The impact of gender barriers on decision-making processes and on the performance of family businesses in Kosova

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Abstract

Family businesses are the main pillar of the economy in Kosovo; however, their development and functioning are often hindered by cultural norms and traditional power structures that define gender roles and decision-making mechanisms. The study aims to conduct measurements related to the impact of gender barriers on women's ability to become part of decision-making processes and to assess how this impact will be reflected in the performance of family businesses, by treating access to decision-making as a mediating mechanism. The data of this study were obtained from a sample of 70 managers engaged in family businesses, including an equal number of 35 women and 35 men, through the use of a highly structured questionnaire. For the *processing of these data, the following statistical analysis methods were used: descriptive analysis, correlational analysis, linear regression, as well as mediation analysis. The findings show that there is a very significant negative relationship between gender barriers and access to decision-making, and a positive relationship between access to decision-making and business performance. Although gender barriers do not have a statistically significant direct effect on performance, they show that they indirectly influence it by limiting women's access to decision-making. The study shows that the full inclusion of women in decision-making processes exerts a mediating role in the relationship between gender barriers and business performance. In particular, the findings emphasize that the reduction of these barriers, together with the promotion of gender equality, can serve as strategic factors for improving sustainability and achieving the long-term success of family businesses in Kosovo.*

***Keywords**: gender barriers; access to decision-making; family businesses; business performance; gender equality.*

Introduction

Family businesses are the backbone of the economy in Kosovo. They not only create employment and keep the entrepreneurial tradition alive but are also a key factor in the country's economic stability. However, these businesses operate in an environment where power relations, social structures, and cultural norms shape the way roles and responsibilities are distributed within the family enterprise, despite their strategic role. In this sense, these structures have a direct impact on the inclusion of women in key decision-making processes, limiting not only their professional participation but also the overall potential of the business itself (Martinez Jimenez et al., 2021; OECD, 2021).In most family businesses in Kosovo, decision-making remains closely tied to patriarchal organizational practices. As a result, men continue to hold the main role in business management, while women, even when they are key contributors to the daily work, often remain excluded from leadership positions and are involved only in operational functions, with no real influence on the company's strategic direction. International literature indicates that in environments dominated by traditional family structures, women's access to decision-making processes is limited due to gender biases, social perceptions about their roles, and the unequal distribution of authority (Apostolou et al., 2020; Oliveira & Neto, 2023).Gender barriers are not only manifested through formal exclusion but often also in more subtle forms, such as not taking women's opinions into consideration, underestimating their professional contribution, a lack of access to strategic information, and exclusion from decision-making networks. Contemporary studies clearly show that women in family businesses often face a "silence effect," where their presence is visible, but their voice is not heard equally (Kim & Liu, 2023).

This forced silencing of female talent is not simply a matter of injustice, but a real obstacle to business efficiency. By being excluded from key decisions, women lose the opportunity to influence company strategy. The loss is two-fold as research confirms beyond a doubt that companies with equal gender representation in the workforce thrive in critical aspects of the business, which include innovation, transparency, risk management, and financial performance (Ali et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2023). The inclusion of gender diversity contributes to problem-solving efforts and is part of the development of an enabling environment. Thus, in a transition economy such as Kosovo, where family businesses are confronted with market instability, scarce resources, and heightened competitiveness, the disempowerment of women from organizational decision-making processes would have a greater impact. Regional studies indicate that gender diversity in leadership enhances flexibility, adaptability, and resilience in family businesses during periods of crisis (Sukkurwala & Ahmed, 2020). By failing to utilize the strategic potential of women, these businesses lose a significant portion of their human capital, reducing performance and growth opportunities. Although the importance of this issue is widely recognized in the international literature, empirical evidence for family businesses in Kosovo remains limited. Through in-depth research, this study analyzes the impact of gender barriers on women's participation in decision-making and the consequences these limitations have on the success of family businesses, particularly in an environment where the pressure of traditions and family structures is evident in daily management practices. The study's methodology is built on the analysis of perceptions and experiences of 70 family business managers, aiming to identify the specific barriers that prevent the equal inclusion of women, measure the degree of their access to decisions, and assess how these factors affect business performance. Finally, this work makes a unique contribution to the scientific literature by revealing how power dynamics and exclusion mechanisms within entrepreneurial families shape the economic outcomes of such enterprises in Kosovo's economic and social context.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study is to look at how gender barriers affect women's ability to make decisions in family businesses in Kosovo and how these barriers affect the businesses' performance, innovation, operational efficiency, and long-term viability. The goal of the study is to find out what kinds of barriers are already there, how strong they are, and how they affect the strategic direction and performance of family businesses.

Research question

In what way and to what extent do gender barriers affect women's access to decision-making and the performance of family businesses in Kosovo?

Supporting questions

- What are the main structural, cultural and institutional barriers that limit women's involvement in strategic decision-making processes in family businesses in Kosovo?
- Does women's access to decision-making have a significant impact on innovation, management and operational efficiency of family business performance?
- Is there a statistically significant difference between the level of gender barriers and the perception of family business performance?

Literature Review

Family businesses are one of the leading types of economic organizations across the world, especially in developing and emerging countries. A distinctive feature of family businesses lies in their integration with family members and their economic relations, leading to a distinctive model of governance and decision-making (De Massis et al., 2018). Unlike in organizations that are not family-owned, in which decisions are usually based on a professional hierarchy, in family businesses, decisions may depend on cultural and emotional factors between their members (Sharma & Salvato, 2021).

Current literature is also highlighting the fact that family businesses make decisions in a very social way, based on their status as families and their gender. Also, the power and authority base do not come from their official roles per se (Nordqvist & Melin, 2022). In this case, the real access to the decision-making is considered as one of the main determinants for assessing how power is shared in the business. Access to decision-making for certain members of the business, especially women, may result in less potential for innovative adaptation in the future of the business (Calabrò et al., 2021). Gender barriers in family businesses exhibit varying dimensions; they cannot solely be restricted to direct discrimination, but also involve implicit dimensions that derive based on cultural values and society's expectations of different genders (Apostolou et al., 2020). In patriarchal societies, males have traditionally been considered that dominant group suited to rule or make key decisions, bearing authority, while women play complementary and support roles (Oliveira & Neto, 2023). One of the relevant theoretical contributions in this sense comes from Gender Role Congruity Theory, in that this tells us that prejudice in relation to female leadership emerges as a result of the incompatibility perceived between women's social roles and their positions as female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In family businesses, access to decision-making positions is related to maintaining family traditions and to possessing professional competencies, creating further obstacles for female family members (González et al., 2019). Research indicates that there are structural barriers for female family business members that include a lack of connection to business networks, finance, and strategy information; and there are also symbolic barriers like undervaluing ideas and being excluded from unwritten strategy sessions (Bøllingtoft & Ulhøi, 2020; Vera & Dean, 2019; World Bank, 2022). Within the context of Social Capital Theory, as discussed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), the exclusion of females from social and professional networks diminishes their influence over crucial business decisions, even if their operational input is high (Danes et al., 2020). The previous literature suggests that the relationship between gender barriers and performance is not a linear relationship because negative gender barriers normally manifest indirectly, which includes a decrease in diversity and perspectives, as well as a decrease in human capital (Ali et al., 2022). Literature on gender diversity states that firms with balanced diversity record better performance and are innovative (Faccio et al., 2016). Such effects may also have significant impacts on critical phases of development, crisis, or succession since single-sided decision-making can raise the risk of a lack of flexibility (Pere-Calero et al., 2023). However, there are findings indicating that family firms are subject to continuity in terms of performance, especially because of a forward orientation strategy, even though there may be a threat of gender barriers (Bammens et al., 2020). Cultural, institutional, and economic factors mold gender barriers to business in the Western Balkans, including Kosovo. According to reports by OECD (2021) and the World Bank (2022), constraints on access to finance, training, and professional networks affect women entrepreneurs, while traditional norms hamper their participation in decision-making processes (Mustafa et al., 2023). Local research has identified that family businesses in Kosovo still have a clearly patriarchal structure of ownership, where main decisions are made predominantly by men, even if there is female co-ownership or females actively participate in management. However, it is important to note that while the literature has widened, gaps still exist. To start with, actual access as a mediating variable for accessing performance, excluding gender representation, remains underexplored (Gupta et al., 2023). Transition economies, such as Kosovo, also remain under researched despite the fact that cultural or institutional hurdles are even higher in such economies (OECD, 2021). In this way, this study aims to enrich the knowledge about the way gender affects the organizational performance of family businesses in Kosovo by focusing on actual access to decision-making.

Study Hypothesis

The main hypothesis in this study is based on the analysis of contemporary literature on gender barriers, decision-making access, and family business performance. Furthermore, key theoretical frameworks such as Role Theory, the Resource-Based View, and Social Capital Theory have been used in these studies. The standard of the study is to empirically test the mediation of the main variables of the analysis. The scientific literature suggests that gender barriers do not only reach individual or temporary obstacles; rather, they are rooted in cultural and organizational frameworks, which source in the enterprise the authority of decision-making power within family businesses. This approach is supported by the fact that gender barriers are such a factor in shaping the structure and functioning of family businesses. Considering and taking the decision in the decision position with real power, these are other barriers in the levels of their involvement in the strategic processes of the enterprise. It is estimated that gender barriers can have a wider impact on businesses, especially when they limit access to decision-making processes. The limitation of women's conditions in these processes is expected to negatively affect the analysis of strategic decisions, the optimal use of human capital, and, consequently, the overall performance of family businesses. In this context, the aim of the study is to assess the impact of gender barriers on family business performance within the decision-making approach, having a comprehensive and all-theoretical analytical business.

Main Study Hypothesis

H1: Gender barriers negatively affect the performance of family businesses in Kosovo indirectly, by limiting women's access to strategic decision-making processes.

Methodology for the Study

This study employs an explanatory research design and utilises a quantitative approach, with the objective of empirically examining the relationships among gender barriers, access to decision-making, and the performance of family businesses in Kosovo. The research design is cross-sectional because the data were only collected once. The study population consists of leaders and managers of family enterprises in Kosovo. Because there isn't an official database for this type of business, the sample was chosen using a mix of purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods. The final sample consists of 70 respondents, evenly split between genders (35 females and 35 males). A structured questionnaire was used to gather the data. This tool was made using scales that have been shown to work in other studies and were changed to fit the local situation. The survey asked about three main things: gender barriers, access to decision-making, and business performance. A seven-point Likert scale was used to measure all of the items. Using Cronbach's Alpha, we checked the instrument's reliability, and all of the constructs scored above the acceptable level of 0.70. Before the main study, a pilot study was done to make sure the questionnaire was clear and valid. We used descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, linear regression, and mediation analysis to look at the data. We also used independent samples t-tests to compare answers between groups of men and women. The whole research process followed standard ethical rules, which meant that all respondents were anonymous, their information was kept private, and they could choose to take part.

Study Results

This section represents the empirical results of the study, which are the basis for discussion on the analysis of the relationship between gender barriers, access to decision-making, and the performance of family businesses in Kosovo. The analyses were conducted in several steps, in accordance with the structure of the main hypothesis and the methodology described earlier.

TABLE 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Female	35	50.0
Male	35	50.0
Total	70	100.0

Source: Calculated by the Authors

The sample consists of an equal gender distribution, which provides a solid basis for analyzing gender-based perceptions and experiences in family businesses. This balance reduces statistical bias and enhances the validity of gender comparisons in the subsequent analyses.

Descriptive statistics of the main variables

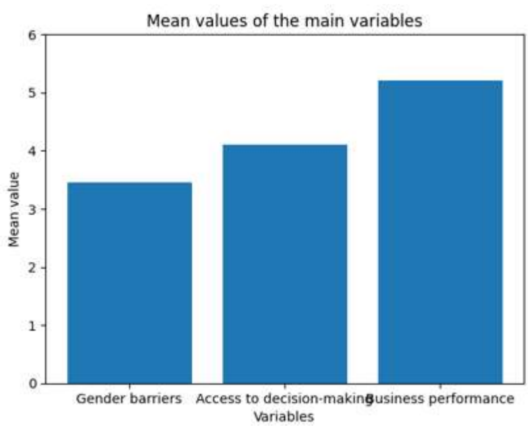
TABLE 2. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Min	Max
Gender barriers	3.45	1.40	1	7
Access to decision-making	4.10	1.25	1	7
Business performance	5.21	1.10	1	7

Source: Calculated by the Authors

The results show that the perceived level of gender barrier is moderate in nature (M = 3.45, SD = 1.40), which should mean a relatively wide distribution of experiences of the respondents. Finally, access to decision-making is assessed as moderate, with M = 4.10 and SD = 1.25, reflecting a moderate variation in decision-making involvement. In contrast, the performance of family businesses is reported to be relatively high (M = 5.21, SD = 1.10), with a more homogeneous distribution of perceptions.

FIGURE 1: Mean values of the main variables



The graphical presentation of the mean values for each variable clearly illustrates this configuration, showing that business performance remains above the average levels of gender barriers and access to decision-making. This descriptive pattern suggests that, although gender barriers and limitations in decision-making participation exist, family businesses manage to maintain a satisfactory level of performance, supporting the assumption that the impact of gender barriers on performance is not direct but operates through mediating mechanisms.

Correlational Analysis

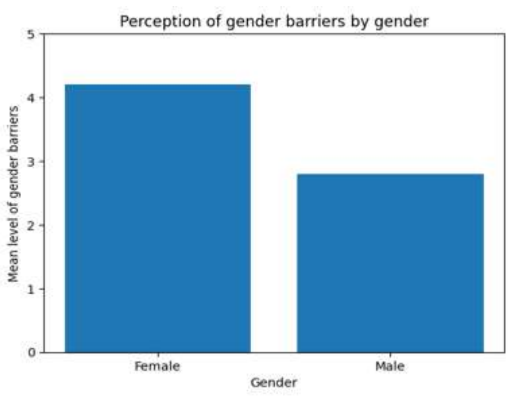
TABLE 3: Correlation matrix (Pearson r)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Gender barriers	1		
2. Access to decision-making	-0.42**	1	
3. Business performance	-0.09	0.36**	1

Source: Calculated by the Authors
Note: p < 0.01

Correlational analysis was employed to evaluate the linear relationships among gender barriers, access to decision-making, and the performance of family businesses. The findings demonstrate a negative and statistically significant correlation between gender barriers and access to decision-making ($r = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that increased gender barriers correlate with restricted participation in decision-making processes. However, the relationship between gender barriers and performance is very weak, and it is not significant ($r = -0.09$). This is an example showing that there is no relationship between performance and gender barriers. On the other hand, having access to decision-making is also associated with performance, and it is also significant ($r = 0.36$, $p < .01$). It is crucial for individuals to have access to decision-making if they are interested in improving performance. Overall, as a general rule, it would seem that the pattern of correlation implies a mediating mechanism wherein gender barriers influence performance indirectly via access to decision-making.

FIGURE 2: The table illustrates gender differences in the perception of gender barriers in family businesses.



Source: Calculated by the Authors

The figure clearly shows that women report significantly higher levels of gender barriers compared to men. In this context, gender barriers refer to structural, cultural, and organizational obstacles that limit women's real access to authority, information, and decision-making influence, despite their formal involvement in the business. This finding reinforces the theoretical argument that such barriers are more visible and more tangible for women in the context of family businesses, where traditional norms and patriarchal structures continue to shape the distribution of decision-making power.

Linear Regression Analysis

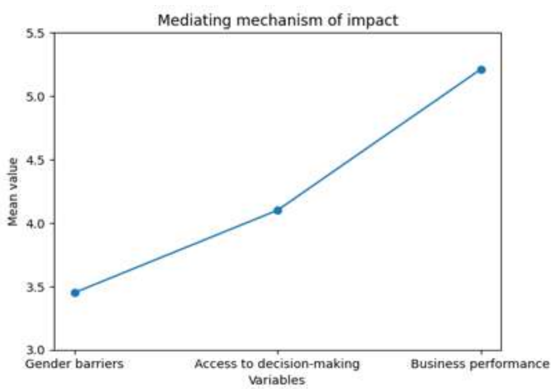
TABLE 4: Linear regression - the impact of gender barriers on performance

Independent variable	β	t	p-value
Gender barriers	-0.07	-0.77	0.44
R^2	0.008		

Source: Calculated by the Authors

The results of the linear regression analysis indicate that gender barriers do not have a direct and statistically significant effect on the performance of family businesses ($\beta = -0.07$, $t = -0.77$, $p = 0.44$). The very low value of the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.008$) suggests that gender barriers explain only a minimal proportion of the variance in business performance. These findings indicate that the impact of gender barriers on performance does not manifest directly, but is likely to operate through organizational mediating mechanisms, such as access to decision-making.

FIGURE 3: Presents the mechanism through which gender barriers affect business performance via access to decision-making.



Source: Calculated by the Authors

The figure clearly visualizes the structure of the relationship among the main variables of the study. The decline from gender barriers to access to decision-making and the subsequent increase from access to decision-making to business performance confirm that the impact of gender barriers on performance occurs primarily in an indirect manner, through the restriction of real participation in decision-making. This graphical illustration is fully consistent with the results of the mediation analysis and with the main hypothesis of the study.

Mediation Analysis

To test the main hypothesis, mediation analysis was applied, in which access to decision-making was treated as a mediating variable in the relationship between gender barriers and business performance.

TABLE 5: Results of the mediation analysis

Relationship	β	p-value
Gender barriers → Access to decision-making	-0.42	<0.01
Access to decision-making → Performance	0.31	<0.01
Gender barriers → Performance (direct)	-0.07	0.44
Indirect effect	-0.13	<0.05

Source: Calculated by the Authors

The results indicate that gender barriers have a negative and statistically significant effect on access to decision-making ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$), showing that an increase in gender-related obstacles is associated with a restriction of real involvement in decision-making processes. At the same time, access to decision-making has a positive and statistically significant effect on business performance ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$), highlighting its importance for achieving improved organizational outcomes. In contrast, effects on performance through gender barriers are limited and statistically insignificant ($\beta = -0.07$, $p = 0.44$), indicating that there is actually no impact of gender barriers on business performance. Moreover, the effect on performance through access to decision-making is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.13$, $p < 0.05$), thus affirming that the impact of gender barriers on family business performance is realized in an indirect manner.

In this study, access to decision-making refers to individuals' real opportunity to participate in and exert effective influence on the strategic processes of the business, including involvement in decision-making discussions, access to strategic information, formal or informal authority to influence key decisions, and the perception of personal influence on the direction of the business. Controlling access to such resources reduces the full utilization of human capital, an effect that represents the primary manner in which gender restrictions impact organizational performance.

Overall, the findings support the notion of full mediation, which suggests that gender barriers impact the performance of family businesses only through the restriction in real access to decision-making, as in line with the theoretical assumptions and the conceptual model described in this study.

Testing of the Main Hypothesis

Based on the results of the correlational, regression, and mediation analyses, the main hypothesis of the study is partially supported. The findings indicate that gender barriers do not directly reduce business performance, but exert a negative effect through the restriction of access to decision-making, thereby confirming the theoretically proposed mechanism.

Summary of Results

The results in the real world show how gender barriers affect how these companies work and what they get done. The descriptive analysis indicated that the respondents perceived gender barriers as moderate, access to decision-making as adequate, and family businesses as performing relatively well. This indicates that family enterprises in Kosovo can persist in thriving despite the presence of gender-related challenges within their organisational framework. Second, the correlation analyses revealed a statistically significant and negative relationship between gender barriers and access to decision-making. This supports the idea that making it harder for women to be involved in decision-making processes makes it harder for them to be involved. On the other hand, there was a strong and positive relationship between company success and having a say in decisions. This means that having more people involved in making decisions is linked to better results for the company. Thirdly, linear regression analyses indicated that gender barriers do not exert a direct and statistically significant influence on the profitability of family businesses. This data indicates that the influence of gender barriers on performance is indirect, mediated by other organisational factors. Fourth, the mediation study confirmed that mediation plays a role in the link between gender barriers and how well a company does. In our study, the capacity to make decisions means being fully and really engaged in the strategic processes of the business. This entails the ability to talk about decisions, acquire crucial information, use power in an official capacity or in an informal manner, and revise decisions that impact the businesses in growth processes. On the other hand, the findings indicated that gender barriers facilitated the failure of family businesses in the sense that they impeded the capacity of people to really make decisions. This completely backs up the main idea behind the study's proposed mechanism. Lastly, comparisons based on gender showed that women report much higher levels of gender barriers than men. However, there were no statistically significant differences in business performance based on the leader's gender. This shows that women can still run family businesses just as well, even when they have to deal with the law and make decisions that are harder for them. This shows that they are strong, good at managing people, and able to work in businesses with strict rules. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that gender barriers constitute a structural issue for family enterprises in Kosovo. It's not that they directly affect performance; it's that they make it harder for family members to make decisions, which means they can't use all of their human and organisational capital. These findings provide a robust empirical basis for the subsequent theoretical discussion and the practical and political ramifications to be examined in the following sections of the essay.

Conclusions

This study aimed to analyze the impact of gender barriers on access to decision-making and their effects on the performance of family businesses in Kosovo. The article, based on the empirical findings derived from family business owners, employing cutting-edge statistical analyses, provides significant insights and results, which form important contributions in terms of Understanding Gender Barriers within Family Business. The study provides significant insights into family businesses, and three important results can be derived regarding gender barriers within such a domain, i.e., first of all, it is indicated that indeed, gender barriers do exist in family businesses within Kosovo, especially for women, as significant results derive from comparing men and women, and it turns out that women report higher levels of gender barriers than men, especially due to the cultural context of respecting patriarchal cultural norms. This result confirms that organizational experience in family businesses is differentiated by gender. Second, the study concludes that gender barriers have a direct and negative impact on real access to decision-making. An increase in gender-related obstacles is associated with a restriction of women's involvement in strategic processes and in decision-making with real authority, thereby reducing their influence on the direction and development of the family business. This finding indicates that the main challenge is not related to women's formal presence in the business, but to the lack of equal access to decision-making mechanisms. Third, the results demonstrate that access to decision-making plays a positive and significant role in the performance of family businesses. Businesses in which decision-making processes are more inclusive and where human capital is used effectively report higher levels of performance, suggesting that diversity of perspectives improves decision quality and organizational outcomes. Fourth, a key conclusion of the study is that gender barriers do not directly affect the performance of family businesses, but exert their influence indirectly through the restriction of access to decision-making. This finding again points out the need to examine mediating factors and, in fact, supports the overall hypothesis of the study, i.e., that the impacts of gender barriers are mediated by decision-making structures rather than by financial outcomes. Ultimately, the research concludes that there are structural gender-related issues for family businesses in Kosovo that, if not addressed, have the potential to limit opportunities for innovation, sustainability, and sustainable development for these family businesses; however, it also identifies that these women have high levels of managerial potential and organizational resilience and that they perform at a comparable level despite these issues against them.

Recommendations

According to the above conclusions and results, it is now possible to present a series of actionable and policy-related recommendations on how gender-inclusive decision-making can help enhance family business performance in Kosovo.

Recommendations for Family Businesses

Firstly, there is a need for family businesses to consider and review their governance structure, as well as fostering a more open-minded approach in management. The involvement of women in management and decision-making processes that really matter can help improve family firm decisions and reduce possible negative issues associated with highly centralized decision-making.

Second, professionalization of family governance is recommended by way of formalization of roles, responsibilities, and decision-making mechanisms. This may help minimize the impact of traditional values and create a more merit-based organizational environment.

Third, there is a need for family firms to invest in enhancing the managerial and leadership skills of women as well as in establishing professional networks to improve the quality of the family's human capital.

Recommendations for Institutions and Policymakers

Fourth, public institutions and support organizations should develop policies and programs aimed at empowering women in entrepreneurship, particularly within family businesses. These programs should focus on increasing access to finance, managerial training, and business networks.

Fifth, the development of awareness-raising campaigns is recommended to address gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in decision-making, thereby contributing to changes in cultural perceptions in society and within businesses.

Sixth, institutions should encourage the systematic collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data in the family business sector, in order to enable progress monitoring and the design of evidence-based policies.

Recommendations for Future Research

Finally, the study recommends that future research expand to larger samples and combined methodologies (mixed-method approaches), including qualitative interviews, in order to deepen the understanding of gender-related experiences in family businesses. Longitudinal studies would also enable the analysis of the long-term impact of gender barriers on performance and sustainability.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

> During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used generative AI in order to translate the text, perform linguistic corrections, and improve the clarity of the writing. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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