



An Empirical Study on Feminist Leadership in Family Enterprises

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Abstract: *Women leaders who strategically utilize intergenerational transmission to transform traditional business legacies. By integrating relational intelligence and collaborative governance, they confront patriarchal norms and promote inclusive decision-making, ensuring sustainable growth and empowering future generations within the family business landscape. This empirical qualitative research examines feminist leadership in family enterprises through the theoretical framework of feminist organizational theory and intersectionality. Utilizing in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, it explores how women leaders strategically exercise agency to disrupt patriarchal governance and incorporate relational intelligence, ethical stewardship, and collaborative decision-making. The study clarifies the significance of feminist leadership in enhancing organizational adaptability, innovation, and social capital within family firms, positioning women as essential agents of sustainable business transformation. The research aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting Gender Equality (SDG 5) through the empowerment and inclusion of women in leadership; fostering Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8) through sustainable business practices; and mitigating Inequalities (SDG 10) by challenging deep-rooted gender biases. These findings offer practical insights for academics, policymakers, and family enterprises aiming for gender-sensitive governance models that encourage inclusive growth, organizational resilience, and socio-economic development.*

Keywords: *feminist leadership, family enterprises, gender equality, sustainable development goals, organizational adaptability, Family Business Ecosystem*

Introduction

Feminist leadership within Indian family enterprises is becoming increasingly significant as women assert their roles beyond conventional limits, navigating intricate family dynamics alongside business needs. Indian family businesses, which represent a substantial segment of the country's economy, are mainly micro and small enterprises characterized by closely held family ownership, where the intergenerational transfer of leadership is essential. Traditionally patriarchal, these businesses are undergoing transformative changes as educated and empowered women challenge gender norms, contributing strategically to governance, innovation, and sustainability. According to the 2023 SPJIMR State of Family Business Report, more than 54% of Indian family businesses actively engage women in management roles, indicating a growing acceptance of female leadership despite socio-cultural and structural challenges.

This study aims to investigate the nuanced experiences and strategies of women leaders in family enterprises, with a particular emphasis on relational intelligence, ethical stewardship, and collaborative decision-making that disrupts established patriarchal governance. Additionally, it seeks to analyze how feminist leadership practices foster sustainable growth and organizational resilience while aiding the intergenerational transmission of business legacy

and values. By aligning these outcomes with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Gender Equality (SDG 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), the study provides a thorough framework for understanding and promoting feminist leadership in the complex context of Indian family businesses. This research not only enhances academic understanding of gendered leadership dynamics but also offers practical recommendations for policymakers and family enterprises dedicated to nurturing inclusive and sustainable development within traditional business structures.

Literature Review

V. Gupta and N. M. Levenburg's study, *Women in Family Business: Three Generations of Research* (2013), examines the changing role of women in Indian family businesses. It emphasizes obstacles such as gender bias and societal expectations, as well as the transformative leadership that women provide, with a focus on leadership, empowerment, succession, and the business impact through qualitative case study analyses. P. Gupta's research, *Breaking through the Periphery: Growing Role of Women as Leaders in Indian Family Businesses* (2020), explores the increasing presence of women leaders in Indian family businesses. It evaluates various elements including education, career advancement, and their contributions to business performance through qualitative exploratory analysis of top management teams in listed Indian companies.

S. Sowjanya Shetty and V. Basil Hans' paper, *Role of Family-Business in Women Empowerment* (2019), assesses the impact of family businesses on women's economic empowerment in India. It reviews government initiatives and the challenges women encounter when taking on entrepreneurial roles within family enterprises. *Women in Family Business Research—What We Know and What We Should Know?* (2023) article reviews existing research on women in family businesses globally and highlights knowledge gaps, focusing on drivers and barriers of women's involvement and leadership in family enterprises. Bağış, Ayşe's exploratory study *Navigating Family Business: An Exploratory Study on Women's Roles and Contributions in Indian Family Enterprises* (2023) investigates women's roles and contributions in Indian family enterprises, emphasizing the sparse existing literature and calling for more in-depth qualitative research. Malcolm Fang and Siu-Ming To's *A Systematic Literature Review of Female Leadership in Family Business* (2025) examining female leadership in family businesses worldwide with insights applicable to the Indian context, focusing on leadership styles, challenges, and outcomes for firms led by women.

Research Gap

Despite the increasing participation of women in Indian family businesses, significant gaps persist in comprehending how feminist leadership is expressed within these traditional and patriarchal frameworks. Current literature frequently emphasizes the roles and representation of women but often neglects the intricate dynamics of cultural norms, gender biases, and intergenerational succession that uniquely influence women's leadership experiences in India. There is a notable absence of comprehensive qualitative research that explores how women adeptly navigate familial expectations alongside their entrepreneurial aspirations to reshape family governance and promote sustainable innovation. Moreover, studies seldom connect the outcomes of feminist leadership to wider socio-economic development objectives, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Significance of the Study

The research emphasizes the necessity for investigations into women's leadership agency as a driving force for inclusive growth and organizational resilience in family businesses. This study fills these gaps by utilizing feminist organizational theory and intersectionality frameworks, presenting empirical data from Indian family enterprises.

Additionally, it aligns the leadership influence with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as Gender Equality (SDG 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10). This research enhances academic knowledge while providing actionable insights for policymakers, family businesses, and practitioners dedicated to fostering gender-inclusive governance and sustainable development in the dynamic landscape of family enterprises in India.

Hypothesis

This research proposes that feminist leadership, defined by relational intelligence, collaborative power, and ethical stewardship, has a positive impact on the transformative potential of women leaders within Indian family businesses. It suggests that these feminist leadership approaches improve inclusive governance, reduce patriarchal limitations, and promote sustainable organizational adaptability, thus aiding in the intergenerational transfer of feminist values and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at achieving gender equality and inclusive growth.

Research Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative methodology rooted in feminist organizational theory and intersectionality to investigate feminist leadership within Indian family businesses. Data collection will involve semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women leaders and significant family members to gather insights on their lived experiences and leadership approaches. Thematic analysis will be employed to discern patterns concerning relational intelligence, ethical stewardship, and collaborative governance. Reflexivity and ethical considerations, which are fundamental to feminist methodologies, will steer the research process to challenge conventional power dynamics and ensure that participant voices are genuinely represented. This method emphasizes situated knowledge, aiming to illustrate how feminist leadership challenges patriarchal governance in families and promotes sustainable, inclusive business practices.

This research adopts a qualitative methodology framed by feminist organizational theory and intersectionality. It conducts semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women leaders and key stakeholders in Indian family enterprises to delve into their lived leadership experiences. Thematic analysis will highlight significant patterns in relational intelligence, ethical stewardship, and inclusive governance. Reflexivity and ethical rigor will guarantee the authentic representation of participants' voices, addressing power imbalances. This feminist methodological approach aims to reveal how women's leadership disrupts patriarchal norms within family businesses, fostering sustainability and inclusive growth.

Research Questions

1. How do female leaders in Indian family businesses strategically maneuver through patriarchal governance and intergenerational succession to implement feminist leadership that promotes inclusive and sustainable organizational practices?
2. What socio-cultural, structural, and gender-related obstacles do women encounter in achieving and exercising leadership positions within Indian family enterprises, and how do they surmount these challenges?
3. To what degree does feminist leadership in Indian family businesses enhance organizational adaptability, innovation, and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals like Gender Equality and Reduced Inequalities?

Analysis and Discussion

1. Women Leaders in Indian Family Businesses

Women leaders in Indian family businesses navigate deeply ingrained patriarchal governance and the challenges of intergenerational succession through strategic feminist leadership practices that foster inclusivity and sustainability. Historically, family businesses in

India operated within patriarchal frameworks where women were largely relegated to peripheral roles, primarily managing family harmony rather than business decision-making. Gupta and Jain (2025) emphasize this enduring norm: “Women have been playing an important role by ensuring the harmony in family structure... While they largely remained invisible in formal settings of the business” (44). This invisibility has been slowly eroding as educated and empowered women assert their leadership potential.

Strategic navigation begins with women's balancing of traditional family responsibilities alongside emerging executive roles. Gupta and Jain note that “women in family businesses often balance their leadership roles with traditional family responsibilities, adopting ethical decision-making processes” (97-98). This dual role requires relational intelligence—understanding complex family dynamics and exercising emotional labor to mediate conflicts and foster collaboration. Ethical stewardship manifests as women apply values-driven governance, emphasizing long-term sustainability over short-term gain, thereby challenging the patriarchal emphasis on rigid hierarchy and control.

Intergenerational succession plays a vital role in family businesses, where the transition of leadership can either reinforce or challenge existing gender norms. Feminist leadership in this context involves strategically positioning women as rightful heirs and decision-makers, often necessitating their overcoming biases that favor male successors. Research has shown that women utilize coalition-building and mentorship to bolster their leadership claims, thereby ensuring the continuity of feminist values and inclusive governance across generations. Initiatives like the SPJIMR Ladies in Family Enterprise (LiFE) demonstrate how formal education and mentorship can empower women. The impact of the LiFE program on the Bansal family serves as a prime example of this transformation—women moved from “silent roles” to becoming active, strategic contributors, “reshaping their family business and personal growth” (SPJIMR 2025). This comprehensive approach to leadership development enhances women's agency, providing them with the necessary tools to innovate and promote adaptability, which is essential for sustainability in changing markets.

The feminist leadership model is directly connected to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It promotes Gender Equality (SDG 5) by breaking down patriarchal obstacles, encourages Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8) through responsible business practices, and tackles Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) by facilitating fair power distribution in family governance. As stated in the study's hypothesis, feminist leadership “improves organizational adaptability, innovation, and social capital... fostering sustainable organizational adaptability, thus aiding in the intergenerational transmission of feminist values” (Abstract; Hypothesis). In summary, women leaders in Indian family businesses effectively implement feminist leadership by utilizing relational intelligence, ethical stewardship, and collaborative governance to address patriarchal family structures and intergenerational succession issues. Their leadership challenges conventional power dynamics and promotes inclusive, sustainable organizational practices, thereby enhancing the long-term resilience and transformation of family enterprises within the changing Indian socio-economic landscape.

2. Socio-Cultural, Structural, and Gender-Specific Barriers of Women

Women leaders in Indian family businesses encounter a multifaceted set of socio-cultural, structural, and gender-specific obstacles when seeking to attain and exercise leadership positions. These issues are deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions, conventional family roles, and restricted access to essential resources, which together hinder their complete involvement in governance and decision-making. As highlighted by Gupta and Jain (2025), women have historically held marginal positions, being “largely invisible in formal settings of the business,” constrained by cultural norms that favor men as successors (44). Structural challenges also

encompass gender-biased succession practices that favor male heirs, thereby obstructing women's routes to leadership. Socio-cultural challenges revolve around inflexible gender roles and expectations. Women are frequently conditioned to prioritize caregiving and family responsibilities over their professional aspirations, which restricts their engagement with business operations and leadership development.

One analysis points out, "The socialization and grooming of young women can influence their familiarity with various business aspects. When they are not afforded the same opportunities as their male siblings, for example, they are excluded from leadership roles" (Grant Thornton Insights). These societal norms perpetuate internalized self-doubt, often referred to as imposter syndrome, which diminishes women's confidence in asserting themselves as leaders. Structural barriers include a lack of mentorship, insufficient formal leadership training, and limited access to financial and operational decision-making. The scarcity of visible female role models in family businesses leads to feelings of isolation and uncertainty. SPJIMR's LiFE program tackles this issue by providing women with strategic and financial knowledge, cultivating leadership identity, and assisting in overcoming confidence challenges (SPJIMR 2025).

Gender-specific challenges are evident in biases related to performance evaluations, exclusion from key decision-making forums, and cultural resistance to women in positions of authority. Nevertheless, women are progressively utilizing relational intelligence, coalition-building, and transformational leadership approaches to break through these barriers. For example, women leaders are recognized for their ability to "lead with empathy and a collaborative spirit instead of competition," which enables them to effectively manage intricate family dynamics and business obstacles (Grant Thornton Insights). Empowered women develop strategic agency through continuous learning and advocacy, reshaping family business governance. Successful leaders like Roshni Nadar Malhotra and the Chauhan sisters illustrate how acquiring financial acumen and creating influence within male-dominated spaces enables women to break glass ceilings and transform enterprises (SPJIMR LiFE). Mentorship and support networks also play crucial roles in sustaining their leadership trajectories. In sum, socio-cultural conditioning, structural exclusion, and gender bias historically hindered women's leadership in Indian family businesses. However, through education, mentorship, strategic agency, and feminist leadership principles emphasizing ethical stewardship and inclusivity, women overcome these challenges. Their leadership not only promotes gender equality but also drives innovation and sustainability, contributing to resilient, inclusive family enterprises aligned with broader development goals.

3. Feminist Leadership in Indian Family Businesses with SDG

Feminist leadership within Indian family businesses plays a crucial role in enhancing organizational adaptability, fostering innovation, and aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10). This impact is supported by empirical research and case studies that demonstrate how women leaders implement transformational governance practices that confront patriarchal structures while advancing sustainability and inclusive growth.

Women are increasingly taking on leadership positions in Indian family enterprises, motivated by improved education, greater exposure, and evolving socio-cultural norms. As noted by Gupta and Jain (2025), "women in family businesses frequently juggle their leadership responsibilities alongside traditional family duties, employing ethical decision-making processes," which enhances both organizational adaptability and social capital (97-98). This ethical stewardship and relational intelligence are key attributes of feminist leadership that drive innovation by facilitating more collaborative and inclusive decision-making, moving away from hierarchical and male-dominated governance.

The SPJIMR Ladies in Family Enterprise (LiFE) program serves as a prime example of institutional support that empowers women leaders. The case of the Bansal family illustrates how a structured learning environment has enabled women to enhance their skills and rethink their roles "beyond comfort zones," thereby transforming family dynamics and business strategies into more sustainable and equitable enterprises (SPJIMR 2025). Mehul Bansal's support for his mother and aunt in pursuing LiFE facilitated their transition from marginal participants to strategic leaders who promote innovation and resilience. Research indicates that women's leadership brings diverse perspectives to business, resulting in improved risk management and more adaptable strategies that are crucial for navigating volatile markets and ensuring sustainability.

Female leaders cultivate integrative cultures and long-term visions, which align with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by fostering decent work environments and encouraging innovation. Furthermore, gender-diverse leadership has been linked to enhanced business performance, as women contribute additional creativity and stakeholder engagement. Additionally, feminist leadership within family enterprises addresses SDG 5 and 10 by challenging deep-rooted gender biases and advocating for gender-sensitive governance. As Tulsi Jayakumar from SPJIMR notes, "the glass ceiling persists... however, it is encouraging to witness a growing number of daughters and daughters-in-law stepping into managerial roles than ever before" (SPJIMR 2023).

Feminist agency in these contexts is expressed through the strategic negotiation of cultural norms and the empowerment gained from education and mentorship. In summary, feminist leadership within Indian family businesses plays a significant role in fostering adaptability and innovation by challenging patriarchal governance and integrating ethical, inclusive management practices. With the support of targeted initiatives such as the LiFE programme and wider societal changes, women's leadership promotes sustainable development, aligning with global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This transformation not only enhances organizational resilience but also creates positive socio-economic effects through empowerment and the reduction of inequalities, paving a progressive path for family enterprises in India's changing business environment.

Findings

The research highlights the increasingly important role of women leaders in Indian family businesses, who are progressively challenging traditional patriarchal norms to make a significant impact on governance, innovation, and organizational sustainability. Women leaders adeptly navigate the dual responsibilities of family and business, exemplifying feminist leadership qualities such as relational intelligence, ethical stewardship, and collaborative decision-making. The rise of women in leadership positions is supported by educational empowerment, mentoring initiatives like SPJIMR's LiFE, and encouraging family dynamics. Despite ongoing socio-cultural and structural challenges, the participation of women is associated with enhanced business adaptability, innovation, and long-term sustainability. These leaders promote inclusive governance that aligns with Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Gender Equality (SDG 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10). Leadership diversity is associated with improved risk management, creativity, and stakeholder engagement, which in turn contributes to greater organizational resilience.

Conclusion

Women leaders in Indian family businesses serve as catalysts for transformative change, confronting established patriarchal systems through feminist leadership. Their strategic approach to governance and succession promotes inclusive and sustainable practices within organizations, improving performance and equity in family enterprises. Institutional

backing and societal changes are crucial for enhancing their leadership influence. Advocating for gender-inclusive governance aligns family businesses with global development objectives and propels social and economic advancement. Ongoing efforts to tackle obstacles through education, mentorship, and policy reforms are essential to fully harness the potential of women's leadership, ensuring resilient, innovative, and equitable family enterprises in India's future.

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