



ARTICLE

Received 5 Jul 2016 | Accepted 3 Nov 2016 | Published 6 Dec 2016

DOI: 10.1057/palcomms.2016.88

OPEN

# Are family ties an opportunity or an obstacle for women entrepreneurs? Empirical evidence from Italy

Francesca Maria Cesaroni<sup>1</sup> and Paola Paoloni<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT** Micro-enterprises are important drivers of economic growth and women entrepreneurs are key developers of these businesses. It is therefore important to understand factors that affect their existence and their success or failure. In this study, our aim is to describe some typical women—family relationship profiles, characterized by families playing a central role in influencing the choices, behaviours and activities of women entrepreneurs, in positive and negative ways. We address the research question by adopting a qualitative approach based on multiple case studies—an approach that is particularly well suited to assessing people’s experiences in depth. Our data collection is based on direct interviews with Italian women entrepreneurs through a semi-structured questionnaire, guided by a checklist. This analysis helps us to better focus on one of the key issues facing women entrepreneurs—namely, balancing family life with their work and professional aspirations. Clearly, it is important to know and understand the role of the family in women’s entrepreneurial experiences to interpret the reasons why women-owned businesses succeed or fail, as family ties will inevitably have an impact on their performance. The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates the existence of a strong bond between female entrepreneurs and their families. We conclude that female entrepreneurial experiences—that is, women’s individual choices to become entrepreneurs and the characteristics of their businesses—cannot be truly understood if attention is not additionally paid to the “family” dimension. This article is published as part of a collection on the role of women in management and the workplace.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Economics, Society, Politics, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Via Saffi, Urbino, Italy <sup>2</sup> Department of UNISU, Niccolò Cusano University, Via Don Gnocchi, 3, Rome, Italy Correspondence: (e-mail: francesca.cesaroni@uniurb.it)

## Introduction

From early research on female entrepreneurship the family issue has played a central role (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003; Sieger *et al.*, 2009; Sciascia *et al.*, 2012). In even earlier research, attention was paid to the family's role in pushing women towards entrepreneurship (Hughes, 2003). In fact, women's decisions to become entrepreneurs have been interpreted as a necessity and a duty, rather than the result of women's free choice and personal aspirations. Other research shows that families may play a central role in women's entrepreneurial experiences, not only as a source of restraint, obligations and duties, but also as a source of resources and support (Ram and Holliday, 1993; Dyer and Handler, 1994; Dumas, 1998; McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003; Zamberi Ahmad, 2011).

In light of this previous work, it is important to focus on the family's role and identify any possible ways in which the family can be involved in female entrepreneurial experiences. With this aim, we present a typology describing a variety of family profiles. These profiles are outlined and draw on interviews with a number of Italian women entrepreneurs. Italy was chosen as the analysis context because, among OECD countries, it presents a very traditional view of women, as recently shown by Alesina and Giuliano (2010). These authors point out that, in cultures where family ties are strong (such as in Italy), family is often based on a very traditional division of roles, with men described as the breadwinners and women running the household. These cultural traits are especially marked in central and southern Italy, where analysed women-owned businesses are located.

## Female entrepreneurs and family

In studies on entrepreneurship, it is widely recognized that birth families play a central role in influencing an individual's career choices. Some authors have highlighted that families can influence the career choices of their family members. Schröder *et al.* (2011) empirically demonstrated the impact of individual and socialization influences on an offspring's succession intentions (Schröder *et al.*, 2011). Zellweger *et al.* (2011) suggested that students with a family business background are pessimistic about being in control in an entrepreneurial career, but optimistic about their efficacy to pursue an entrepreneurial career.

Several studies confirm that those who belong to a business family very often follow the same path. This effect is even greater in successful family businesses (Cooper and Dunkelberg, 1981; Shapero and Sokol, 1982; Hill and Welsh, 1986; Duchesneau and Gartner, 1990), since the members of the family absorb the business's principles, values and behaviours (Brockhaus and Horwitz, 1986; Scherer *et al.*, 1990). Business families also transmit information, knowledge and competencies to their members. Direct and repetitive contact with people involved in business activities favours a learning process, which encourages other family members to choose an entrepreneurial career (Krueger, 1993). Some research has shown that a family's influence on family members' career choices is conditioned by gender and occurs less frequently for female family members. For women, in particular daughters, the family effect on their career choice is often reduced by other social and cultural conditions, persuading them to prioritize other paths, primarily concerning the roles of wives and mothers (Matthews and Moser, 1996). In family businesses, for example, sons are often still preferred as successors (Dumas, 1992; Curimbaba, 2002; García-Álvarez *et al.*, 2002; Vera and Dean, 2005; Haberman and Danes, 2007).

Only rarely do daughters voluntarily decide not to be involved in the family business (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2015). More frequently, daughters are obliged to give up the possibility of joining the family business because they are convinced that

having children and other family commitments are obstacles, which take time away from the business (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014). The marriage family can act as an inhibitor when it hampers women's entrepreneurial career. This effect clearly emerges in early studies on female entrepreneurship (Goffee and Scase, 1985). In their typology, family acts as a source of responsibility in the "domestic" profile, referring to women whose identity is centred on the roles of wife and mother. These roles create a number of duties and commitments and induce women to give secondary importance to their career. A family's role is also clearly visible in the "conventional" profile of women entrepreneurs, even if in this profile family's role is less important. Conventional women in fact show more commitment to their roles in the business, but they also maintain a strong attachment to traditional gender roles and are not ready to sacrifice their family for their work. They often decide to become entrepreneurs as a means to contribute to the family income rather than to satisfy any personal ambition.

Family also plays a central role in some women entrepreneur profiles outlined by Carter and Cannon (1988). This typology highlights how women enter and remain in entrepreneurship. In particular, the family role is important for the so-called "returners", those who return to work after a maternity leave. For them, business represents an opportunity to have an income and to balance work and family. Entrepreneurship flexibility is an important factor for the "high achievers", who are strongly career-oriented but don't want to take time away from their family. In the "traditionalists" profile, family plays a completely different role. They come from business families and their entrepreneurial career is the result of the business atmosphere in which they lived at home with their family.

With regard to women, the conditioning effect exercised by the birth family is often accompanied by the new family, resulting from marriage. The role of the latter is clearly shown by analyses focused on reasons why a woman decides to become an entrepreneur (Scott, 1986; Moore and Buttner, 1997; Caputo and Dolinsky, 1998; Hughes, 2003).

Many studies show that, especially if they have young children, women are forced to deal with work-life balance problems. The latter are easier to manage with self-employment rather than as a dependent—characterized by more rigid schedules and lower flexibility (OECD, 2004; Wellington, 2006; Ronsen, 2012). At the same time, several studies highlight the importance of family ties (Paoloni, 2011; Paoloni and Demartini, 2012; Paoloni and Dumay, 2015) in women's entrepreneurial experience. Some studies also focus on the central role of family in financing women-owned businesses. Indeed various studies show that women entrepreneurs start their firms with a lower level of funding than their male counterparts; they are less likely to raise capital from external sources even in the following phases of their business life cycle; they are more likely than men to rely on personal loans, from family and friends, and use lower ratios of debt finance (Constantinidis *et al.*, 2006; Carter *et al.*, 2007; Coleman and Robb, 2009; Fairlie and Robb, 2009; Cesaroni, 2010; Alesina *et al.*, 2013; Cesaroni *et al.*, 2013).

According to Cromie and Hayes (1988), an event as important as having children marks the difference between different female profiles and affects objectives that women attribute to their work. These authors distinguish between innovators—women without children who perceive their entrepreneurial experience as a means of self fulfilment and autonomy—and other women entrepreneurs, like the dualists—who above all desire to balance work and family. For the "returners", who return to work, this means regaining autonomy.

The family's central role in female entrepreneurial experiences is also clearly evident from studies that focus on the reasons

women give about becoming entrepreneurs (Scott, 1986; Moore and Buttner, 1997; Caputo and Dolinsky, 1998; Hughes, 2003). Two are identified:

- necessity-driven reasons that push women to become entrepreneurs: starting a business is a necessity, because there are no other job opportunities or because they have some family or personal restraints;
- opportunity-driven reasons that pull women towards entrepreneurship: starting a business is an opportunity, allowing women to achieve their objectives and satisfy their ambitions.

According to Bruni *et al.* (2000: 159), “family is the intervening variable between gender and entrepreneurship”. This is why in women’s experiences, family and work are often closely linked (Caputo and Dolinsky, 1998). Family also influences how women manage their businesses. According to the “integrated perspective” (Brush, 1992), women entrepreneurs are able to integrate family, community and business. Women don’t view their business as a separate unit in their life, but as an “interconnected system of relationships”. This means that when a woman becomes an entrepreneur, she doesn’t stop being a mother, a wife or a daughter. These roles will continue to deeply influence her entrepreneurial experience. They can facilitate her work but can also hinder it.

This is why it is important to focus on the family’s role in female entrepreneurship, to identify and describe different situations involving women entrepreneurs in real life.

Precisely for this reason it is important to focus on the role of the family in women’s entrepreneurial experiences, also to identify and describe the many facets that the relationship between women entrepreneurs and family can actually present.

Therefore, we aim to analyse the role of the birth or marriage family in women’s entrepreneurial experiences, to understand how they positively or negatively influences women’s experiences. The final purpose of this article is to describe some typical female entrepreneurship-family relationship profiles, characterized by families playing a central role in women entrepreneurs’ experiences.

**Methodology**

To answer our research question we adopt a qualitative research approach based on case studies (Yin, 2009). This approach is particularly suited to observe the meaning of people’s experiences and to examine real life current events in depth. Data collection was based on direct interviews (McKenzie, 2007) with 15 Italian women entrepreneurs, identified thanks to some Italian entrepreneurial associations. Then women entrepreneurs interviewed

are located in central Italy, and the authors live in this area too. Proximity to the interviewed women entrepreneurs permitted more in-depth analysis of the case studies.

The sample was drawn purposively to include women with different personal (age) and family statuses (married/unmarried; with/without children). A brief presentation of the interviewed entrepreneurs is presented in Table 1.

The data saturation principle has been adopted to establish the number of women to interview (Yin, 2009). Personal and business information was collected during the interviews through a semi-structured questionnaire (Qu and Dumay, 2011), guided by a checklist. Special emphasis was placed on the role played by their families during their business experience. The interviewer’s attention was focused on both verbal and non-verbal communication, trying to point out the importance of family in the women’s entrepreneurial experience.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, particularly useful for investigating the behaviour of the analysis’ leading actors, to understand their experiences and the meaning they attach to events and experiences in which they were involved (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Pettigrew, 1997; Stake, 2000; Qu and Dumay, 2011). Semi-structured interviews also allow us to obtain richer information than “question-and-answer” structured interviews Cruz and Nordqvist, 2012).

After the interviews and their literal transcription, the interpretation of the cases was carried out in two steps (Hall *et al.*, 2012):

1. *Analytical description and interpretation* of each case (Stake, 2000), on the basis of thematic analysis of the interviews and all available material (in addition to the interviews, there were also field notes, documents provided by the interviewer and other information from various sources—for example, web-sites). In this first phase, an interpretative analysis was performed using some pre-defined themes, identified on the basis of existing literature (Byrne and Fattoum, 2015);
2. *Joint analysis and interpretation of all cases*, to detect the existence of differences and similarities, and to identify categories that are useful to give account of the plurality of situations observed, regarding the role of family in women’s entrepreneurial activity. The in-depth analysis of each case and the cross-reading of all available material have also highlighted other issues, which have allowed us to outline a more comprehensive and detailed interpretative framework, providing possible meanings linked to the role of women entrepreneurs’ families.

**Table 1 | Descriptions of interviewees**

	Name	Industry	Age	Marital status	Children
1	Maria	Hotel	35	Unmarried	No
2	Donatella	Beauty centre	31	Unmarried	No
3	Silvia	Wellness centre	30	Unmarried	No
4	Lucrezia	Country house	32	Unmarried	No
5	Sonia	Textile firms	46	Married	Yes
6	Enrica	Bookshop	34	Unmarried	No
7	Lorena	Beauty centre	33	Unmarried	No
8	Sara	Farm	36	Married	Yes
9	Laura	Building industry	47	Married	Yes
10	Tiziana	Mechanical manufacturing	48	Married	Yes
11	Roberta	Clothing manufacturing	74	Married	Yes
12	Giorgia	Beauty centre	29	Unmarried	No
13	Elena	Restaurant	40	Unmarried	No
14	Chiara	Beauty centre	28	Unmarried	No
15	Rachele	Clothing manufacturing	41	Married	Yes

**Table 2 | A typology of family profiles**

<i>Family as an obligation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daughters who feel forced to follow their family business.</li> <li>• Women forced to choose entrepreneurship because they need a flexible work.</li> <li>• Family commitments that force women to downsize the business.</li> </ul>
<i>Family as a support</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological support: family provides encouragement and support</li> <li>• Financial support: family provides funds or offers collateral to get loans.</li> <li>• Organizational support: family helps in managing household or business.</li> </ul>
<i>Family as an opportunity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family business may help women's professional realization.</li> </ul>
<i>Family as generational continuity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women entrepreneurs who share their role with their children and are ready to pass on the business to them.</li> </ul>
<i>Family as a form of giving up</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unmarried women entrepreneurs who have given up to have their own family.</li> </ul>

Interviews made it possible to identify five different situations (family profiles), characterized by different types of family influence in women's experience. Family profiles are briefly presented in Table 2. In the following sections, each profile is described in detail, with some extracts from interviews. Interviews are useful to better focus on the family's role in women's entrepreneurial experiences and they allow us to "listen" to women's words.

As discussed above, topics emerging from the case analyses are presented and discussed in the next section, along with brief descriptions of some of the most representative cases analysed and excerpts from the interviews. The latter are particularly useful for understanding the role that women entrepreneurs ascribe to their families in their entrepreneurial experience. For privacy reasons the cases analysed are presented using fake names.

## Results—the role of the family in women's entrepreneurial experiences

**Family as an obligation.** Family may act as an obligation when it influences women's choices about their future careers and pushes them towards entrepreneurship, even if it is contrary to their motivations and ambitions. Furthermore, family may affect how women run their own businesses.

There are particular examples of this situation when referring to daughters in entrepreneurial families. Daughters' involvement as successors of family businesses is rarely the result of women's free choice. More often it is the result of a hard decision, which excludes them (for example, especially if there are brothers wishing to lead the family business) or forces them to take the helm of the company (for example, if there are no other heirs and the continuity of the family business is in danger). In the latter case, the decision to join the family business does not often arise from women's own desires to devote themselves to the business. It often arises from the duty, or the perception of a duty, to help their families or to fill a position that no other one family member wants to hold. This was Maria's experience. She was very young and was studying oriental languages, thinking about a future as an interpreter, when her mother, who ran a family hotel, died. Her younger brother had already embarked on a military career and was not available to revise his life projects. For that reason, Maria felt compelled to take over the reins of the business and give up her professional ambitions. She says: "This job is not what I wanted to do. I replaced my mother when she died. It was not my life plan ... but I was involved. When my mother got sick I went back home temporarily but I wanted to continue studying. But then our projects were disrupted ... and now this is my job".

Family can be an obligation for women because they need to take care of their home, children or other family members. The requirement to have enough time for their family commitments, in fact, often leads women to choose a flexible job, which makes it easier to balance work and family, even if it does not match their

expectations and ambitions. Elena, a restaurant owner, tells us: "My grandmother had fallen ill and so I decided to open a shop. I said: I should open a shop so that we can manage to join family and work together".

Family can also be a constraint for unmarried and childless women entrepreneurs, which is why they may decide to give up investing or develop their company. In fact, they know that if they get married, family responsibilities could restrain them from fully devoting themselves to business. This is Donatella's concern: "I had even thought about buying some new shops ... but in the end I gave up ... Taking another mortgage for me would be a big problem, because I'm thinking about starting a family, so I should have some free time, but if I had a huge mortgage I just couldn't do it".

**Family as a support.** Family can play an essential role in providing support to women entrepreneurs. This supporting role may be a necessary condition for a woman to perform her business activity.

A family can provide *moral and psychological support* when it shares and encourages a woman's choice to become an entrepreneur. For married women, husbands often play a fundamental role in encouraging their wives to start a business and to overcome their initial uncertainties. This is Sonia's experience, owner of a small textile firm: "I began working for myself in 2000 ... Honestly, my husband helped me a lot in starting this business".

Sometimes husbands, or partners, share the difficulties of the start-up phase and help women to manage their business. Women often admit that they wouldn't have been able to start their business without their husband's help. This is particularly true for women who also have family responsibilities and young children.

For unmarried women, parents' consent and support often plays a central role in their decision to start a business. Silvia, owner of a wellness centre, says: "In my experience, family represents psychological, emotional, financial and economic support with its constant presence. Perhaps if I decided to do this crazy thing, it was because I knew I could count on their help".

Even Lorena, who owns a beauty centre, recognizes how the consensus of her birth family was essential during the start-up of her business: "My family is a great support, not only financially, but also psychologically. Without my parents, I would have never become an entrepreneur ... This was the job I wanted to do but I had a lot of doubts and fears. My parents gave me the courage to overcome my uncertainties".

For other women, the involvement of a male family member (birth or marriage) is absolutely necessary to get a bank loan: "I got two mortgages but I didn't have any problems with the banks. They were always very helpful and my husband helped me by

signing” (Rachele, owner of a small clothing manufacture); “Fortunately, I had my brother’s support for the guarantees. He signed a surety in my favour, so I had no problems with the bank” (Enrica, owner of a bookshop); “I took my last mortgage last year, but without my father I wouldn’t have gotten anything ...” (Giorgia, owner of a beauty centre).

Women’s family can provide fundamental support, even acting as a mediator with banks. Indeed, in several female experiences, the birth family played a decisive role, not only in making it possible to obtain financing but also in offering indispensable knowledge and competences to compensate for their daughters’ inexperience and therefore strengthening their contractual power in negotiations with the banks. Fathers, in particular, may think that it is often “difficult being taken seriously” for a young woman, as Lucrezia’s father stated. And Lucrezia, young owner of a country house, confirmed: “My father looks after the financial issues and I run the business; when there’s a problem with the bank, he deals with it”.

Family often plays a crucial role in helping women entrepreneurs to manage business and family responsibilities, such as looking after children. On numerous occasions, help from the family is an essential condition to make entrepreneurial activity possible, especially for women with young children. More often than not, this type of support comes from a female member—mother and sometimes sister—while husbands are less involved. Women often complain that their husbands, while supporting them psychologically, are less helpful in domestic issues. The parents’ role is evident in Sara’s words, the owner of a farm: “My baby is still very little, so I devote all my free time to him. I sincerely think that if I hadn’t had my family I would have overlooked my work and it would have suffered a little”.

This issue recalls the work—life balance problem, which, for many women, is the biggest challenge to overcome. Help from their family is often the only practical solution, especially when childcare services are limited and the family income does not allow for private care (for example, a babysitter or childminder). At the same time, it is very satisfying for a woman to be able to demonstrate to herself and others that she can overcome this problem.

**Family as an opportunity.** Belonging to a business family can give women a career opportunity. A business family can encourage daughters to choose an entrepreneurial career starting a new business. Women without this family background would have difficulty to achieve this result. Business families can promote the formation of a business identity, as they can also transmit entrepreneurship-oriented values and attitudes.

This is Laura’s experience, daughter of the founder of a small firm in the building industry. Laura chose to enter into the family firm because of her great admiration for her father and for values he had transmitted to her: commitment, goal orientation, product and customer care, as well as innovativeness and a long-term vision. When we asked her: “What values has your father taught you?”, she answered: “Above all, commitment. Never give up. Never. Even when I was a child ... My father always used to say: ‘If there is a problem you can’t solve, try changing your point of view’. This is something that I always say, too”.

Laura is gradually replacing her father as the leader of their family business. But often, for daughters, it is not easy to be chosen as successors. For this to happen, the senior generation should not have gender bias or be opposed to having a woman as the leader of the company. In addition, it is important that there are no siblings who aspire to play the same role. In Tiziana’s case, daughter of a mechanical medium-sized firm’s owner, the succession at the helm of the family firm is more problematic,

because her brother aspires to the same role. Indeed, Tiziana is aware: “when my father will have to choose the successor, he will choose my brother”. But this awareness doesn’t disturb Tiziana’s serenity, because in her values system the family business’ survival, as well as the peace of her family, has an undisputed priority. For this reason, she is very willing to carry on her business experience alongside her brother. The most important thing for her is that they are able to share the business’ vision and goals, because “although there are some clashes, sometimes quite heavy, our family is always very close”. For this reason, her family plays a central role in Tiziana’s entrepreneurial experience, not only because it has offered her an entrepreneurial opportunity, but also because it is precisely in the name of the family that Tiziana is ready to take a step back in favour of her brother.

Family can also represent a job opportunity for women. This happens when women have difficulties finding a job or have experienced challenging situations in their workplace (for example, “glass ceiling”, work-life balance and so on). In these circumstances, the family business can represent the only opportunity of having a job; it can offer the possibility of working in a more flexible workplace, making it easier to balance work and family.

**Family as a form of generational continuity.** Succession is a very critical phase in the family firm’s life cycle. The ability to successfully manage this process depends on the attitude and behaviour of the two main actors (successor and predecessor). Some research shows that women entrepreneurs are more careful and even more prepared to deal with their succession, thanks to their leadership style, characterized by flexibility, team work and attention to people.

As for entrepreneurs, it is more difficult to imagine someone else at the helm of their company, but for women entrepreneurs, it is more natural to think that their company is something that they can pass down to their children. Women, unlike men, do not ever deviate from their parental role, even when they are leaders of a company (Kaslow, 1998; Cadieux *et al.*, 2002; Vera and Dean, 2005; David, 2006; Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2016).

For women entrepreneurs, moreover, the transfer of the company to their children is never a result that is taken for granted. Women entrepreneurs, in fact, rarely claim that children take on the leadership, as they are more careful to respect their natural vocation. Roberta, for example, is the founder of a small clothing manufacture. She says: “I never desired to see my business grow. My dream was to live well with my family and my mission was to give my children a good position. I don’t want them to sacrifice the same things that I did when I was a kid”.

Female entrepreneurs who consider their family to be an element of generational continuity can be defined as parents in a double meaning. The first is a business meaning, because they gave birth to a new business, which is “generated” by a woman. The second is a personal meaning, because they are women entrepreneurs, always maintaining a close relationship with their children and never breaking away from their parental role. This role is often transferred to the workplace, so that work and private life are almost overlapping.

**Family as a form of giving up.** Sometimes job responsibilities come into conflict with a woman’s private life and force her to give up on having a family. We are referring to unmarried women entrepreneurs who decide not to have their own family due to work commitments and difficulties in balancing work and family. It is important to emphasize that this situation is not always a free and voluntary choice. Often this is a forced decision, as women realize that a family would give rise to great responsibilities, very

difficult to reconcile with entrepreneurial activity. This is typically a female issue, since men are much less affected by work-life balance problems.

Women, on the contrary, are well aware of this problem, as Chiara's words show. Chiara is 28, she is unmarried and owns a small beauty centre. For her, family is now a form of giving up, because her work would not give her the time to manage a family.

Looking ahead, however, family may become a constraint, which could affect her business and probably limit its growth and development. She says: "For ten years I always gave my best and I thought almost exclusively about my work. My private life was sacrificed a bit ... But now I'm thinking that it was too much. I'm going to live alone, so of course I have to organise ... to go shopping, think a bit at home ... And I know that it's really difficult".

### Conclusions and implications for future research

The experiences of women entrepreneurs presented in this work provide clear evidence of the importance of family and family ties in women's entrepreneurial experience. In this sense, results from this analysis confirm previous findings (Caputo and Dolinsky, 1998; David, 2006), where family has been described as the "intervening variable between gender and entrepreneurship" (Bruni *et al.*, 2000: 159): the different roles that women play within their families—mother, wife, daughter—in fact, continue to significantly influence their business experiences, where you can always find traces of family involvement.

Interviews with women entrepreneurs confirm the existence of an unbreakable bond between female entrepreneurs and their families. Family may act as an obligation, but sometimes it is a crucial support. The birth family may especially give women entrepreneurs an important help, often essential to enable them to do business. This happens, for example, when the family provides significant financial support, or when it offers psychological support for women entrepreneurs, encouraging and/or sharing their choice to become an entrepreneur. Sometimes family offers a decisive organizational support, helping women entrepreneurs to manage the household, take care of children, and sometimes even manage the business.

The implications of families' central roles in female entrepreneurial experiences are particularly interesting. Under a methodological profile, the main conclusion of our analysis is that female entrepreneurial experiences cannot be truly understood if attention is not paid to their family situation. In terms of research, the main implications of these results underline the significance of analyzing the role of the family when investigating women's entrepreneurship: women's choices related to business creation, financing, management and growth, in fact, cannot be properly understood and interpreted if family is not included in the analysis or field of survey. Similarly, family must be taken into account when analysing the performance of women-owned businesses, reasons for their success or failure, underlying reasons for the choice to grow or not, including their choice to continue managing their business or close it and give up their entrepreneurial activity. From an economic and sociological point of view, this analysis should help us to focus on one of the key issues of women's lives when they try to balance family life and work. This means that in order to support women entrepreneurship, it is essential to address this issue. It is important to know and understand the role family plays in female entrepreneurial experiences in order to clearly interpret the reasons for the success or failure of women-owned businesses, as family ties will inevitably have an impact on their performance.

### Limitations

Since this study only examines a selection of Italian women-owned firms, our findings could be influenced by the individuals' specific socio-economic conditions. Therefore, future research should be carried out with a larger number of women entrepreneurs, located in different countries, in order to verify the importance of the factors related to different cultural contexts.

Future analysis comparing men and women entrepreneurs could also be carried out, to understand if there are significant differences regarding the role of family in their entrepreneurial experience.

Moreover, results from this analysis are based on a small number of observations and do not allow statistical generalization. As a result, in the future, similar analyses could be based on more numerous and representative samples.

### References

- Aldrich HE and Cliff JE (2003) The pervasive effects of family on entrepreneurship: Toward a family embeddedness perspective. *Journal of business venturing*; 18 (5): 573–596.
- Alesina A and Giuliano P (2010) The power of the family. *Journal of Economic Growth*; 15 (2): 93–125.
- Alesina A, Lotti F and Mistrulli PE (2013) Do women pay more for credit? Evidence from Italy. *Journal of the European Economic Association*; 11 (1): 45–66.
- Brockhaus RH and Horwitz PS (1986) The psychology of the entrepreneur. In: Sexton DL and Smilor R (eds). *The Art and Science of Entrepreneurship*. Ballinger: Cambridge, MA, pp 25–48.
- Bruni A, Gherardi S and Poggi B (2000) *All'ombra della maschilità*. Guerini e Associati: Milano, Italy.
- Brush CG (1992) Research on women business owners: Past Trends, a new perspective and future directions. *Entrepreneurship, Theory and Practice*; Summer, pp 5–30.
- Byrne J and Fattoum S (2015) The gendered nature of family business succession: Case studies from France in Blackburn R, Hytti U and Welter F (eds). *Context, Process and Gender in Entrepreneurship*. Edward Elgar: USA.
- Cadieux L, Lorrain J and Hugron P (2002) Succession in women-owned family businesses: A case study. *Family Business Review*; 15 (1): 17–30.
- Caputo RK and Dolinsky A (1998) Women's choice to pursue self-employment: the role of financial and human capital of household members. *Journal of Small Business Management*; 36 (3): 8–17.
- Carter S and Cannon T (1988) *Female Entrepreneurs: A Study of Female Business Owner, Their Motivations, Experiences and Strategies of success*. Department of Employment Research: London.
- Carter S, Shaw E, Lam W and Wilson F (2007) "Gender, Entrepreneurship, and Bank Lending: The Criteria and Processes Used by Bank Loan Officers in Assessing Applications", *Entrepreneurship. Theory and Practice*, May 2007, pp. 427–444.
- Cesaroni FM (2010) Donne imprenditrici e banche. Le ragioni di un rapporto difficile. In: Calcagnini G and Favaretto I (eds). *L'economia della piccola impresa*. FrancoAngeli: Milano, Italy.
- Cesaroni FM, Lotti F and Mistrulli PE (2013) Female firms and bank's lending behavior: What happened during the great recession?, Banca d'Italia, Questioni di Economia e Finanza, Occasional Papers, n.177, June, [http://www.bancaditalia.it/publicazioni/econo/quest\\_ecofin\\_2/qef177/QEF\\_177.pdf](http://www.bancaditalia.it/publicazioni/econo/quest_ecofin_2/qef177/QEF_177.pdf).
- Cesaroni FM and Sentuti A (2014) Women and family businesses. When women are left only minor roles. *History of the family*; 19 (3): 358–379.
- Cesaroni FM and Sentuti A (2015) Family Business Succession: A Female Perspective. Proceedings of the XXIX RENT Conference, Zagreb, Croatia, 18–20 November 2015.
- Cesaroni FM and Sentuti A (2016) She is the founder. Who is the emotional leader?. Proceedings of the 11th European Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship—ECIE 2016, 15–16 September 2016, Jyväskylä, Finland.
- Coleman S and Robb A (2009) A comparison of new firm financing by gender: Evidence from the Kauffman firm survey data. *Small Business Economics*; 33, 397–411.
- Constantinidis C, Cornet A and Asandei S (2006) Financing of women-owned ventures: The impact of gender and other owner- and firm-related variables. *Venture Capital*; 8 (2): 133–157.
- Cooper AC and Dunkelberg WC (1981) Influences upon entrepreneurship. A large scale study, Academy of Management Meetings, San Diego, CA (4 August 4).
- Cromie S and Hayes J (1988) Towards a typology of female entrepreneurs. *The Sociological Review*; 36 (1): 87–113.

- Cruz C and Nordqvist M (2012) Entrepreneurial orientation in family firms: A generational perspective. *Small Business Economics*; **38** (1): 33–49.
- Curimbaba F (2002) The dynamics of women's roles as family business managers. *Family Business Review*; **15** (3): 239–252.
- David P (2006) *Il valore della differenza*. Carocci: Roma, Italy.
- Duchesneau DA and Gartner WB (1990) A profile of new venture success and failure in an emerging industry. *Journal of Business Venturing*; **5** (5): 297–312.
- Dumas C (1998) Women's pathways to participation and leadership in the family owned firm. *Family Business Review*; **11** (3): 219–228.
- Dumas C (1992) Integrating the daughter into family business management. *Entrepreneurship: Theory & Practice*; **16** (4): 41–56.
- Dyer WG and Handler W (1994) Entrepreneurship and family business: Exploring the connections. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*; **19**, 71–71.
- Fairlie R and Robb A (2009) Gender differences in business performance: Evidence from the characteristics of business owner survey. *Small Business Economics*; **33** (4): 375–395.
- Fontana A and Frey JH (1994) Interviewing: The art of science. In: Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (eds). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- García-Álvarez E, López-Sintas J and Gonzalvo PS (2002) Socialization patterns of successor in first- to second-generation family businesses. *Family Business Review*; **15** (3): 189–204.
- Goffee R and Scase R (1985) *Women in Charge: The Experiences of Female Entrepreneurs*. Allen & Unwin: London.
- Haberman H and Danes SM (2007) Father-daughter and father-son family business management transfer comparison: Family FIRO model application. *Family Business Review*; **20** (2): 163–184.
- Hall JD, Leloudis JL, Korstad RR and Murphy M (2012) *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*. UNC Press Books.
- Hill GE and Welsh HP (1986) Entrepreneurship behavioural intentions and student independence characteristics and experiences. In: Ronstadt R, Hornaday JA, Peterson R and Vesper KH (eds). *Frontiers of Entrepreneurial Research*. Center for Entrepreneurial Studies, Babson College, MA.
- Hughes K (2003) Pushed or pulled? Women's entry into self-employment and small business ownership. *Gender, Work and Organization*; **10** (4): 433–454.
- Kaslow FW (1998) Handling transitions from mother to son in the family business: The knotty issues. *Family Business Review*; **11** (3): 229–238.
- Krueger N (1993) The impact of prior entrepreneurial exposure on perceptions of new venture feasibility and desirability. *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice*; **XVII** (1): 5–21.
- Matthews CH and Moser SB (1996) A longitudinal investigation of the impact of family background and gender on interest in small firm ownership. *Journal of Small Business Management*; **34** (April): 29–43.
- McElwee G and Al-Riyami R (2003) Women entrepreneurs in Oman: Some barriers to success. *Career Development International*; **8** (7): 339–346.
- McKenzie DA (2007) *Do Economists Make Markets?: On the Performativity of Economics*. Princeton University Press.
- Moore DP and Buttner EH (1997) *Women Entrepreneurs. Moving Beyond the Glass Ceiling*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- OECD (2004) *Women's entrepreneurship: Issues and policies*. OECD: Paris.
- Paoloni P (2011) *La dimensione relazionale delle imprese femminili*. Franco Angeli: Milano, Italy.
- Paoloni P and Demartini P (2012) The relational capital in female smes. *Journal of Academy of Business and Economics*; **2** (1): 23–32.
- Paoloni P and Dumay J (2015) The relational capital of micro-enterprises run by women: The start-up phase. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*; **15** (2): 172–197.
- Pettigrew M (1997) What is a processual analysis? *Scandinavian Journal of Management*; **13** (4): 337–348.
- Qu SD and Dumay J (2011) The qualitative research interview. *Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management*; **8** (3): 238–264.
- Ram M and Holliday R (1993) Relative merits: Family culture and kinship in small firms. *Sociology*; **27** (4): 629–648.
- Rønsen M (2012) The family – a barrier or motivation for female entrepreneurship? Discussion paper no. 727, Statistics Norway Research Department: Oslo.
- Scherer RF, Brodzinski JD and Wiebe FA (1990) Entrepreneur career selection and gender: A socialization approach. *Journal of Small Business Management*; **XXVIII** (April): 37–44.
- Schröder E, Schmitt-Rodermund E and Arnaud N (2011) Career choice intentions of adolescents with a family business background. *Family Business Review*; **24** (4): 305–321.
- Sciascia S, Mazzola P, Astrachan JH and Pieper TM (2012) The role of family ownership in international entrepreneurship: Exploring nonlinear effects. *Small Business Economics*; **38** (1): 15–31.
- Scott CE (1986) Why more women are becoming entrepreneurs. *Journal of Small Business Management*; **24** (4): 37–44.
- Shapiro A and Sokol L (1982) The social dimensions of entrepreneurship. In: Kent C, Sexton D and Vesper KH (eds). *The Encyclopedia of Entrepreneurship*. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, pp 72–90.
- Sieger P, Nason RS, Zellweger T and Nordqvist M (2009) Family Portfolio Entrepreneurship. **29** (14): Article 8.
- Stake RE (2000) Case studies. In: Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (eds). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn., Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Vera CF and Dean MA (2005) An examination of the challenges daughters face in family business succession. *Family Business Review*; **18** (4): 321–345.
- Wellington AJ (2006) Self-employment: the new solution for balancing family and career? *Labour Economics*; **13**, 357–386.
- Yin RK (2009) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th edn. Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data. Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Zamheri Ahmad S (2011) Evidence of the characteristics of women entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: An empirical investigation. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*; **3** (2): 123–143.
- Zellweger T, Sieger P and Halter F (2011) Should I stay or should I go? Career choice intentions of students with family business background. *Journal of Business Venturing*; **26** (5): 521–536.

### Data availability

The dataset generated and analysed in the current study is not publicly available due to reasons of privacy; however, it is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Additional information

**Competing interests:** The Authors declare no competing financial interests.

**Reprints and permission** information is available at [http://www.palgrave-journals.com/pal/authors/rights\\_and\\_permissions.html](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/pal/authors/rights_and_permissions.html)

**How to cite this article:** Cesaroni FM and Paoloni P (2016) Are family ties an opportunity or an obstacle for women entrepreneurs? Empirical evidence from Italy. *Palgrave Communications*. 2:16088 doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2016.88.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in the credit line; if the material is not included under the Creative Commons license, users will need to obtain permission from the license holder to reproduce the material. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>