependent identities, and must engage in continuous negotiation to attain visibility, influence, and authority within the family and firm. This study contributes to the literature on family business and identity by illuminating the complex role enactment and identity work of women in patriarchal settings.

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Los roles de las mujeres en empresas familiares de Oriente Medio: construcción de identidad en un contexto de desigualdad estructural

Resumen Este estudio explora los roles de las mujeres —en particular, de las hijas— en empresas familiares en el contexto de Oriente Medio, caracterizado por una marcada desigualdad estructural de género y escasa atención académica. A partir de la teoría de la identidad y mediante un enfoque de estudio de casos múltiples, analizamos cómo las hijas en 17 empresas familiares construyen y negocian sus identidades profesionales. Nuestra investigación identifica 26 roles distintos, que se agrupan en seis categorías: (1) dirección y liderazgo, (2) transformación e innovación, (3) propiedad y sucesión, (4) facilitación y responsabilidad social, (5) identidad, continuidad y sostenibilidad, y (6) funciones operativas y ejecutivas. Los resultados revelan que las hijas adoptan identidades múltiples, complejas y dependientes del contexto, y deben involucrarse en una negociación constante para lograr visibilidad, influencia y autoridad dentro de la familia y la empresa. Este estudio contribuye a la literatura sobre empresas familiares e identidad al arrojar luz sobre la complejidad de los roles y el trabajo identitario de las mujeres en entornos patriarcales.

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1. Introduction

In today's world, nearly 2.4 billion women do not enjoy the same economic rights as men. In 178 countries, legal barriers still prevent the full economic participation of women (World Bank, 2022). In such contexts, family businesses provide better job opportunities for women (Covin, 1994).

They are recognised as a 'professional refuge' or 'launching platform' in the face of gender inequality (Gherardi & Perrotta, 2016) and the prevailing cultural factors in society for women (Karlsson, 2020; Rahman et al., 2022; Xian et al., 2021), especially in an environment marked by transformations in family structure and declining birth rates (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003).

Women's participation in family businesses is of particular significance (Frishkoff & Brown, 1993). Therefore, family businesses are compelled to value the presence of women more in order to fully leverage human capital amid demographic constraints (Salganicoff, 1990). Nevertheless, despite this growing necessity, the deeply rooted cultural ties between family businesses and society (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003) perpetuate gender stereotypes, which also produce inequalities within these businesses (Campopiano et al., 2017).

Research in this area confirms these inequalities and has led to increasing attention from researchers in this field towards a gender perspective (Rovelli et al., 2022). Several studies show that, despite women's commitment and efforts in these businesses, their efforts are often rendered invisible (Sethi et al., 1981; Akhmedova et al., 2020). They do not have access to equal opportunities with their male counterparts in terms of job status and pay (Chadwick & Dawson, 2018).

Whereas some women accept these stereotypes, others actively challenge them (Frishkoff & Brown, 1993). There are studies that showed the conflicts between family and work roles of women within family firms (Ko et al., 2021). Their roles in grooming the next generation, transmitting knowledge (Discua Cruz et al., 2024; Duarte Alonso & Kok, 2021), and strengthening interpersonal relationships as emotional senior officers (Lowe & Evans, 2015; Poza & Messer, 2001) are explored in these studies.

Additionally, businesses that include women on their boards have reported improved performance (Félix & David, 2019). Increased creativity and entrepreneurship are some of these effects (Bauweraerts et al., 2022). Even in informal roles, women significantly influence decision-making processes (Chen et al., 2018; Dettori & Floris, 2023). Many women are aware of their

current positions and aspire to assume primary leadership roles (Poza & Messer, 2001).

One of the key roles women play is that of successor, particularly in the case of daughters, which has garnered attention in several studies (Ahmad et al., 2024; Gimenez-Jimenez et al., 2021; Sentuti et al., 2024; Suchankova et al., 2023; Urban & Nonkwelo, 2022). However, other female roles have been underexplored (Almlöf & Sjögren, 2023) or treated as secondary topics (Nguyen et al., 2022). This limited the understanding of the full spectrum of their contributions, particularly prior to attaining leadership positions (Madison et al., 2021). Notably, most of this research has been conducted in European and North American contexts, and many of these studies recommend conducting similar studies in different cultures (Dettori & Floris, 2023; Sentuti et al., 2024).

In response to this call, the present study seeks to answer the question: 'What is the role of women in family businesses in the underexplored context of Iran, a society with pronounced cultural and normative differences that perpetuate gender inequality?' (Coville, 2020). To this end, a multiple case study method was employed. Seventeen second-generation family businesses in which daughters have assumed the role of successor were examined. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture the professional life stories of these women within their family businesses. Given that, in unequal contexts, women are compelled to actively construct their identity in order to access main roles (Hytti et al., 2017; McAdam et al., 2021; Xian et al., 2021), the study is framed within identity theory (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000), aiming to identify tasks, expectations, values, and behavioural patterns specific to women and to contribute to the theoretical development of the concept (Burke & Tully, 1977; Stets & Burke, 2000; Thoits, 1986).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Identity theory

Family businesses provide an ideal context for examining the multiple roles of women (Cosson & Gilding, 2021), especially when facing conditions of inequality that require them to actively construct their identity (Hytti et al., 2017; McAdam et al., 2021; Xian et al., 2021). Therefore, this study adopts identity theory as its interpretive framework.

This sociological and interdisciplinary theory is rooted in the work of George Herbert Mead (1934), who argued that 'society shapes the self and shapes social behaviour'. Based on this premise, identity theory was developed, distinguishing

between the 'self' and the 'society'. However, Stryker (1980) and Stryker and Serpe (1982) pioneered studies of identity theory, focusing on 'how social structure influences the self'. Then Burke and colleagues (Burke, 1991; Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Burke & Stets, 1999) developed this theory by focusing on 'how the self influences social behaviours' (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

In general, identity theory can be defined as 'a unique sense of self' (Postmes & Jetten, 2006). In other words, it can be said that an individual's identity is defined by his or her characteristics, values, expectations, and behavioural models within the framework of roles (Burke & Tully, 1977; Stets & Burke, 2000; Thoits, 1986). The level of analysis in this theory is the individual, and the 'self' manifests itself with different identities in the form of different roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000) to answer the question 'Who am I?' (Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

This theory differs from social identity theory, where group membership forms the core of identity. A central concept in identity theory is salience; this means that not all roles hold the same importance to the individual, and the more salient a role is, the more effort and commitment it will receive (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Stryker, 1968). This feature makes identity theory particularly useful for studying family businesses, where family and work roles intertwine and often conflict, especially for women who face tensions when adopting professional identities. Consequently, this study uses the lens of identity theory to analyse the behaviour of daughters within family businesses to better understand their roles.

2.2. The role of women in family businesses

Family businesses have increasingly attracted the attention of management researchers in the past two decades (De Massis et al., 2012; Neubaum, 2017), and the result can be seen in the large number of articles published in this field in reputable journals (e.g. Kotlar et al., 2018; Neckebrouck et al., 2018). Researchers have discussed gender issues, especially in Western societies where traditions greatly influence the norms governing these businesses, regardless of whether they are Christian or Muslim (Eze et al., 2021).

The persistence of gender inequality in women's participation and presence in key roles in family businesses has led to the theory of women's 'invisibility' (Salganicoff, 1990). This invisibility stems not only from cultural and traditional factors but also from women's self-concept and internal limitations, a limitation referred to as the 'glass ceiling' (Acheampong, 2018). As a result, daughters may not even consider succession as a

possibility until a significant event forces them to do so (Overbeke et al., 2013).

This invisibility is also reinforced by media representations, where women are often referred to as 'others' or 'managers' rather than 'owners' (Bjursell & Bäckvall, 2011). Traditional norms intensify conflicts between roles of women, complicating the transition to identities such as the 'entrepreneurial mother' (Lewis et al., 2016) and posing additional barriers when daughters enter male-dominated industries (Mischel & Iannarelli, 2011). Even so, informal roles can help reduce these tensions between the roles of a mother and a business professional. (Ko et al., 2021).

Owing to their collaborative approach, women tend to promote cohesion and strengthen interpersonal ties within family businesses, earning recognition as 'emotional senior officers' (Lowe & Evans, 2015; Poza & Messer, 2001). Their influence on decision-making even in communities where they lack the right to vote, such as among Hutterite colonies in Western Canada, is very important (Nordstrom & Jennings, 2018). Curimbaba (2002) categorises women's roles into three types: 'invisible', 'professional', and 'anchor'.

Various studies corroborate the importance of women in enhancing sustainability (Almlöf & Sjögren, 2023; Bell & Pham, 2021), business growth and profitability (Félix & David, 2019; Sieweke et al., 2023), and their potential to advance social development, especially in business families that have intergenerational entrepreneurship (Eze et al., 2021). Their participation on boards of directors strengthens entrepreneurial orientation, creativity, and corporate sustainability (Bauweraerts et al., 2022; Campopiano et al., 2017; Marín-Palacios, 2023; Post et al., 2022).

Moreover, when they hold leadership positions, their participatory leadership style, emotional discourse (Danes et al., 2005), and interest in mutual self-improvement enable them to play an important role in enhancing the social performance of family businesses (Campopiano et al., 2019).

2.3. Contextual framework

The study was conducted in Iran, a country geographically located in the Middle East but whose cultural norms regarding women's roles differ in various respects from those of other nations in the region (Sarfaraz, 2017). Despite its location, Iranian women enjoy certain legal rights that are uncommon in neighbouring countries (Wright, 2000): They make up about half of university students, can register companies under their own name, retain their surname

after marriage, and run for various political offices. However, women still face significant gender inequalities (Kazemzadeh, 2002). Some are legal in nature, such as the requirement for a husband's permission to obtain a passport or travel abroad, or restrictions on women staying in hotels without male accompaniment. Additionally, in matters of inheritance, women receive only half the share given to their male siblings (Arasti, 2006). Other inequalities are cultural, reflected in social norms that restrict women's participation in the workforce: Women's employment damages men's reputation, their primary role is viewed as domestic and maternal, certain jobs are deemed 'unsuitable for women', and their leadership is often not taken seriously, especially by male employees (Arasti, 2006; Sarfaraz, 2010). Within this complex context, family businesses function as safe havens that enable women to assume roles that would be inaccessible in other business environments (Coville, 2020). These businesses, by emphasising meritocracy and taking internal steps to mitigate legal inequalities, such as awarding more shares to daughters to compensate for discriminatory inheritance laws, have been described as 'social laboratories' or a 'refuge' for women in Iran (Coville, 2020). Despite the above, Iranian women still must struggle to achieve key roles, such as leadership, even in these businesses. This issue was repeatedly reiterated in the interviews conducted.

3. Methodology

This study employed a multiple case study method, a qualitative research method. Qualitative methods are used to explore people's lives, experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings. Thus, the findings of this research are not based on statistical methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) but instead offer a thematic description of the cases (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 1994), examining complex phenomena by comparing cases (Yin, 1999).

The case study approach is popular among family business researchers who use qualitative methodologies (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014), as it enables the identification of hidden patterns through in-depth analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). When several cases are examined, as in this study, the design is referred to as a multiple case study (Swanborn, 2010), which significantly enhances its validity (Aragón-Amonarriz et al. 2024; De Massis & Kotlar, 2014).

Since we were looking for participants with more information (Patton, 2002) who met our desired criteria (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), we used a purposive sampling approach. The sample

included second-generation or older family businesses founded by the participants' parents, in which the female respondents held leadership positions such as chair of the board, vice chair of the board, CEO, or deputy CEO. This allowed for an in-depth analysis of their career trajectories from initial entry into the business to the assumption of leadership roles.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to share their experiences through a narrative approach. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. The data were then manually analysed using open, axial, and selective coding, and the roles identified were thematically categorised.

3.1. Data collection

Given that the objective of this study was to analyse the role of women in family businesses, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. Participants were selected based on their deep knowledge of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002) and adherence to predefined criteria (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Specifically, the study focused on second-generation or older family businesses founded by the participants' fathers, in which the daughters currently held leadership positions such as chair of the board, vice chair of the board, CEO, or deputy CEO. This selection ensured a sufficient time lapse between their entry into the business and their rise to leadership positions, allowing for the identification of the various roles assumed throughout the process.

Determining these criteria for selecting the sample population significantly limited the scope of sample selection. Due to the unfavourable context, in most of the family businesses introduced, women were either not active in management positions or their role was limited to middle management roles, or in some cases, the women themselves were the founders of the family business.

However, the first case was identified through the personal contacts of the first author, and subsequent cases were recruited using snowball sampling. Through this approach, 17 cases were collected until theoretical saturation was achieved. To enhance the quality of the interviews, the participants were sent the interview questions in advance, and the purpose of the research was clearly explained. A standardised protocol of semi-structured questions was used (Woodfield & Husted, 2017), encouraging participants to share their stories and experiences through a narrative lens (Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; García & Welter, 2013). To enrich the perspective on the role of women, the research aimed to interview not only the daughters who had attained leadership

positions but also other individuals who had been influential in their trajectories. However, due to limitations, such as the death of key individuals or unwillingness to participate, a total of 29 interviews were conducted.

To avoid bias associated with personal relationships among interviewees - a common limitation of snowball sampling (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997) - it was confirmed that participants from each case had only professional connections with those from other cases. Even when multiple businesses operated in the same industry, their

relationships were competitive in nature. During the interviews, participants began by introducing themselves, then recounted the general history of the company from its founding to their entry, and finally described their entry process, key events, experiences, responsibilities, and activities undertaken up to their attainment of leadership roles. The average duration of each interview was 90 minutes. The average age of the primary interviewees (the daughters) was 40 years old, and all but three had completed master's degree and above (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive information on family businesses and interviewees (C = case)

Name	Industry	Gen	Age	Role	Education	Second and third inter-viewee	Number of interviews
C1	Import of car spare parts	2nd	36	CEO	Master of English Literature	-	1
C2	Horse breeding	3rd	63	CEO	PhD in Management	-	1
C3	Beekeeping and honey production	2nd	59	CEO	PhD in Management	Husband	2
C4	Printing house	2nd	48	CEO	MBA, Master of Operations Management	Mother and father	3
C5	Production and distribution of industrial electrical components	3rd	40	CEO	PhD in Electrical Engineering	Mother and father	3
C6	Saffron production and packaging	2nd	31	CEO	Master of Architecture	-	1
C7	Engineering design	2nd	36	CEO	MBA, Risk Management	Father	2
C8	Production and education of visual arts and handicrafts	2nd	30	CEO	Master of Arts in Research	Mother	2
C9	Pistachio export and import company	2nd	36	CEO	PhD in Business	Mother	2
C10	Lighting products manufacturers	2nd	30	Vice Chair	PhD in Business	-	1
C11	Printing house	2nd	38	CEO	Bachelor of Computer Software	Mother	2
C12	Carton making	2nd	40	Chair	PhD in Entrepreneurship	Mother	2
C13	Printing house	2nd	39	CEO	Master of Information Technology	Father	2
C14	Pistachio production, processing and export	2nd	42	CEO	Bachelor of Plant Science, MBA	Mother	2
C15	Motorcycle production	2nd	48	Deputy CEO	Bachelor of Business Administration	-	1
C16	Motorcycle production	2nd	44	CEO	Master of Executive Management	-	1
C17	Export and import of nuts and dried fruits	2nd	34	CEO	Master of Business Administration	-	1

At the beginning of each interview, participants were assured of confidentiality. They were informed that, in addition to keeping the

information private, their names and business details would remain anonymous. Interviews were recorded with their consent.

The primary interviewer being of the same gender, particularly in the patriarchal and religious context of Iran, facilitated more comfortable and appropriate communication with the interviewees. This allowed for the collection of rich, sensitive information regarding family relationships and business conditions (Byrne & Shepherd, 2015), enabling the analysis of personal histories and experiences (Woodfield & Husted, 2017). Additionally, since the authors' native language is Persian, their linguistic proficiency ensured accurate and complete transmission of the interview content despite the language's complexity.

3.2. Data analysis

The interviews were fully transcribed and sent to participants for review and validation, minimising the risk of misinterpretation. Data were analysed in three coding stages: open, axial, and selective (Eisenhardt, 1989). Open coding was conducted independently by two authors to reduce bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Axial coding allowed for the identification of relationships between categories and groupings of similar concepts. In the final stage, selective coding focused on identifying relationships among the codes to determine the roles played by women, which were then organised thematically. In general, two authors participated in the coding process, and a third person acted as a referee in case of disagreement.

4. Findings

This study, following a three-stage coding process, ultimately identified **26 distinct roles** assumed by women in family businesses. These roles were categorised into six main thematic groups based on the literature review conducted and the comparative experience of the three authors from the findings of the interviews.

4.1. Managerial and leadership roles

This category encompasses four roles:

Senior manager: This role refers to the highest levels of leadership and management. Given that one of the criteria for selecting participants was the presence of daughters in top positions such as chair of the board, vice chair of the board, CEO, or deputy CEO, this role was among the most frequently reported.

C4: 'Over time, the power came to me. Now, everything is under my control.'

C17: 'The confidence that people around me had in me has enabled me to achieve leadership.'

Middle manager: This refers to intermediate management levels, such as commercial or sales managers. Our findings indicated that after initially entering the business in lower positions, women eventually advanced to middle management -often a stepping stone to higher roles. However, this progress faces challenges, including staff resistance and the need to gain parental consent.

C1: 'I have my own managerial role in networking, correspondence, and communication.'

C15: '. . . When my father found out about this, he insisted that I go to the factory and take over the factory's foreign trade unit.'

Empathetic manager: Women often adopt a more empathetic managerial style than their fathers, paying close attention to employee welfare, and because they have a smaller age gap with employees, they have a better understanding of the personnel situation.

C10: 'I implemented a menstruation leave policy because I understand how unwell our female staff feel on those days . . .'

C7: '. . . Given the economic situation of my society, being able to create a system where the people who work there have a good life is very important to me.'

Symbolic manager: Despite holding managerial titles, in some cases, women lacked real authority. The low frequency of this role indicates that many women had succeeded in asserting their managerial authority.

C6: 'I said, "I am the manager . . ." (My father) replied, "You are nothing."'

C1: 'I am the CEO, but my management role is not that way. My father and brother also run the business.'

4.2. Transformative and innovative roles

This category includes seven roles:

Business developer: Women actively contributed to business development across multiple dimensions, including market expansion, product development, human resources, and physical infrastructure (most frequently coded role, 319 mentions).

C3: 'Our brand is now visible everywhere - you'll find our products in Canada, in our California store, and more . . .'

C9: 'He entrusted me with the pistachio sector so that I could revive and strengthen that sector and take the product towards export.'

Idea generator: Our findings show that daughters were generating ideas in various fields for

improving business, solving problems, developing, and so on.

C10: '(The sales manager told my father) increased sales are due to the implementation of your daughter's idea'

C7 (Father): 'Good thinking and idea generation (my daughter in business) are effective.'

Innovator: This role reflects women's tendency to pioneer innovation, striving to keep the business competitive in its industry.

C3: 'We initiated the separation of honey types. We publicly promoted the concept that every plant produces a unique nectar with specific properties.'

C5: 'Our company has 13 patents; some from my father's time and many from my own time.'

Moderniser: Women were instrumental in modernising traditional businesses by implementing new technologies, standards, and digital systems (e.g. QR codes in warehouses, automation, updated software).

C5: 'We placed QR codes on products in the warehouse so we could pinpoint their exact physical location.'

C17: 'Regarding packaging machines, we changed the machines to be faster, require less manpower, and have more up-to-date packaging.'

Structurer: They restructured or established departments that were previously merged or non-existent.

C10: 'Human resources were under the finance department. Since we had more staff and increased financial operations, I separated HR into its own department.'

C7: 'I took the organizational structure out of that flat state because our company is getting a little bigger.'

Systematiser: Our findings show that one of the major concerns of daughters in family businesses is to free the businesses from individual dependency. They tried to systematise the departments by creating mechanisms and systems that specified the order, priority, and stages of work in each department.

C11: 'We categorised machines and developed forms to track when each part was checked and serviced.'

C2: 'My other important job was to get the horses registered . . . That is, all the information about a foal is recorded from the moment it is born, its weight - and this microchip system is such that when it is registered, the whole world is aware of this issue.'

Knowledge enhancer: To address knowledge gaps, women pursued relevant education or professional training and shared their expertise within the business or arranged training for staff and consultations with experts.

C1: 'Through my involvement with the Women Entrepreneurs Association and the Chamber of Commerce, I was able to bring valuable knowledge into our business.'

C4: 'When I was studying computer science, print design was just starting to emerge. With software, they no longer did it manually. My father's hope was that if I studied computers, I would be able to do something.'

4.3. Ownership and Succession Roles

This category comprises four roles:

Owner: As is typical in family businesses, all participants were shareholders and board members.

C4 (Father): 'My daughter has been a board member for 7 years.'

C12: 'I am a member of the board of directors.'

Successor: Given the study's focus on second-generation leadership, most participants or their parents identified them as successors.

C8 (Mother): 'Now that my daughter is here, I can retire.'

C9: '. . . and my father has this trust in me and knows that I will continue on his path.'

Successor developer: While many women had no children or had young children, they still took on mentoring roles, preparing siblings or children to take over in the future.

C4: 'If my brother is involved in the business today, it's because I got him interested in it.'

C16: 'My first daughter has a very managerial personality. I take her with me to many exhibitions.'

Candidate for vacant roles: When essential roles were left unfilled -especially those requiring high trust - women either volunteered or were asked to assume them, even temporarily.

C2: '(My brother said) we have our own jobs and can't take care of the horses. I said, if no one else is coming, I'll do it.'

C13 (Father): 'My daughter's husband was here and left, and we needed someone who was a reliable person.'

4.4. Facilitation and social responsibility roles

Two roles were identified in this group:

Facilitator of women's inclusion: Even when not in management roles, women advocated for the recruitment of female employees, and when they are in middle management positions, they use more women in their work teams.

C9: 'I try to hire mostly women so they can gain financial independence.'

C11: 'If there's a woman who actually knows how to operate the machine, I really prefer to hire women.'

Socially responsible actor: Women took initiative in CSR projects, supporting female-headed households, aiding children with cancer, and implementing public health programmes (e.g. cancer screening for female workers, blood donation).

C5: 'We started doing social responsibility work, like breast cancer screenings in industrial units.'

C16: 'We had social responsibility, we worked with the Mahak charity, and for every motorcycle we sold, we paid a certain profit to Mahak in Tehran.'

4.5. Identity, continuity, and sustainability roles

Five roles emerged in this domain:

Identity builder: Establishing a recognisable brand and identity was a key concern for many women.

C8: 'I insisted on brand registration and developed a visual identity for the business.'

C3: 'We created a brand so that we can advertise.'

Role model: Women inspired younger siblings and female employees by actively participating in the business.

C4: 'I was the oldest of all the children. If I hadn't worked at the print shop, the others wouldn't have joined either.'

C17: 'It means that my influence has been such that my colleague has unconsciously become like me.'

Key piece: Some women were so integral to business operations that their absence would jeopardise continuity.

C12: 'Without me, I'm sure this factory - my father's legacy - would have eventually slipped from my mother's hands.'

C14: 'I will manage everything from start to finish myself.'

Policymaker: Women played a decisive role in setting strategic directions for the business (most commonly shared role across cases, observed in 17 cases).

C1: 'Given the need I saw in the market, I tried to focus more on importing products from China, due to the price, variety, and presentation of products that the Iranian market wanted . . .'

C11: 'I have concluded that obtaining paper from Mashhad is not cost-effective, so we reviewed

various options. Ultimately, I reached the conclusion that buying paper from the city of Tehran in trailer loads relative to the volume of work we have can be very economical for us.'

Unity builder: Our findings show that daughters made efforts to promote family cohesion and unity. They sometimes did this by forgoing a larger share of the profits or by trying to resolve work-related grievances between family members.

C17: 'Profits were distributed equally, and I was genuinely happy - even when I knew my siblings needed extra income, I tried harder to make it possible.'

4.6. Operational and executive roles

This final group includes four roles:

Basic employee: Most women began their careers in entry-level roles, performing basic administrative or manual tasks.

C15: 'Our foreign procurement manager used to tell me, "Type the letters."'

C6: 'At that time (when I first entered the business), I did various tasks for my father. I even worked as a secretary for him.'

Organizer: Women often assumed responsibility for neglected operations, implementing order in both documentation and workflows.

C10: 'We had an R&D department, but it needed follow-up. When I took over, I made sure everything ran on schedule.'

C12: 'One of the other things I did was to separate the document of the company's building, which had a commercial section, because this document was industrial and needed to be separated.'

Consultant: Our findings show that daughters in family businesses sometimes reach positions at the highest levels of management, where they are directly consulted on key decisions.

C2: 'I was his (my father's) advisor. Before making a move, he'd ask, "What do you think I should do?"'

C17: 'My father asks my opinion on many business-related matters and consults with me. He does not proceed without my approval.'

Supervisor: After rotating through departments, women often retained oversight over their former units.

C10: 'That shift moved me away from accounting, and I focused purely on supervision.'

C4: 'As I progressed section by section, I reached the financial section, where I realised there was a discrepancy. Our expenses and revenues did not match.'

Table 2. frequency of role occurrence across interviews

Role category	Role title	Number of times the code is repeated	Number of cases with this code
Management and leadership roles	Senior manager	87	16
	Middle manager	67	14
	Empathic manager	22	11
	Symbolic manager	6	4
Transformative and innovative roles	Business developer	319	16
	Idea generator	18	8
	Innovator	30	11
	Moderniser	29	7
	Structurer	15	7
	Systematiser	40	7
	Knowledge enhancers	28	13
Ownership and succession roles	Owner	16	12
	Successor	44	12
	Successor developer	8	3
	Candidate for Vacant Roles	24	10
Facilitation and social responsibility roles	Women's inclusion facilitator	27	9
	Socially responsible actor	12	5
Identity, continuity, and sustainability roles	Identity builder	18	6
	Role model	5	4
	Key piece	25	10
	Policymaker	81	17
	Unity builder	2	2
Operational and executive roles	Entry-level employee	97	15
	Organiser	18	4
	Advisor	5	4
	Supervisor	25	7

5. Theoretical Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this study respond to the question: *'What is the role of women in family businesses within the underexplored and adverse context of Iran?'* The research was conducted using a multiple case study approach through the lens of identity theory. Based on this theory, the study examined the behaviour of daughters in 17 family businesses, identifying the various identities they construct for themselves, which are manifested through different roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). According to this perspective, individuals possess multiple identities (Sundaramurthy & Kreiner, 2008), a phenomenon also observed in the study's participants: daughters with multiple, stratified, and interdependent identities who choose to perform different roles depending on their contextual prominence (Stryker, 1968). These roles change over time, and in the case of women, such changes are deliberate and the result of their own efforts (Poza & Messer, 2001).

In general, women enter the family business through basic operational roles, such as entry-level employees, but progressively - and in an effort to move away from invisible roles - they develop innovative ideas that position them as idea generators and Innovators (Arzubiaga et al., 2018; Bauweraerts et al., 2022; Campopiano et al., 2017; Post et al., 2022). Furthermore, their continuous activities aimed at improving the business position them in roles such as modernisers, systematisers, structurers, organisers, knowledge enhancers, and in more advanced cases, business developers (Félix & David, 2019). This study also showed that, due to the nature of family businesses, most daughters assumed owner roles (Belenzon et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2016; McDonald et al., 2017).

Brand development was a notable concern among them; in businesses without a registered trademark, their emphasis on the company's name, legacy, and continuity led them to play the role of identity-builders. Likewise, to ensure

business sustainability, they adopted the roles of role models for other children, successor developers (Discua Cruz et al., 2024; Duarte Alonso & Kok, 2021; Zehrer & Leiß, 2019), and unity builders (Lowe & Evans, 2015; Poza & Messer, 2001). After being promoted in each department, they acted as supervisors of their previous department, despite being transferred to another department, and being placed in different positions made them more proficient and became key piece. One of the most notable roles identified was that of 'candidate for vacant roles', as they often volunteered or were nominated by their families to fill critical personnel gaps. Their sensitivity towards social responsibilities also led them to play the role of socially responsible (Campopiano et al., 2019; Peake et al., 2017). After formally integrating into the business, they attempted to increase female participation by acting as women's inclusion facilitators. Even without holding executive positions, they actively participated in decision-making as policymakers (Mogaji, 2023; Nordstrom & Jennings, 2018; Santiago, 2011; Danes & Olson, 2003).

Over time, as they demonstrated their abilities and gained acceptance from others, they assumed middle management roles. Once they earned their parents' trust, they were positioned as advisors, successors (Ahmad et al., 2024; Calabrò et al., 2018; Mussolino et al., 2019; Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017; Sentuti et al., 2024), and senior managers (Calabrò et al., 2024; Hashim et al., 2021; Hernández-Linares et al., 2024; Page et al., 2023; Rachmawati & Suroso, 2022). Overall, they favoured an empathetic management style, thereby fulfilling the role of empathetic managers (Danes, 2005). In a few cases, despite their efforts and achievements, their responsibilities remained limited, placing them as symbolic managers. The narrative of their struggle to attain leadership roles, such as CEO or successor, and to gain the trust of their parents, was a constant theme in their accounts. Comparing these findings with previous studies indicates that most of the roles assumed by women in more favourable contexts were also observed in Iran, despite its structural constraints. However, some roles identified in this study - such as key piece, identity-builder, candidate for vacant roles, and women's inclusion facilitator - have not been reported in previous research. Additionally, roles such as moderniser, systematiser, and organiser have not been explicitly identified in other contexts, although implicit references to these concepts exist. Notably, special emphasis was placed on the role of business developer (the most frequently mentioned) and the policymaker role (present in every interview), reflecting the unique conditions of Iran, where, as an adverse

environment, women must strive intensely to gain visibility, influence, and power.

Among the practical implications of this research, which highlights the importance of women's roles in family businesses, are the impact on strategic decision-making for family business owners and the help in passing laws to facilitate the presence and growth of women by policymakers in unfavourable conditions for women, especially in Iran. In addition, telling the story of women's struggles in reaching key roles in these businesses can facilitate their acceptance by family and society. Nonetheless, further research is recommended to explore the reasons behind these differences.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Since this study was conducted in a context unfavourable to women, we were faced with limited access to cases that had interview conditions. Therefore, longitudinal studies, especially longitudinal studies with women before and after assuming managerial positions, narrative analyses of identities or comparative approaches between Muslim countries with different levels of acceptance of women's leadership in the same cultural context, especially comparative analyses between Middle Eastern countries, are recommended. In addition, in some cases, there was no willingness to be interviewed due to family problems on the part of the daughters or their families. Therefore, interviewing only those who agreed could bias sample selection towards more capable and notable samples. Therefore, it is recommended to conduct further studies to record silent voices in future research through other methods such as ethnographic methods, indirect interviews, and analysis of family documents.

Author contribution statement

The authors contributed equally to the work.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical statement

The authors confirm that data collection for the research was conducted anonymously, and there was no possibility of identifying the participants.

Declaration on the use of generative AI in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors did not use generative AI.

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