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This is a draft chapter. The final version is available in "Women in Family Business: New Perspectives, Contexts and Roles" edited by Mary Barrett, Jolien Huybrechts, Jean S.K. Lee, published in 2024, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd

<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802206364.00013>

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN FAMILY BUSINESS GENDER STRUCTURES—AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Although women play a vital role in many private family firms (Hamilton, 2006), their role is often described as ‘invisible’ or ‘hidden’ (Jimenez, 2009; Kubíček & Machek, 2019). The lack of women in key positions has been attributed to patriarchal structures in family businesses (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017; Vera & Dean, 2005). Continuity is important for family firms, and during their life cycles, values and traditions become an incremental part of their identities (Selznick, 1957). The invisibility of women in family firms aligns with an understanding of gender that is deeply embedded in organizational structures (Acker, 2006; Risman, 2009), and female successors may face considerable challenges when striving to become legitimate successors in family businesses (Byrne et al., 2021; Hytti et al., 2017).

Family businesses are influenced by and respond to changing institutions over time (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015; Wright & Kellermanns, 2011). Recently, calls have been made to conduct research on how institutional factors shape family businesses (Soleimanof et al., 2018). Of the most apparent factors are the institutional norms related to the roles of women and men in working life as well as in families (Billing, 2011). The situation in the Nordic countries is paradoxical. For instance, inheritance laws are gender-neutral, and the participation of men and women in the labour force is equal, but daughters take over family businesses less often than sons. Women may not be viewed as the ideal or preferred successors (Hytti et al., 2017), but may be needed to step in as such, for instance, due to a family tragedy (Heinonen & Ljunggren, 2018).

In this chapter, we build on the understanding of gender as an organizing structure (Risman, 2009; Risman & Davis, 2013): gender structure informs the ways that different economic and familial roles are available to a person depending on their gender. Risman and Davis (2013, p. 744) state that ‘structure shapes individual choice and social interaction and how human agency creates, sustains and modifies current structure’. Gender structure is both constrained and created by behaviour and has implications at the individual, organizational and institutional levels. However, it does not need to be consistent across the different levels, nor is it static. Although individuals can be products of their social worlds, they are not determined by them (Risman, 2009). Similarly, although influenced and constrained by institutions, individuals have agency in resisting and shaping them (Martin et al., 2016) and represent possibilities for change.

In this chapter, we apply an institutional perspective to analyse gender in family firms. Our purpose is to examine how institutional elements influence gender structures in family firms. As succession processes trigger change within family firms (Steier & Miller, 2010), the focus is on analysing how different institutions influencing gender structures are negotiated as part of succession processes. We follow Scott’s (1995) approach to differentiating institutional arrangements between regulative, normative and cognitive institutional pillars. Building on empirical data from the succession processes of five Finnish family businesses, we address the following research question: How do institutional elements influence gender structures in family firms, and how do they promote or hinder change?

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, our examination offers an in-depth understanding of gender structures in family businesses, including why they persist and how they may change over time. Second, this study elucidates how family firms are influenced by the institutional context; by employing an institutional approach with a focus on the family aspect of

business, our study reveals less explored insights on the interplay between institutional elements and family businesses (Soleimanof et al., 2018). Third, our study extends the understanding of how family and business are related (James et al., 2012) through the institutions of family and business.

Theoretical Framework

Gender in family firms

The investigation of gender in family firms has been growing into an important research domain (Byrne et al., 2021; Hytti et al., 2017; Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017). Family businesses have often been found to have patriarchal structures (Vera & Dean, 2005), linking to the gendered roles and division of labour in families (Breen & Cooke, 2005). Moreover, the invisibility of women is amplified by the differences in the tasks women and men engage in, women's mediation of the family and the business, and the fact that women's contributions are sometimes unpaid (Jimenez, 2009). Because changes in gender structures and practices are slow, they are difficult to assess over a short period of time. However, critical incidents, such as successions, may cause changes to occur faster (Steier & Miller, 2010). Succession is a process in which different regulations, rules, norms and scripts are brought to the surface (Sharma et al., 2003), and related challenges must be negotiated. Over time, societal structures change, leading different generations to have different values and ideas. At the firm level, societal changes may influence the core set of enduring values and cultural elements (Whetten, 2006). Consequently, succession in a family firm may lead to changes in governance, goals, roles, structures, behaviours and, ultimately, core values (Steier & Miller, 2010).

Business succession is one of the most researched areas in the family business literature (Brockhaus, 2004; Gilding et al., 2013; Handler, 1994). Previous studies have focused on topics

such as succession timing and successor choice (De Massis et al., 2008), power struggles (Fenech, 2022), and the role of planning in managing the succession process (Hytti et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2004). Existing research has also contributed to the understanding of the barriers daughters face when trying to take over the family business (Byrne & Fattoum, 2014; Hytti et al., 2017; Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017). Hence, most studies appear to focus on the roles of the incumbent and/or the successor or the relationship between them (individual perspective), or the strategic needs of a business (organizational perspective) within the functionalist paradigm (Ainsworth & Cox, 2003). We build on institutional theory to further understand how these processes and structures may be influenced by societal changes. An institutional theory perspective on family businesses has been used to address the role of institutional arrangements on family businesses' performance (Amit et al., 2015), governance (Miller et al., 2017; Parada et al., 2020), and values (Parada et al., 2010). In addition, because family and business subsystems overlap significantly (Dyer, 2003), we build on the family perspective (James et al., 2012) to understand how institutions linked both to the family and the firm play a role. This enables us to address the interplay between institutional elements and gender in family businesses, which has thus far been neglected in the literature.

<c> Institutional theory perspectives

A family business, like any other organization, needs social acceptability and legitimacy to survive (Scott, 2008). Acceptability and legitimacy are assessed against society's institutional elements, which include both formal rules and tacit assumptions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Previous research has noted the importance of institutional arrangements in the transformation of the values and governance of family businesses (Miller et al., 2017; Parada et al., 2010). Institutional pressure may push family owners to introduce structures and forms of governance to enhance their business's legitimacy (Parada et al., 2020). Such interplay between institutional elements and

family businesses creates fertile ground for investigating how institutional arrangements shape gender structures in family businesses in the context of succession.

Scott (1995, 2008) defined regulative, normative and cognitive institutions. The first of these concerns the regulations, policies, rules and laws affecting the behaviour of individuals and organizations (Scott, 1995). Normative institutions integrate the social norms, values and beliefs that influence human behaviour (Hofstede, 1980; Scott, 1995). Finally, cognitive frameworks define how individuals interpret information. The role of institutions can be analysed at various levels (Scott, 1995); our focus is on organizations and family businesses and the individuals involved in them.

For family firms, institutional elements may differ from other types of firms in several ways (Leaptrott, 2005; Soleimanof et al., 2018). For instance, legislation and taxation regulations or allowances may influence family businesses' strategic choices (Carney et al., 2014; Soleimanof et al., 2018). Institutional elements may shape the ways family businesses seek to enhance their control over their business's ownership, stewardship and governance via the selection of managers, board members and successors (Carney, 2005; Miller et al., 2017; Peng & Jiang, 2010; Peng et al., 2018; Zellweger et al., 2016). Similar factors may influence the gender structures in family businesses, including a business's governance structure, ownership rights and the degree of formality with which it is managed (Leaptrott, 2005).

While regulative institutions guide actions through coercion and sanctions, normative institutions guide actions through norms of acceptability, morality and ethics. Values (i.e., what is preferred or considered appropriate) and norms (i.e., how things should be done) establish the ground rules to which people conform; these are the actions that organizations and individuals should take (Bruton

et al., 2010; Scott, 2008). Pursuing legitimacy makes family businesses sensitive to institutional pressures to adapt their behaviours and identities (Leaptrott, 2005; Parada et al., 2020; Reay, 2009). External normative pressures can guide how family businesses define their family values, such as how they practice gender equality (Parada et al., 2010; Soleimanof et al., 2018). Leaptrott (2005) suggested that within family businesses, there might be a self-selection process of persons with congruent norms and values becoming part of the firm. Family businesses typically emphasize the traditions and values of previous generations, which influence the gender-based treatment of family members (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017; Soleimanof et al., 2018). These traditions often value male leadership and ownership over that of female peers (Danes & Olson, 2003). For instance, first-born males are likely to be appointed to family businesses' leadership positions (Calabrò et al., 2018), while female members are viewed as 'invisible actors' (Danes et al., 2005) who may have to recreate their identity to be viewed as a suitable successor according to institutional prescriptions (McAdam et al., 2021). This results in normative isomorphism, in which men reflect the expected norm as leaders or successors in family businesses.

Cognitive institutions guide actions through the categories and frames by which actors know and interpret their world (Garud et al., 2007). These include the behaviour-guiding routines, rules, scripts and schemas developed in family businesses. Such processes become institutionalized structures within a family business, driving common understandings and actions therein (Löhde et al., 2020). For example, individuals use role schemas to evaluate their own behaviour in terms of how an individual occupying a certain role is expected to behave (Cole et al., 2007). In a family business context, this may imply the 'habitualisation' of certain roles that originated in the family context and were transferred to the business context (Leaptrott, 2005). Such informal structures

shape the perceptions of family members' gendered treatment in succession (Soleimanof et al., 2018).

Institutions such as societal norms or regulations aimed at promoting gender equality may support changes in gender structures within family businesses. However, the pressure of strong family business norms and individual cognitive institutions may inhibit change and contribute to the continuity of established gender structures. We used the three mentioned institutional elements to analyse how different institutions influence gender structures in family businesses and how they contribute to their change or persistence.

Method

Research materials

To examine the research question, we conducted case studies of five family businesses in Finland. *Family businesses* were defined as firms in which members of the same family have ownership and control over the business and in which a minimum of two generations had been involved. All the studied firms were at least second-generation family businesses and had undergone succession relatively recently. They had employees from outside the family, and three were large firms with more than 250 employees. We consulted an expert in the Finnish Family Firm Association to help us identify and select suitable firms. To obtain cases that dealt with continuity or changes in gender structures, we selected firms in which women were involved or had been seeking to be involved as either owners or managers. Because perspectives can vary between stakeholders, particularly regarding important and sensitive issues such as succession, it was important to gain information from several family members for each case (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; De Massis et al., 2008).

Our empirical material consisted of between one and four in-depth interviews with different family members in each firm. Data were collected during the summer of 2012.

The thematically structured interviews covered the family businesses' history, significant events, decision-making related to succession, and the role of women in the business. The interviews were open-ended, and the participants were invited to talk freely about and around the themes. The participants included both men and women in different roles vis-à-vis the family business (owners, employees and/or non-active family members). Participants were interviewed individually.

Analyses

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analytical strategy followed a stepwise interpretive approach (Nordqvist et al., 2009). Initially, sections addressing the roles of women and men in the past, present or future were noted in the interviews. Next, we focused on understanding and interpreting these sections. The analysis centred on succession decisions that had been or were about to be taken or the unfolding of events in previous or ongoing successions reflecting the participants' understanding of those decisions. The preliminary observations were discussed at a research seminar for entrepreneurship and family business researchers representing both business studies and historians, an approach suggested by Colli (2011) and Hjorth and Dawson (2016). The historians commented that they recognized current observations being the same as those from studies from 18th and 19th century Finland, illustrating the persistence of gender structures in family firms (see Heinonen & Vainio-Korhonen, 2018).

Subsequently, we adopted an institutional approach to understand and interpret the interviews. Our focus was on the regulative, normative and cognitive institutional elements at play and how these elements were interpreted by the research participants and shaped their ideas (Bruton et al., 2010;

Busenitz et al., 2000; Leaptrott, 2005). We were also interested in institutions within the firm, for example, how regulative institutions enabled the division of company shares into A and B shares. Institutions inside a firm can also include normative expectations for certain behaviours and roles for individuals, such as institutionalized norms within a family business regarding women as owners and their male spouses as managers (Leaptrott, 2005).

Family Business Cases

In this section, the five cases are briefly introduced to provide background information about them and create context for the succession and the case analyses in the next section.

Case A: *Textile* is a small textile manufacturing firm. The firm has production facilities in Russia, a highly uncertain business environment. The founding couple continued to work in the firm together even after their divorce; the division of tasks between them is clear. The husband, Matt, is in charge of marketing and opening new locations, whereas the wife, Hannah, is in charge of human resources (HR) and operational matters. Matt has always made all the important decisions on his own. To facilitate co-working and some flow of information, Hannah has insisted that the door between their offices remains open to ensure that she learns about his decisions. Both parents are reluctant to have their daughter, Cathy, take over the firm, but both are eager to have her move back to be close to them. Cathy insisted on taking over and running the firm as a condition of moving with her family to live near her parents. Her brother is not a potential successor; he has his own business next door.

Case B: *Engineering* is an engineering firm that was acquired in 2001 by the late husband/father, Mike. When Mike suddenly died in 2007, the daughters, Norah and Nina, who were in their 20s at

the time, and the wife/mother, Samantha, decided to continue managing the firm despite numerous buyout offers. This decision was justified by tax benefits and job security for the employees, ‘the boys’. They decided to hire an external CEO, and both the mother and the daughters are satisfied with the choice. The daughters do not identify as ‘bosses’; instead, they refer to themselves as ‘assistants’ or ‘secretaries’ at the firm. They have considered alternative careers, such as starting new businesses in other industries, but they have no plans to sell the current firm. Samantha currently owns 50% of the firm, but the daughters do not include her in business discussions. However, the CEO has regular meetings with Samantha. She has agreed to sell her shares to her two daughters in the near future, on the condition that they do not sell any shares to outsiders. Samantha wants the firm to go to her grandsons when they grow up.

Case C: *Media* is a large media company under third-generation management. In succession from the first to the second generation, the company was transferred to the son, while the daughters inherited other assets. In the 1990s recession, the firm was on the verge of bankruptcy, and it was an attractive target for a hostile takeover. The second-generation father and previous CEO, Timothy, believed that his son-in-law, who worked at the company, was involved in a hostile takeover attempt. Due to this suspicion and subsequent mistrust among family members, both the son-in-law and his wife (Timothy’s daughter, Mary) were no longer given the opportunity to work in the family business. Timothy divided the company shares into A and B shares, with the A shares (which included decision-making power) going to the two sons (Harold and Ben) and the B shares to the daughters (Mary and Jane). Both Harold and Ben work in the company, and Harold, the older son, is the current CEO. The daughters, the sons and their aunt, Sally (who is the same age as the four siblings), form the board. Mary, in particular, is very active on the board. The division of A and B shares created much bitterness and was interpreted as a classification of ‘A and B children’.

This is a recurring theme in board discussions, not least because the present owners must begin preparing for the next succession process. There are 14 cousins in the fourth generation; no formal decision has been made regarding whether or how they will be involved in the business. However, John, the oldest son of the current CEO, currently works at the firm and is being ‘guided’ into succession.

Case D: *Retail* is a large retail trade firm currently in the third generation. The previous owner had two sons, Sam and Tom. The younger son, Tom, was the planned successor, but neither of the sons wanted to work in the firm. Sam and Tom’s mother was not involved in the company but attended to her husband’s needs and domestic responsibilities. When the father grew ill, an external CEO was appointed. However, the firm almost went bankrupt while this person was in charge. Sam, the older son, took over the business in the 1980s and bought out all the other family members. His wife, Bertha, did not work in the company full-time but was involved in some projects there. Later, Tom lost his money in the stock market and joined the firm as an employee. The business thrived, but then Sam died suddenly. Bertha was forced to make a hasty decision, and she decided to retain the company and run it. The employees and directors of the individual business units supported Bertha’s decision. Sam’s legacy has been kept alive. The fourth generation is not yet working in the firm, but they will become board members after they turn 20.

Case E: *Conglomerate* is a large conglomerate active in technical trade and related services, as well as investment and property activities. Bridget, the current CEO, owns the firm with her half-sister. Bridget explained that ‘in previous generations, the firm was owned by women but managed by their husbands’, indicating that formerly women were not accepted in the firm’s management. Bridget was not intended to be a successor; therefore, she was never coached to take over the firm. After Bridget’s father, the previous CEO, died, she fought for a position on the board. The company

went through several external CEOs with little success. Consequently, the board urged Bridget to take over the firm to avoid the image of ‘the difficult female owner’ (the series of external male CEOs following one after the other led to concerns that the problem was female ownership and not the inability of the CEOs to lead the firm). Despite the family’s history of involving sons-in-law in the company, Bridget’s mother (Alana) did not allow Bridget’s husband to work in the firm. After Alana’s death, Bridget and her half-sister became embroiled in disputes about who would inherit the firm. It is then Bridget’s husband began working in the firm on her management team.

Table 1 Overview of the cases and key events emerging in the analysis

Case	A: Textile	B: Engineering	C: Media	D: Retail	E: Conglomerate
Industry	Textile industry	Engineering works	Media	Retail trade and services	Wholesale trade, technical and construction services
Size	Small firm	Small firm	Large firm—Group consists of six individual business units	Large firm/Group	Large firm/Conglomerate
Founded	1982	An older firm that was acquired in 2001	1925/1945 (later acquired a newspaper established in 1905)	1925	1905
Current generation	2 nd generation	2 nd generation	3 rd generation	3 rd generation	4 th generation
Important members and ownership	Copreneur couple Matt and Hannah (25%+25% ownership; now divorced); both work in the firm, although they are officially retired. Daughter, Cathy, current CEO (50% ownership). Son, not involved in the firm; has his own business.	Father, Mike, previous CEO (deceased). Mother, Samantha, co-owner (50%); not working in the firm. Two daughters, Norah and Nina, both in their 20s, co-owners (25% + 25%) working in the firm. An external CEO.	Father, Timothy (2 nd gen.), deceased. Two brothers, Harold and Ben (3 rd gen.), both working in the firm. Harold is the current CEO (A shares). Two sisters (3 rd gen.), Mary and Jane, plus their aunt, Sally (who is of the same age), are active board members; Mary's ex-husband previously worked in the firm (B shares). John (4 th gen.), working in the firm; other 4th gen siblings not yet decided.	Father (2 nd gen.; deceased). Mother, family manager. Older son, Sam, successor (deceased). Younger son, Tom, not an owner but working in the firm. Sam's widow, Bertha, current director of the board (owns 100% of the firm with her children). Three children.	Mother Alana (deceased), owner, did not work in the firm. Father (deceased), not an owner but worked in the firm. Daughter, Bridget, current CEO (70% ownership with her children, 80% power). Bridget's husband, currently working in the firm. Bridget's half-sister, owner but not working in the firm (30% ownership).
Important event	Both parents willing to sell the firm because they considered the business too tough of a life for the daughter. Daughter determined to take over.	After the death of the father, the mother and daughters continued the business. An external CEO was hired. The daughters plan to buy their mother out.	Second-generation father divided the shares into A and B categories; decision-making power was passed onto the sons with the A shares. Daughters can be owners and are currently active on the board. The son of the current CEO is working in and being guided into the firm.	Older son took over the failing business, contrary to his or his parents' original plans, and bought others out. After growing the firm and making it a success, he died in an accident. His widow took over management (subsidiaries professionally managed).	The firm is owned by the daughters but managed by their husbands. The current female CEO Bridget manages the business but only to do so after her father's death. After Alana's death, Bridget and her sister started to dispute who would inherit the firm.

Case Analyses

Next, we examine how regulatory, normative and cognitive institutional elements shape the gender structures in these family business cases, identifying how they interact and how they influence the change or continuity of the case firms' gender structures.

Regulative institutional elements

The external regulative environment does not appear to exert a major influence on firms' gender structures, at least not directly. In Finland, regulatory institutional elements, such as business-related legislation and property, do not specifically mention gender, and the requirements for establishing a new business do not differ based on gender of the entrepreneur (World Bank, 2020).

However, regulative institutions may be applied to maintain or reinforce certain gender structures.

The role of inheritance regulations was identified in all five case studies. Inheritance laws in Finland are gender neutral, and sons and daughters are expected to inherit equally. Furthermore, half of every inheritance cannot be regulated with a will but is the 'legal share' of the inheritors. Consequently, both daughters and sons may inherit shares in family businesses, which was apparent in the cases of this study (e.g., Case E). In family business succession, this regulation can be circumvented by dividing the inheritance into the business and other property. In Case C, this process was followed in an earlier succession. Mary, the daughter in Case C, said, 'Our father inherited the firm and Sally [the aunt] inherited other things. But apparently, not fairly. Our aunt left us to understand that it was not fair. But she did not make a fuss because she wanted to accept her father's wish'.

In the same firm's most recent succession, this tradition of gender-divided inheritance continued, but it took a different form. Company law was employed to divide company shares into A and B shares. Accordingly, the regulatory structure within the firm, in terms of ownership of decision

rights, is of interest here. The A shares were imbued with decision-making power and given to the sons, whereas the daughters inherited the B shares, which have the same economic value but do not include decision-making power.

The succession was done between the second and third generations by our father. He divided the shares into A and B categories. It was not discussed at all; we were just told. Apparently, the boys had been involved in the discussions, but we daughters were just told that this is how it goes. (Mary, Daughter, Case C)

Regulative institutional elements within the firm, such as governance structures, also appeared to play an important role. Such structures represent stability, and the division of gender roles in the governance of family businesses tends to persist despite other changes. The clearest example of this was found in Case B. The two daughters, Norah and Nina, continued as ‘assistants’ in the firm upon taking ownership after the death of their father. Together with their mother, the daughters decided to hire an external CEO to take over their father’s previous position. Both the mother and the daughters are extremely satisfied with their choice of CEO. Norah said:

One cannot say that he [the new CEO] has been [the same as] our father, but every time there is a change of house or a bank, he has given his opinion, outside of work ...

In most cases, the inheritance of ownership also leads to a formal position within the firm, at least as a board member. Ownership and board membership influence important firm decisions. In Case C, Mary, the sister of the current CEO, was denied a management position in the family firm and inherited B shares; she and her sister were both provided with board positions in recognition of their ownership shares. Mary has been a very active board member and has sought to influence the development of the firm, amongst voicing other concerns, by promoting the development of family

policies, for example, a policy related to the recruitment of family members, and transparency in the firm's decision-making.

In Case B, the daughters also became board members as a result of their ownership shares. Working with the firm as owners has led them to take on positions as active owners and managers. Norah said, 'Well, I decide on all the big investments with Nina, my sister. After all, it is our firm and, in principle, our money'. Meanwhile, Nina talked about needing to put her foot down with the employees. She explained that she and Norah had to adopt a more managerial outlook, saying,

They are just our employees. In the beginning, we kept the firm for the sake of our employees. Now, our thinking has changed. We are not here for the employees but for our customers.

This example suggests that if given a formal role as an owner resulting from regulatory institutions, time and related learning can change how an individual interprets the situation—that is, there can be changes in the cognitive dimension. Rather than the 'women are incapable' trope and the belief that women's role is to maintain the company and secure jobs for the male employees and the inheritance for the next generation of sons, it becomes possible to write a new script: *We are here for the customers, and we are capable.*

<c> **Normative institutional elements**

We identified normative institutional elements related to the role of women in the family firms and how these roles were sustained or changed during succession. In Case E, the norm of women having no role in management was expressed very clearly by the late father, as recounted by Bridget:

My father said in the 80s that there will never be women in management positions. Or even in sales positions. Because that is inappropriate.

Family business research has frequently acknowledged the role of women as ‘invisible assisting spouses’, although their roles may be very important in the firm (e.g., Danes et al., 2005; Heinonen & Stenholm, 2011; Jimenez, 2009; Kubíček & Machek, 2019; Sentuti et al., 2019). In Case A, the wife, Hannah, began to handle administrative work because there were no employees, thus no one else to do the job. Later, her role expanded into a more strategic one in HR, as well as the implementor of important and difficult decisions, such as closing a factory. She was also needed at home to attend to the household and the couple’s children during her husband’s frequent travels. Hannah acknowledged that Matt made all major decisions and said she felt baffled by how she had allowed this to happen given her independence in the household and other areas of the business.

I had 50% ownership, but it has been hurtful that I have not even been informed of [business decisions]. ... I had to be alert all the time. When I sat in the office next door, I said, ‘Keep the door open’, so that I could hear what agreements he made with people. ... His silence has been [difficult]. ... I have often wondered why I [let it happen] when I normally take care of all the issues in my life. (Hannah, Mother, Case A)

This case illustrates one of the normative institutional elements identified throughout the cross-case analyses as important to gendered structures: the gendered division of work within a firm. Despite equality in ownership shares, the division of work and responsibilities may result in different roles and very different degrees of influence on firm decisions. Cathy, the daughter, said that her mother had been the company’s ‘rock’, explaining:

Employees had problems when my mother stepped back because my mother had always been the rock in the company. She has been quite firm, but [people] trusted [her]. ... My father has never done anything uncomfortable in his life.

Following the normative dimension, there is a clear expectation of the role wives should play in family firms: they are to stay in the back office and do administrative work. Several cases revealed examples of women not being viewed as ‘natural’ CEOs and therefore not being expected to be able to fill the requirements of being in charge. These norms, referring to the perception that women, in general, are not as capable as men, may be shared by the women themselves, as well as family members, employees and other stakeholders. This masculine norm embedded in running and leading a firm may unintentionally direct gendered decision-making in business successions. Hence, the shared script is that women lack the skills and abilities to run a firm. This is particularly apparent when the firm operates in a masculine industry, such as engineering. For example, in Case B, Samantha said:

When [my husband] died, I received a lot of calls from people who wanted to buy the firm.

That women cannot cope was a clear message that we received.

Employees or family members may also find it difficult to accept the new generation in charge, and this lack of acceptance may be gendered. For example, in Case A, the transfer was challenging for Hannah’s sister, who also works in the firm. She even threatened to resign because it was so difficult for her to accept her niece as the new CEO. Previous research suggests that changes in management and a new generation of management may be problematic for employees (Lee et al., 2003). In addition, working with a young female successor may be particularly difficult because it conflicts with both the normative and cognitive dimensions related to the identity of a preferred and capable successor.

Wives often occupy another role that is laden with normative expectations: motherhood. As mothers, women’s main responsibility is expected to be at home, whereas a male entrepreneur’s

main responsibility should be the firm. This suggests that the gendered roles developed in a family are transferred to the family business, reflecting the cognitive habitualisation of gendered roles.

In Case B, Samantha, who does not work in the firm, is intentionally shielded from involvement in the firm by the daughters, and all parties acknowledge this behaviour. Norah said:

We have wanted to keep Mother out. We do not want to stress her, and we do not want stress from her when she misunderstands things.

Indeed, Samantha does not want to be involved in daily decisions. When the employees started calling her and asking her questions after her husband's death, she guided them to contact the CEO or her daughters.

In Case D, the mother had been a real homemaker and in constant service of her late husband (the father and previous CEO). In Case A, Matt, the father, made it clear that he would have preferred that his daughter concentrate on motherhood rather than taking over the firm.

I did not want this for her [Cathy], but she herself wanted to come here. I would not have cared if this [the business] had been closed or there were external owners. ... Her mother came from a rich family, and I had some savings ... I would have wanted her to have children, and her husband is working as a marketing manager in this bank ... In time, he will be a bank manager, so I would have supported one housewife [the daughter] with Hannah.

This clearly shows how strongly gendered norms are embedded in the roles of men and women and how a role in a family system may overrule a possible role in the family business (Leaptrott, 2005). However, working mothers have long been a tradition in Finland and, excluding the few

years when the children are small, women generally do not remain at home. The institution of the housewife has nearly become extinct. Hence, this is an odd comment to make. One explanation may be the generational difference between father and daughter: he made this comment based on his past experiences. Related to the idea that institutional forces do not apply to all organizational members equally, it can be noted that Cathy did not succumb to these normative or cognitive institutions suggesting that being a mother is more appropriate behaviour for a woman than running the family firm.

Finally, we found that the norm of primogeniture, the idea that a family business should go to the oldest son, remains a normative institutional element, although it has been removed as a regulative institutional element. In Case C, there is a long family tradition of sons inheriting the business and daughters inheriting something else. Suitable (male) candidates are guided into the firm without any explicit decision-making involving all family members. Sally, the aunt, said:

It is likely that one of these five sons of [my nephews] will be there ... but so far no one has asked if it's okay that John is trained into such a position.

This may appear to be an advantageous position for the sons, but the downside is that they may not have a choice or may feel as if they are treated unequally because of their position. For example, in Case C, Mary stated that her brother (the current CEO) never had an alternative but to work in the firm. John, the son of the CEO, also expressed frustration regarding his role in the firm, saying:

What I find frustrating is that sometimes things are not said directly, and perhaps I've been given some extra privileges, though I did not seek them myself. I would like to think that I'm one among others.

The implicit selection of John as the next successor reflects the primogeniture norm: the eldest son should continue the firm. This is viewed as the appropriate way to act.

In Case B, there was no older brother to take over; hence, the primogeniture norm could not be followed directly. However, the selection of an external male CEO mirrors the norm of having and needing men to run the firm. In particular, the mother considered having the daughters take over as owners and hiring an external CEO to be an temporary situation. She did not want to sell her late husband's legacy; she wanted to retain and eventually transfer it to her grandsons.

In Case A, the primogeniture norm was not visibly present: the son was not a potential successor. Although the parents did not originally view their daughter as a successor, they finally accepted that she should take over the firm without offering her brother as an alternative. In Case D, the primogeniture norm was broken; rather than the brother of the deceased CEO, who works in the firm but does not own shares, Bertha, the deceased CEO's widow, was viewed as the natural successor. Their sons were not old enough to be considered successors at the time, but all children in the family are to join the board after they turn 20. Hence, the norm of primogeniture is present to varying extents and in various forms suggesting that norms may influence some families and family firms but not others.

Cognitive institutional elements

Among cognitive institutions, we identified the preferred roles of daughters and sons and the perceptions of business life as particularly important institutional elements. People involved in a firm may have different cognitive perceptions of firm roles, and together their views can influence the change of gender structures related to succession. For instance, in many cases, we found that women were not viewed as natural candidates for taking over a firm.

Women themselves may have different cognitive ideas or scripts. For instance, in Case A, it was always clear to Cathy that she would return and take over the firm. In the interview, she explained that she always self-identified as part of the company. This schema was not originally shared by her parents, who instead wanted to sell the family firm to an external party and thereby help their daughter have an ‘easier’ life. As mentioned, Cathy’s father preferred that she be a housewife, ‘not having to work’. This view links to the idea that running a family business is tough, illustrating one of the cognitive institutional elements related to the perception of business life. In Case A, this script related to the unstable regulatory environment in Russia, where the company’s production facilities are located. Matt, the father, said:

Every day, one has to wonder when there will be a decision from the Russian authorities that the operations cannot continue.

Consequently, it was assumed that the daughter would be a housewife, concentrating on being a mother and leading a certain type of life that was not excessively difficult.

In Case C, Harold, the current CEO, talked about finding suitable owners/managers from within the family. It is important to Harold that his children become part of the company’s ownership and management, but there is a caveat:

If I am fully honest, I find it difficult to see my daughter working here.

This thinking reflects both normative and cognitive dimensions, but to different degrees. In accordance with the normative institutions, children should be involved in family businesses, reflecting the values that are at the very core of family firms. However, from a cognitive perspective, daughters are not viewed as having a working position in the firm because they are

potentially lacking in skills or abilities or, alternatively, needing to be protected from the harshness of business life.

In Case E, although the father was reluctant to have any women occupying management positions in the firm, the daughter, Bridget, was sent to work in various parts of the business, likely to coach her into ownership of the firm by providing a good ‘school’ from which to learn the business as well as how to operate in a technical trade dominated by men. Consequently, after her father’s death, when it became necessary for her to step in after a series of unsuccessful external male CEOs, Bridget did not hesitate to take over the firm. Because of her in-house training and experience, she identified herself as capable. As she had worked in the different units, gaining trust and learning how the business is run, she was seen as part of the firm, and no-one considered treating her differently because she was a woman, despite the male dominated industry.

Occasionally, it is not easy for women to view themselves as succession candidates, particularly in masculine industries, as in Case B. Norah stated:

I am not really familiar with [the business]. We have a CEO to take care of management, really ... We are not bosses ... This is not my dream job. We have talked about a café or children’s clothing store.

Hence, the cognitive script of the women related to their own role also contributes to sustaining gender structures when they do not view themselves as candidates for the role of successor and hence do not ‘claim’ the family business. This contrasts with Case A, in which Cathy had ‘always’ identified herself with the firm and saw herself as the successor; these scripts were important for her active take-over of the textile business. She said:

We made a deal with my family that we would not move back here unless my future was in the firm. ... Even if [my father] was still here, I've tried to bring it forward that this is mine, that I decide.

The gendering of business life and organizations (Acker, 2006) was clearly visible in the cases. In Case E, when Bridget needed to take over the management of the firm after firing two external CEOs, the board members disagreed, saying:

The press will get to you if your company is owned by women. If you are a woman and you fire a man, the problem is not with the man but with you; nobody gets along with you.

Hence, the cognitive dimension of women being seen as incapable of running firms is readily accepted by the public and the media if difficulties arise. External male CEOs are deemed capable, and any problems result solely from the female owners 'being difficult'.

Table 2 Examples of institutional arrangements identified as influencing gendered structures

CASE	REGULATIVE INSTITUTIONS	NORMATIVE INSTITUTIONS	COGNITIVE INSTITUTIONS
Case A Textile	<p><i>Inheritance:</i> Succession has not occurred yet, as both parents are still involved in the firm, but the daughter has taken over the majority of the shares.</p> <p><i>Governance:</i> The daughter became the CEO after taking over as majority owner. Although the wife had 50% ownership before succession, she had limited involvement in major decisions. After succession, the daughter became actively involved in major decisions. However, the business with Russia remains very much the father's domain.</p>	<p><i>Division of work:</i> The wife started handling the administrative work as the wife of the CEO and later took responsibility for HR and administrative duties. The daughter took over both the father's and mother's responsibilities when she became CEO (except for the business with Russia, which remains her father's responsibility).</p> <p><i>Role of motherhood:</i> The mother took on major domestic responsibility when the children were small because the husband often travelled for the firm. The father would prefer his daughter to be a housewife and take care of her children.</p> <p><i>Primogeniture:</i> The son is not viewed as an available successor. He started and operates his own firm.</p>	<p><i>Perception of roles:</i> The daughter has always viewed herself as strongly related to the family firm. The aunt working in the firm finds it difficult to view her niece as CEO and has threatened to resign.</p> <p><i>Perceptions of business life:</i> The parents view business life as excessively harsh for their daughter, particularly aspects related to the Russian subsidiary. The parents want to protect their daughter from uncertainty and potential difficulties related to instability in the market and regulations in Russia.</p>
Case B Engineering	<p><i>Inheritance:</i> The wife and daughters inherited the firm according to normal inheritance rules (no sons).</p> <p><i>Governance:</i> The daughters continued assisting in administrative positions after inheriting the firm and hiring an external CEO, taking on board positions after succession. They are gradually acclimating and taking on the role of owners, including being the ones to make the final decision on large investments.</p>	<p><i>Division of work:</i> The wife was never formally involved in the firm. Even after officially taking over the firm, the daughters continued doing administrative work.</p> <p><i>Norms of owner requirements:</i> After the CEO died, external parties enquired about buying the firm because they did not expect a woman to be in charge.</p> <p><i>Role of motherhood:</i> Both daughters have been on maternity leave during their ownership. Because they are 'assistants' and have an external CEO, this is not considered a problem.</p> <p><i>Primogeniture:</i> The mother wants her daughters to take over as owners to ensure that the grandsons can take over the firm when they are old enough.</p>	<p><i>Perception of roles:</i> The daughters do not self-identify as owner-managers, only as owners. Both the wife and the daughters perceive their roles as assistants and supporters to the firm's management.</p> <p><i>Perceptions of business life:</i> The daughters want to shield their mother from the stress related to the firm.</p>
Case C Media	<p><i>Inheritance:</i> Shares were divided into A and B shares (with and without decision-making power, respectively). A-shares were transferred to the</p>	<p><i>Division of work:</i> Only sons work in the firm; their wives and sisters are not involved.</p>	<p><i>Perception of roles:</i> The father finds it difficult to accept the idea of a daughter working in the family firm, whereas he wants his sons to be</p>

	<p>sons, and B-shares were transferred to the daughters.</p> <p><i>Governance:</i> The daughters, sons and an aunt form the board. One daughter is very active on the board, where she has been promoting the development of family policies and transparency in firm decision-making. She wanted to take on a middle manager position in the family firm but was turned down.</p>	<p><i>Norms of owner requirements:</i> CEOs are expected to be of a certain type: tough and having the right skills.</p> <p><i>Role of motherhood:</i> Not discussed.</p> <p><i>Primogeniture:</i> The oldest son is being guided into the business. Their parents perceived being a younger son as more challenging; the younger son is also viewed to be weaker. The oldest son is perceived as the natural successor.</p>	<p>actively involved in management. On the other hand, he wants all his children to be involved as owners.</p> <p><i>Perceptions of business life:</i> Business life is viewed as tough and excessively tough not only for the daughter but also for one of the sons.</p>
Case D Retail	<p><i>Inheritance:</i> The widow inherited the firm after her husband died according to normal inheritance rules. The husband had previously bought out his brother and other relatives from the business.</p> <p><i>Governance:</i> The widow took over the deceased husband's role as CEO and actively uses directors with responsibility for firm branches to run the firm.</p>	<p><i>Division of work:</i> Prior to her husband's death, the widow had been involved in the firm in different projects, but she had not been employed.</p> <p><i>Norms of owner requirements:</i> The employees and directors supported the widow's takeover.</p> <p><i>Role of motherhood:</i> The mother-in-law (the mother of the deceased CEO) was a homemaker who had been in constant service to her husband. She is happy that her son did not view his wife solely as a homemaker but also involved her in business decisions.</p> <p><i>Primogeniture:</i> The oldest son was very young when his father died. The widow, not the brother (employed in the firm), took over as CEO when she inherited the firm.</p>	<p><i>Perception of roles:</i> The widow is accepted as the leader by the family and employees. Her brother-in-law works in the firm as an employee without any ownership shares.</p> <p><i>Perceptions of business life:</i> The widow needed to take and claim the position quickly after her husband's death to circumvent any rumours regarding the firm's future.</p>
Case E Conglomerate	<p><i>Inheritance:</i> Daughters have inherited ownership for several generations because of a lack of sons. The daughter and half-sister inherited the firm. Both are on the board; however, the half-sister participates solely through a representative because of her sister's demands.</p> <p><i>Governance:</i> The tradition of hiring sons-in-law as CEOs was broken when a daughter took over (after her father's death) after trying external CEOs without success.</p>	<p><i>Division of work:</i> The daughter worked in the firm before her father died, but she was not trained as a successor. Her husband is now employed in the firm as part of the management team.</p> <p><i>Norms of owner requirements:</i> The father did not view his daughter as a successor. The board hired an external CEO when he died, and she had to fight with the board to be chair of the board. The daughter was advised to take over as CEO herself after firing two external CEOs, as women owners firing male CEOs could be perceived as a stigma.</p>	<p><i>Perceptions of roles:</i> The father did not view his daughter as a successor.</p> <p><i>Perceptions of business life:</i> The board members were concerned that a female owner could stigmatize the firm, particularly when needing to fire male CEOs.</p>

Cross-case Analysis

Our study illustrates how regulatory, normative and cognitive institutional elements participate in the shaping of gender structures in family firms, particularly in succession processes. External and firm-level institutional arrangements influence gender structures in family businesses through a range of mechanisms. Our study shows how normative and cognitive institutional elements favouring male over female successors and the normative institutional elements related to women as the primary caretakers in families and not suited to harsh business life, particularly in masculine industries, are important in shaping the gender structures in family firms.

Certain regulative, normative and cognitive institutional elements may be *change mechanisms*: factors supporting change in gender structures within family firms (Table 3). The external regulative institutional elements in Finland support gender neutrality and influence how wealth is distributed in inheritance. The regulative elements of gender-neutral inheritance and the fact that ownership leads to regulated roles in firms' governance structures support gender equality. Furthermore, the normative element of the fair and equal treatment of children and the societal norm of gender equality influence gender structures in family firms, moving them gradually towards gender equality. There is a strong tendency to provide equal opportunities for all children in terms of education and inheritance. Cognitive elements related to women identifying with the family business and claiming their position therein appeared to be important for making women visible within family firms and establishing them as major decision-makers and potential successors.

Table 3 *Institutional elements identified as supporting and hampering change in gender structure during family business succession*

	REGULATIVE INSTITUTIONS	NORMATIVE INSTITUTIONS	COGNITIVE INSTITUTIONS
Change mechanisms Supporting change towards gender equality	Gender-equal inheritance rules Ownership leads to formal roles as board members	Norms of equal treatment of children Norms of gender equality	Daughters identifying strongly with the family firm and ‘fighting’ for the right to be considered for succession
Continuity mechanisms Hampering change towards gender equality	Gendered governance structures Gender-neutral inheritance rules may be overruled by certain business arrangements	Gendered division of work: norm of women as most capable in administrative and HR responsibilities and less capable in other business areas Norm that owner-manager requires certain (male) qualities Strong norms of motherhood Gender division of domestic responsibilities Primogeniture as an inheritance tradition within family firms	Perceptions of women as less capable of handling harsh business life and the desire to protect women/daughters from such harshness Daughters not self-identifying as owner-managers Perceptions of women as less qualified as successors

On the other hand, certain regulatory, normative and cognitive institutional elements may constitute *continuity mechanisms*: factors hampering change in gender structures within family firms. We identified regulative elements related to gendered governance structures and the possibility of altering gender-equal inheritance rules via business arrangements as factors hindering change. We observed how regulations can be used to avoid sharing power equally and to ensure that succession occurs according to the will of the family or the incumbent. Hence, the regulative structure of a firm can be applied to maintain certain gender structures. This highlights that the different institutional elements at different levels may contradict each other, or contradictions may be resolved in ways that maintain current gender structures, for example, by having daughters inherit assets other than the business.

These tendencies were particularly apparent when they were supported by normative elements related to the gendered division of work within firms and families, the gendered norms of the requirements for being CEO, strong norms of motherhood and ongoing norms of primogeniture. These norms were identified as counteracting changes in gender structures. Women remain the primary caretakers and ‘emotional leaders’ of families, and the norm of motherhood directs gender-related talk in family businesses. This was also apparent in cases in which the daughters were not mothers but had the potential to become mothers. Moreover, the primogeniture institution remains prevalent in relation to succession; daughters are not coached as successors, regardless of whether they have brothers, as they are not viewed as ‘natural’ candidates for taking over the firm.

Cognitive institutional elements related to perceptions of women as less capable of handling harsh business life and less qualified as business successors also support these counteractions and in some cases were strengthened by women themselves accepting the idea that they were less capable or less interested in taking over the business. One of the most striking findings was that parents generally viewed business life as excessively tough for their daughters. Not

promoting their daughters as successors not only represents favouring sons but also reflects parents' care for and desire to protect their daughters. Hence, institutional elements related to a firm (with regard to who the best successor may be) are combined with and occasionally overruled by the institutional norms related to a family.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that the institutions influencing gender structures in family businesses are not only those related to the firms but are largely those related to the families. This implies that normative and cognitive elements interact: strong perceptions regarding women's familial roles may influence cognitive perceptions of women's roles in family business succession. Therefore, although women are accepted and normatively held responsible for participating in the firm as owners, they still need to 'fight' for their role as potential successors who are capable of running and managing the business.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study provide several contributions to the literature. Our findings on institutional elements influencing gender structures in family businesses contribute to the understanding of why these structures persist through succession processes and over generations. Gender structures inform our socialization and identities, our expectations in social encounters and ideological discourse (e.g., on motherhood; Risman & Davis, 2013). Institutional pressures related to certain gendered expectations have been found to direct women's engagement in entrepreneurship (Thébaud, 2015). From this perspective, our findings indicate that family businesses do not necessarily challenge gendered institutional pressures and social norms (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017). Consequently, our research complements previous research investigating how women (and men) in family firms navigate gendered roles

and processes, as well as their gender identities in succession (Byrne et al., 2021; Hytti et al., 2017).

This study elucidates the relationship between a family business and its environment, particularly regarding how family businesses are influenced by the institutional context (Soleimanof et al., 2018). Our approach relied on the institutional environment and its influence on gender structures in family businesses. Our study focuses on the role of cognitive institutional elements as crucial for how family businesses interpret regulative and, in particular, normative institutional arrangements that determine and reinforce gender structures. Based on our interpretations, it is through the cognitive institutional environment that changes in gender structures are enabled and women are given the agency to claim their position in a firm. Therefore, more in-depth analysis of educational and training programs targeted at future potential successors is needed, as well as consultants with expertise in guiding family business succession processes. It would be interesting to learn if and how these programs and services support changes, for example, in favour of more gender-equal decision-making in family business successions.

The normative institutional element operating in the family context, as well as that of the firm, emphasizes issues such as motherhood that are more resistant to change. Accordingly, our findings imply that such external normative pressures are taken for granted (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017). Hence, norms influence the succession process not only directly at the firm level but also through the family. This adds to the family business literature claiming that family aspects strongly influence the decisions of family firms (e.g., Danes et al., 2005; James et al., 2012; Litz et al., 2012); this issue should receive greater focus in family business research. Future research should pay more attention to family policies, for example, the availability (or lack) of affordable childcare. Recently in the Nordic countries, fathers have

been encouraged to take paternal leave. It would be interesting to learn how such family policies influence family business management and succession.

Daughters' invisibility as successors and their lack of professional legitimacy as a result of firm-level institutional forces (Leaptrott, 2005; Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017) is interesting, as Finland is considered one of the most gender-equal countries in the world. The women's share of Finnish entrepreneurs is average among developed economies (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2022). Future research is needed to investigate the role of institutions shaping gender structures in family firms in other contexts and economies, particularly those in more patriarchal cultures and in economies where women's activity in public spheres is restricted.

Our findings on how different institutional elements are adapted within a family business also reflect how institutional logics guide family businesses' governance, management and legitimacy (Miller et al., 2017). Such internal institutional adaptations shape family businesses' gender structures during succession. The findings indicate that internal gender structures tend to persist even if the institutional environment is gender-equal. This implies that family businesses' family logic is gendered and that family logic can filter the institutional elements' influence within family businesses. Hence, future research should address the interplay between family logic and gender structures in family businesses. Moreover, future research could shed light on the interactions between family businesses' gendered structures, family logic and surrounding institutional elements (Miller et al., 2017). If and when family businesses seek to influence their institutional environments (Reay et al., 2015), future research should focus on how the role of gender unfolds in this interaction.

This study fully supports the identified need to include multiple perspectives; this was achieved by including more than one informant from each firm (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Dyer, 2003).

By investigating the same events through the accounts of different individuals, it was possible to gain a multifaceted perspective on the institutional elements influencing gender structures in these firms. For example, what the daughters interpreted as unfair treatment was seen by the parents as a protective act. Finally, the way the (sudden) death of a CEO creates room for women to enter the management of companies—both today and in 19th century Finland (Heinonen & Vainio-Korhonen, 2018)—suggests that family business research could benefit from interdisciplinary work with historians of business to better understand historical dependencies in family firms (Colli, 2011; Hjorth & Dawson, 2016).

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