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## The Hidden Work of Women in Small Family Firms in Southern Spain

### *Abstract*

Women have historically played an important hidden role in family firms, and a great deal of research is now shedding light on this role. In spite of the more formal nature of female work at the present day, still a considerable volume of women's contributions in family firms is unregistered and unpaid, even in developed regions. A questionnaire was administered in 2011 to 396 women working in small and medium-sized family firms located in Andalucía, a Southern European region, characterized by familialism and a large informal economy. Our results confirm the persistence of subordinate forms of unpaid family collaboration due to the neutrality assigned to female contributions under the traditional gendered division of work. But also this study shows how some of the women voluntarily embrace subordinate roles as a temporary way to gain professional experience, useful for their future work inside or outside the family firm.

**Keywords:** Gender; Women in Business; Unpaid Work; SMEs; Family Firms

### **Introduction**

Literature on family firms started to include gender issues and the participation of women in family firms only in the recent decades, driven by a general increase in the registered labor

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force participation of women, the increasing visibility of their work as self-employed or employed workers, the growing number of women entrepreneurs, the rise of individualism, the professionalization of family businesses and the recognition of gender as an important analytical variable (Fitzgerald et al. 2001; Barrett and Moores 2009; Martínez 2009; Wang 2010; Benavides, Guzmán and Quintana 2011; Bjursell and Bäckvall 2011; Lerner and Malach-Pines 2011; Heinonen and Stenholm 2011; Blondel 2013; Hamilton 2013). However, the vast majority of analyses concentrates on the role of women in processes of inheritance (Dumas 1992; Vera and Dean 2005; Haberman and Danes 2007; Overbeke, Bilimoria and Perelli 2013), and on interpersonal family dynamics, emphasizing particularly three spheres associated with the reproductive role of women: the creation of the next generation, the education of the future business leaders, and the transmission of values (Ceja 2008; Dugan et al. 2011). Therefore, in spite of this emergent literature on women in family firms, there is a wide gap for incorporating gender as a central analytical variable in family business research, though there are some recent attempts to theorize business enterprise from a gendered perspective (Marlow and McAdam 2013; Al-Dajani et al. 2014; Barrett 2014).

We agree with recent research that shows that the number of women performing management and leadership functions in businesses is higher than recorded by the statistics at the present day as it was in the past (Fitzgerald and Muske 2002; Sharma 2004; Vadnjaj and Zupan 2009; Cesaroni and Sentuti 2014). In fact, whereas early studies about the empiric evidence of female participation in family firms highlighted the success stories (Frishkoff and Brown 1993), more recent approaches, by expanding documentary sources to include legal archives, private documents, and interviews, are revealing the existence of major discrimination. We argue that the important participation of women in family firms is still undervalued, since it is

a participation that does not occur necessarily as owners or managers, but still very often as collaborators, unpaid workers, and informal leaders without proper recognition (Cole 1997; Dumas 1992, 1998; Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Brandt 1990; Hollander and Bukowitz 1990; Salganicoff 1990; Rowe and Hong 2000; Cappuyns 2007; Barrett and Moores 2009). As Blondel (2013) states, women take part in the family firm in different ways: they support their husbands, contribute to vital functions in the business, and bring in financial capital, directly or indirectly; they contribute to the development of the social and cultural capital; and, they develop the human and emotional capital. Therefore, she calls them the ‘hidden giants’.

Hence, women have not only historically played an important ‘hidden’ role in family firms, a role that is being highlighted by numerous studies within the fields of economic and business history,<sup>1</sup> but still a considerable volume of women’s work and contributions to family firms remains invisible, even in present times in advanced countries. As Martini and Bellavitis state “the issue of unpaid work in family businesses is regularly raised, but much ground remains to be covered on these productive units, which have dominated both the early modern era and a large part of the modern and contemporary era in southern and northern Europe” (2014, 273).

Our analysis contributes to this recent research that shows how women are still under-recorded as business people in the formal statistics of companies, and are classified into reproductive or secondary and informal roles. The persistent strength of traditional roles in familialistic societies, such as the southern European ones, still keeps women’s contributions in small family firms heavily underestimated. Therefore, we aim to investigate the

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Horrell and Humphries (1995), Sarasúa and Gálvez (2003), Gálvez and Fernández-Pérez (2007), Solà (2008), or the recent *Off the Record symposia* published in two issues of *Feminist Economics* (2012, 2013) and the special issue of *History of the Family* edited by Martini and Bellavitis (2014).

unregistered and many times unpaid role of women – mothers, wives and daughters – in small family businesses and to discuss the nature of their work. Based on data from 396 female family workers, this paper identifies typical women's profiles according to the amount and informality of their work in the family businesses. Our research has been structured around four main questions: What is the nature of women's work in family firms? Under what conditions do women work in a hidden role in small family firms? What are the usual working conditions of women in small and medium sized family firms? What are the consequences of women working in a hidden role on individual level?

### **Analyzing women's work in family firms: an awkward fit in conventional dichotomies**

Feminist economists have shown that unpaid work is located at home but also somewhere between the household and the market, challenging any artificial separation between the two. Family firms constitute a middle ground between the market and the home, between paid and unpaid work, highlighting the limits of using such dichotomies when analyzing the work carried out by women therein (Philipps 2008), since these types of companies become a kind of 'black box' in which conventional concepts and instruments of measurement are limited. Institutional, economic, and social forces affect families and businesses alike, forging gender identities, roles, and relations.

From this perspective, Cramton (1993) and Hamilton (2006) criticize the fact that studies into family firms that apply the theoretical approaches taken from the literature about entrepreneurship emphasize individualism and economic rationality, without contributing a framework to understand collaborative practices. As argued by Fernández-Pérez (2003) and by Fernández-Pérez and Hamilton (2007), gender studies of family firms must be tackled from an evolutionist perspective, acknowledging that gender relations and roles are changing,

inserting family firms into their social and business context, and incorporating the variable of time into the study of continuous organizational and productive changes, and in the relationships that exist within these businesses. Forms of leadership in the context of a family firm are multiple; they change constantly by means of ongoing bargaining and, therefore, family firms should be analyzed as fundamentally collaborative spheres that integrate different relationships and practices between family and business. In fact, the area of unpaid work in family business lies at the intersection of the history of the family and the history of labor (Martini and Bellavitis 2014).

Therefore, we argue that the ‘bargaining framework’ for the household set out by Sen (1983, 1990) and refined by authors such as Katz (1997) and Agarwal (1997), is a useful model to study the role of women in family firms. Sen considers the household as an area of ‘cooperative conflicts’, understanding that within households there are gender and generational (age) inequalities that lie at the foundation of their functioning. Sen’s framework includes “three factors relevant to the bargaining process: a) the ‘breakdown well-being response’ (what a person has to fall back on, were s/he to physically survive outside the family), b) ‘self-interest response’ (one’s perceptions of her/his self-interest), and c) ‘perceived contribution response’ (one’s perception of her/his contribution to the family)” (op. cit. Benería, Berik and Floro 2016: 74). Perceptions about the contributions made by each member of the family, about their needs and capacities, and external perceptions are shaped by social norms. These norms affect not only the differential bargaining power of women and men within the family, but also outside of it, and they even determine what can be negotiated (Agarwal 1997).

Katz (1997) also made important contributions in this respect about the treatment of members of the family as agents in terms of their capacity to participate in the bargaining process (their voice) and their capacity to perceive and have access to viable alternatives for a cooperative solution (emergence). This treatment cannot be symmetrical since, with regard to gender, the voice and emergence of women and men is very different, owing to a variety of factors that range from the valuation of their earnings according to social norms and cultural practices, to gender-differentiated social sanctions (Benería 2008).

Family firms, just like households, can be analyzed as human groupings in which the members of a family cooperate to a certain extent, but in which the existence of conflicts is also recognized when it comes to establishing who makes decisions and how. Family firms function through cooperative conflicts, with models of resources distribution and social norms in general acting against women, detracting from their bargaining power, decreasing their capacity to obtain, control, and decide over resources. Family firms are organizations in which gender roles are dually reproduced by bringing into play not only the gendered division of labor, but also the influence of normativity around the traditional nuclear family and the roles associated with women therein. As Sen recognized, in family owned businesses or family farms, women's contributions to the family enterprise might less be visible both to themselves and others around them compared to a setting of wage labor (op. cit. Benería, Berik and Floro 2016: 74). Women's unregistered work in family firms is not due to a neutral or natural process, but rather is motivated by the role imposed upon them historically, by their socialization as altruistic caregivers for the home and the people who live there, and by the historic sense of guilt inflicted on those who did not abide by this rule.

### Unveiling women's work in family firms

Women have always shared the responsibilities in family firms. This is very evident in rural areas and in family production units, now and in the past. In urban economies, their participation has always been more important in the services sector<sup>2</sup> than in industry, where women were more visible in family firms from preindustrial ages, although capitalism did not expel women, but rather kept them on, adapting their work according to the life cycle of their families, taking up and leaving jobs as their children were born or grew up, or as their husbands died and they remarried (Wiesner-Hanks 2001; Humphries 2010).

Women have historically played a crucial role in founding, managing, and expanding family firms, as the research is revealing, often within the fields of economic and business history, either visibly or chiefly hidden (Mulholland 1996; Dumas 1998; Colli, Fernández-Pérez and Rose 2003; Vera and Dean 2005; Hamilton 2006, Colli and Rose 2008). But although women have been directly involved in daily management, historically they have not received any recognition for their contribution, in the form of a formal position in the business or a salary (Hollander and Bukowitz 1990; Cole 1997; Nelton 1998). This systematic under-evaluation of women's work was rooted in a cultural and ideological model based on the idea that their work – paid as well as unpaid – was not valuable. Work was not part of the social identity of women; they were only expected to act according to their 'natural' role of caregivers. In this sense, female work was a 'dutiful contribution' required in order to earn a livelihood and ensure the maintenance of the family (Zucca 2013, 2014). The historical and hierarchical division of work and spaces imposed a gendered construction of identities.

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<sup>2</sup> See the special issue about women's work in services companies of the *Business History Review* edited by Kwolek-Fowland and Walsh (2007).

The different positions of men and women in the economy and in society, with differentiated roles and responsibilities according to their gender, explain the invisibilization of women in family firms (Rowe and Hong 2000) and, in general, why most female work was largely unrecorded in European societies (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012). The study about family firms in Spain, Italy, and Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries conducted by Colli, Fernández-Pérez and Rose (2003) shows, for example, that women contributed with vital capital resources and access to trusted business and family networks. In 19<sup>th</sup> Century Great Britain, for example, women were under the protection of their spouses and could not inherit until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, so that many were de facto partners in a business, but lacked the legal right to the business capital or other properties. This pattern was also fairly common in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, business interests and the family were fully interlinked and the phantom tasks performed by women extended even to finance.

As indicated also by Gálvez and Fernández-Pérez (2007), the majority of women's work in family firms has been carried out without a contract, salary, or social benefits, and if women have received some kind of remuneration, it has always been lower than their male colleagues, although this gap cannot be attributed to differences in productivity. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, women frequently provided services and helped out family firms in agriculture, manufacturing and commerce without a contract, wages, or public recognition. Women appear in some historical records as auxiliary service providers who served customers and workers, assisted in public relations, and helped to manage family firms. Many managed the businesses for years, between one male relative and another, but in spite of their numerous responsibilities, women never appeared as owners or employees. In large mercantile cities, women managed the business while the men were away travelling (Fernández-Pérez 1996).

Although their help was vital for family firms, particularly during crucial moments of transition, their participation depended entirely on the wishes of their male relatives.

All of these contributions by women to family firms have remained in the shadows for several reasons. First, because in the division of labor between the business and family subsystems, women are usually situated within the family system (Frishkoff and Brown 1993) or they are assigned informal support functions as assistants, advisers, or mediators between the members of the family (Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt 1990) or even, a role of emotional leadership (Lyman 1988; Salganicoff 1990). Second, because the legal and cultural restrictions that existed in all countries blocking the incorporation of women into the labor market in general and particularly into the management and ownership of business, until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, have impeded the ‘formal recognition’ and ‘official recording’ of the role of women in family firms, even in favor of their husbands in the event that women inherited the family firm (Gálvez and Fernández-Pérez 2007; Fernández-Pérez and Hamilton 2007). Hence, information about the work of women and their role in the business sphere is not only diffuse but buried, and even intentionally distorted (Wiesner-Hanks 2001).

This unrecording of women’s work in family firms is not just a feature of the past. Despite the gender gap in the business sphere has been considerably reduced in recent years, the number of women performing management and leadership functions in businesses is still higher than recorded by the official statistics. OECD data show that the proportion of businesses managed by women is stuck at around 30% of the total in the majority of countries, and in 2010, three out of every employer were men, and there were 1.5 times more self-employed men than women. In Spain, male employers double female employers, and there are 1.59 self-employed men working as own-account for every women (OECD 2012, 2013). However, we know that

these official figures continue to underestimate women's contribution to family firms, even more in regions, like the Mediterranean, with a large informal economy and familialistic welfare states.

### Context and Methodology

The geographical area selected for the study of women's unregistered work in family firms is Andalusia, a region in the South of Spain with 8.39 million inhabitants, and a GDP per capita of 70% of the EU-28 average, according to Eurostat data for 2013. Main economic sectors in Andalusia, as in many Southern European regions, are tourism (13% of the GDP), agriculture (5.2% of the GDP) and agrifood (22% of industrial output). In this region, as well as in the world economy, small family firms play a fundamental role. In Europe at least 80 % of firms are family-owned and family-controlled (Poza and Daugherty, 2013). In Spain, family enterprises account for 90% of all firms, contributing to 60% of GDP (70% in Andalusia), and providing employment to 75% of employees in the private sector, according to data from the Spanish Institute of Family Firms. Also, as it is usual in Mediterranean countries, gender inequalities in the labor market are larger than in the North of Europe. Female labor force participation rate is still at 52% compared to 66% of males in 2015 and female employment is 43%, 12 percentage points lower than male employment rate.

These basic traits are clearly represented in the results of this study, although the aim is to go deeper, from a gender perspective, into what is happening inside family firms with female workers. In Spain, all workers in a family firm who are relatives of the business owner up to the second-degree must register under the social security especial regime as entrepreneurs or business managers.<sup>3</sup> However, this registration process is not always followed, and in small

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<sup>3</sup> In Spain, Régimen Especial de Trabajadores Autónomos.

businesses there is still a large amount of unreported work which is carried out mostly by women in the family. We want to analyze what factors determine the extent to which women work officially or unofficially in small family firms. Are these factors individual, family or business-related? What is the nature of women's hidden work in small and medium sized family firms? And what are the consequences for these women?

To this end, we administered a questionnaire to women who work in family SMEs throughout Andalusia. The questionnaire allowed the gathering of data related to characteristics of both family firms and women, as well as to the nature of their work, the frequency and time devoted to work and the type of tasks performed. Informal workers were also asked about the reasons for their unregistered work, the type of compensations received, as well as their perceptions about their working conditions.

Since our population comprehends women who are working in family firms without being registered, and thus that are inherently difficult to quantify and where population databases do not exist, we accessed the respondents through a gatekeeper, in the form of a women's employment program (UNEM in Spanish). This program has 110 Women's Employment Units that offer professional guidance services for women in urban and rural areas of the Andalusian region. It was created in 2007 and it is managed by the Andalusian Women's Institute in collaboration with local governments. We had a meeting with UNEM staff in order to explain the women we wanted to approach, women working officially or unofficially in family firms, and the questionnaire. UNEM staff was essential to approach the target population as they have a deep knowledge of women in their territory, being able to find the sample of women with the characteristics we needed, and to administer the questionnaire

directly through a face-to-face method. Information was gathered during three months of 2011, with Spain already in recession as a result of the outbreak of the eurozone crisis.

Our final sample consists of 396 women working in small family firms. We divide them in three groups: (i) those who are registered in the social security regime as business owners or managers -77 women, who account for 19% in our sample-; and those who are not officially employed but work in the family firm, either (ii) in a regular basis and full-time -184 or 46%- or (iii) only occasionally and part-time -135 or 34% of our sample. The classification of women as regular or occasional workers was carried out once information was collected, based on data about the frequency of their work in the company.

### **Main findings**

The first aspect evidenced by this research is the presence of a significant amount of unreported labor that, although often considered sporadic, reaches similar volumes to that of formal work. We were able to find a considerable amount of unregistered family workers without much effort. The majority of these women without a contract work in the family firm on a daily basis, 60% of women who work informally are in the business indefinitely, and dedicate 30 hours on average a week to the business. ‘Occasional informal workers’ state that they go only several times a week and work on average 17 hours a week (see Table 2).

Secondly, in order to distinguish which factors -individual, family or business- may determine if women work under a hidden role, we look for different profiles of female family workers according to the degree of informality or formality of their work. Most of these women work in micro-enterprises, but family workers with a contract are in slightly larger firms. Looking at the type of activity, despite most firms are in retail, accommodation and food activities and personal services, many informal workers are also in agriculture firms. The most common

tasks carried out by all women are customer service related and customer and supplier relationship management, though many women without a contract declare to devote a considerable amount of time to cleaning activities.

The majority of the respondents are women aged 30 to 49 years of age, with secondary education, married, and living with their partner –who is the business owner -. However, an important part of the occasional workers are young women studying at the university or with a university degree that temporarily work in their parents' family firm to gain experience or because they cannot find a job outside the family firm (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Relationship with the family business owner

	<b>Registered worker (%)</b>	<b>Regular informal worker (%)</b>	<b>Occasional informal worker (%)</b>
Partner	42.9	48.9	35.6
Parents	20.8	16.9	29.7
Children	13.0	13.5	7.4
Siblings	7.8	8.2	11.9
Others	9.1	9.8	14.8
N/A	6.5	2.7	0.7
Total	100	100	100

*Source:* Own elaboration.

As there were just slight differences among the female family workers with and without a contract, women were also asked directly about their main reason for working in the business (Table 2). The majority of them state that they work to help their family, both women with a contract and without, although 38% of the women working formally declared that they have studied to run the family business, in contrast to an important subset of women working informally who state that they are just gaining professional experience or they cannot find another job.

When asked for the significance of the work they do, it is above all a means to serve the welfare of the family. This was the motivation given by 73% of regular informal workers, 77% of occasional collaborators, and 57% of registered workers. This emphasizes the idea of blurred boundaries between family and business, and the reproduction of gendered stereotypes in this interaction, since these informal female workers are also aware that their situation of informality has negative consequences for them, but they work in the firm because helping their family is a priority for them.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of female work in family firms

	<b>Registered worker</b>	<b>Regular informal worker</b>	<b>Occasional informal worker</b>
Average weekly hours of work	39	30	17.2
Reasons for working in firm	60% helping family 38% studied for it	64% helping family 15% getting work experience 15% cannot find a job	56% helping family 16% getting work experience 13% cannot find a job
Significance of work	57% family wellbeing 52% earning a living	73% family wellbeing 27% earning a living	77% family wellbeing 20% earning a living
Remuneration	45% Fixed payment 30% Non-fixed payment	48% None 23.4% Non-fixed payment	51% None 27% Non-fixed payment

*Source:* Own elaboration.

According to the women interviewed, a main reason for the informality of their situation is cash flow problems that prevent the family business from covering the cost of employing them: 52% of regular workers and 29% of occasional workers. Thus, quite a few family firms replace salaried work with informal family work, reducing labor costs. Family informal work has historically coexisted with other forms of regulated labor, but is usually more significant at times of crisis, such as in this case study, in which family firms and households turn to the buffer and flexibility of family labor, especially that of women.

Finally, as for the type of compensation they receive for their work, half of informal workers do not receive any type of compensation, and if they do it tends to be little and not fixed. The majority receives less than €500 per month (34% of regular and 31% of occasional workers) and between € 500 and € 1000 (47% and 27%, respectively).

### **Concluding remarks**

This article presents original research about the still substantial amount of unreported work carried out by women in family firms. Our study of 396 women working in small and medium-sized family firms in southern Europe shows, in the first place, that the unregistered and many times unpaid work of women in family businesses is a key issue in the gender order of our economies, not only in developing economies but also in developed ones, such as the southern European regions, which compared to other welfare regimes (Karamessini 2008; Moreno 2010) are still characterized by a larger informal economy due to lack of regular employment, and a higher level of familialism which gives access to other channels of income-provisioning opportunities (Narotzky 2013).

The second salient finding is that the informal or formal nature of women's work in family firms cannot be explained by the socio-demographic characteristics of the workforce, or by the type of business activity, but rather by a production structure where the predominant vision of family work, especially women's work, as a supplementary flexible contribution still pervades. Hence, these findings corroborate the idea that the separate spaces between family and business must be analyzed as permeable spaces in which negotiations are reproduced based on cooperative conflict on the basis of gendered identities that assign differentiated roles to women and men, as examined in the theoretical section of this paper. Many times the role of women in family firms continues to be invisible or underestimated because of the

neutrality assigned to their contributions in the family sphere. The prevailing traditional cultural model assigns different roles to men and women and characterizes female work as less valuable, and thus as irregular and informal. The still dominant view of women's work as a supplementary flexible contribution, almost always available for the wellbeing of the family, explains the undeclared nature of women's work in family firms in many cases. Indeed, we asked interviewees if other family members, male and female, were working in the firm formally or informally, and the number of women working informally without contract is always higher than the number of men. Men usually work at the family firm with a contract while more women work irregularly than with a formal contract.

In more than one third of the cases, family firms resort to unregistered female work as a mechanism for cutting costs, replacing salaried work with informal family work. This mechanism can be particularly important during recessionary periods or in the context of neoliberal policies promoting competitiveness through labor cost-cutting strategies (Addabbo, Rodríguez-Modroño and Gálvez 2015; Gálvez and Rodríguez-Modroño 2013, 2015). These strategies that promote the embeddedness of production relations in the social fabric of the family may generate deep tensions. As Narotzky warns: "the objectification of affective relations, their embodiment and materialization in production relations appears as a loss of reality of the person and a loss of these affective relations themselves." (2004, 75).

However, not all women's experiences in family firms are the same. There are also some informal workers that do not want to have a formal contract in the family firm. Almost one third of informal workers say they work temporarily in the family firm because they cannot find another job or because they are interested in acquiring experience. These results support Dumas' studies (1992, 1998), who also found that many women do not plan a career in the

family business and do not aspire to ownership but come into the business to help the family in a time of crisis or because other options are less attractive. In her studies, these women see their participation in the family firm as being only temporary. Indeed, many of the occasional informal workers interviewed in our study say that their work in the family firm is something they do occasionally while they are studying, looking for another job or gaining experience before taking over the family firm permanently; or because they have a job in another company. Thus, the marginal role of women in family firms is not always the result of stereotyping and gender discrimination: women are not always forced to operate in a secondary position (Barrett and Moores 2009). As in Zucca's (2014) analysis of women in eighteenth-century Turin or Cesaroni and Sentuti's (2014) study of women in contemporary Italian family businesses, many times they embrace informal roles just for a limited period of their life or precisely to limit their commitment and responsibility in the family business, in order to have more freedom and more time to focus on other activities or to create their own enterprises.

These findings support the idea that gender studies of family firms must be tackled from an evolutionist perspective, acknowledging that gender relations and roles change, and women can be working informally in family firms just for a period of time, before being formally employed in the family firm or outside. Therefore, a step further in our analysis should incorporate time into the study of these family businesses and the continuous changes in the roles of the family members.

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