

The role of women in HRM in family SMEs

Journal of Family
Business
Management

1157

Received 23 April 2024
Revised 25 October 2024
Accepted 25 October 2024

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Abstract

Purpose – This study tries to free women from the “invisible role” prison and understand the different managerial goals and styles adopted by males and females in family small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in managing employees. In particular, this paper grasps the complexity of the relationship between women’s leadership positions and configurational human resource management (HRM) practices in family SMEs.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors use the qualitative fuzzy set comparative analysis (fsQCA) on 623 small and medium Italian family businesses to explore women’s contributions and impacts on adopting HRM practices and business performance.

Findings – The findings confirm that gender-specific leadership styles influence the adoption of distinct bundles of HRM practices and ultimately affect organizational performance in family SMEs. Indeed, women in the family SME social context, to meet certain gender expectations, are more likely to implement steward-oriented HRM practices. This reinforces the role of women as key players in improving organizational performance by adopting people-centered HRM practices that promote employee satisfaction and retention.

Originality/value – Using the fsQCA analysis and the gender theory, family business and HRM literature, the paper investigates the role of women in Italian family SMEs as CEOs or HR managers in implementing HR management practices to achieve good organizational performance.

Keywords Women, Human resource management, fsQCA, Family SMEs

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In the past, feminist writers argued that the perception of sex differences in leadership style was used to exclude women from leadership roles (Kimball, 1995; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). However, today, these same unique qualities are a source of female pride (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

In recent years, the research on the characteristics of women in key managerial positions, particularly in family-owned SMEs, has garnered increasing scholarly attention (Calabrò *et al.*, 2024; Bang *et al.*, 2023; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021), although it is still sparse

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Journal of Family Business Management
Vol. 15 No. 4, 2025
pp. 1157-1178
Emerald Publishing Limited
2043-6238
DOI 10.1108/JFBM-04-2024-0083

(Campopiano *et al.*, 2017; D’Allura *et al.*, 2021; Naciti *et al.*, 2021) mainly when they are in decision-making position (Ratten *et al.*, 2018; Maseda *et al.*, 2022). Given the coexistence and the interweaving of family and business interests, family businesses require women to play a unique role and position compared to other organizations (Calabrò *et al.*, 2024). They are often ensnared in what Herrera and Agoff (2019) and Triklani (2019) describe as the “golden cage,” a metaphor that encapsulates the dichotomy of their situation. Indeed, while the family business context provides a more secure and flexible work environment, it concurrently fails to foster a competitive atmosphere conducive to knowledge enhancement and career advancement (Triklani, 2019), relegating women to the role of chief emotional leaders (Lowe and Evans, 2015; Poza and Messer, 2001). Moreover, women in family businesses are often acknowledged to occupy an “invisible role” (Cole, 1997; Overbeke *et al.*, 2013), relegated to managing family dynamics (Calabrò *et al.*, 2024), where their power and responsibilities are ambiguous and insufficiently recognized (Samara *et al.*, 2019).

Even if family business literature underlines how women’s participation in management processes in family business is increasing (Hernández-Linares *et al.*, 2023) and more consistent than non-family businesses (Ramadani *et al.*, 2018; Andersson *et al.*, 2018), little is known about women’s effect on family business performance (Danes *et al.*, 2007) and their peculiar managerial and leadership styles (Calabrò *et al.*, 2024; Ratten *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the results of numerous publications on the role of women in corporate performance reach ambiguous results (Bjuggren *et al.*, 2018; Amore *et al.*, 2014).

To explore women’s contribution and their impacts on the family business performance, we examine situations in which they are “visible”, when they have formal leadership or managerial positions (Cruz *et al.*, 2024), in Italian family SMEs. Family SMEs could represent a meaningful organization for improving our understanding of women’s role in the business (D’Allura *et al.*, 2021) because in these organizations, owners and managers may more directly influence the behavior of their employees and organizational culture (Allen and Langowitz, 2013; Bannò *et al.*, 2021), and women could have a greater chance to manifest their unique perspectives, experiences, and working styles (Daily and Dalton, 2003).

Using gender theory, family business, and HR management (HRM) literature, we investigate the role of women in Italian family SMEs as CEOs or HR managers in implementing HR management practices to achieve good organizational performance.

The authors employed a relatively new analytical methodology to analyze the impact on women in key decision-making positions in family SMEs, the qualitative fuzzy set comparative analysis (fsQCA) in 623 small and medium-sized Italian family businesses. This approach, increasingly popular in management research (Crespo, 2017), permits showing (1) how the combinations of men and women CEO and/or HR positions with specific HRM practices configuration achieve the same outcome (equifinality); (2) how similar combinations of men and women in CEO and/or in HR position and HRM practices configurations may lead to different outcomes (multifinality); and (3) how the combination of conditions, the presence of women and man in CEO and/or HR manager positions and HRM practices configurations, rather than only one condition can be either necessary or sufficient to achieve a specific outcome (conjunctural causation).

This paper provides several contributions. First, by examining the formal role of women in family businesses (when they are CEO and/or HR manager) in adopting HRM practices, we aim to liberate women from the confines of “invisible roles” and underscore their contributions to family SMEs organizational performance. Second, employing an HRM configurational approach and gender theory, we seek to understand how the presence of women in family SMEs influences the adoption of distinct bundles of HRM practices compared to those adopted by men in similar positions. Third, by combining the equifinality principle and congruence theory, we try to go beyond and overcome the debate about whether women achieve better or worse performance levels than men in family businesses. Fourth, focusing on gender norms in the family business, we used stewardship theory (e.g. Davis *et al.*, 2010; Pearson and Marler, 2010) to suggest women implement more stewards-oriented HRM practices than men to

achieve a low level of turnover. Fifth, using HRM theories in family business (Gagnè *et al.*, 2014) and gender theories, we try to explain the uniqueness and complexity of HRM choices in family SMEs that could be which may be the result of the interaction between the peculiar leadership styles implemented by men and women and the peculiar expectations that these in turn encounter. Therefore, our study highlights the importance of the social context (i.e. family SMEs) (Hernández-Linares *et al.*, 2023) in understanding the role and the choices of women in family SMEs supporting the social constructivist view of gender (Deaux and Major, 1987; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004).

This article is structured as follows. In the first section, we illustrate our frame of reference and develop our hypothesis. In the second section, we describe our sample and methods. The third section presents the results, and the fourth discusses them. We then present the study's main limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Family SMEs are a particular social context that perceives leadership and gender roles and their congruence in a specific way (Chrisman *et al.*, 2005).

Gender role theory posits that a particular leadership style emerges not only because most leaders have internalized gender roles to some extent (Wood *et al.*, 1997) but also because employees respond to leaders based on gender expectations, to which leaders then react in turn (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Consequently, to increase the degree of perceived congruence between a leadership style and gender role (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001), women and men adopt a particular leadership style that makes them acceptable and credible as leaders (Hernández-Linares *et al.*, 2023; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

This issue is particularly significant for women in family businesses, who frequently encounter challenges regarding their legitimacy in leadership roles (Eddleston *et al.*, 2016; Hoyt and Murphy, 2016). For women leading their family SMEs, gender role expectations compel them to promote a specific leadership style, thereby influencing them to adopt HRM practices configurations that align closely with their gender role (Hernández-Linares *et al.*, 2023). Employees in family SMEs expect female CEOs to have a highly feminine, highly communal leadership style and use congruent HRM practices configurations. Indeed, Women in family SMEs are the ones who ensure harmony and create stable long-term relationships based on trust (Amore *et al.*, 2014; Gorman and Kmec, 2009; Liu *et al.*, 2020; Yildiz *et al.*, 2021). If women leaders in family SMEs assume their responsibilities in an authoritative manner, characterized by autocratic and directive leadership styles (Carli and Eagly, 1999; Rudman and Glick, 1999), they may consequently encounter adverse reactions from employees (Lemoine and Blum, 2021).

Women leaders of family SMEs, to conform to gender expectations, are often compelled to adopt a more collaborative and motivating leadership style (Chadwick and Dawson, 2018; Paustian-Underdahl *et al.*, 2014), implementing specific HRM configurations that are more aligned with this approach.

On the contrary, men in family SMEs, motivated by agency expectations, are more control-oriented, task-oriented, and competitive in managing employees (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly *et al.*, 2003; Koenig *et al.*, 2011; Lauterbach and Weiner, 1996; Paustian-Underdahl *et al.*, 2014) and use patriarchal-control HRM configurations. Therefore, men and women leaders in family firms may present different leadership styles and use different HRM practices configurations to meet workers' expectations and improve firm performance. This variability of leadership styles and expectations suggests an equifinality (similar organizational performance) in HRM practice configurations, where different leadership approaches can lead to similar levels of effectiveness depending on the context. Indeed, the configurational theory, asserting that "*a system can reach the same final state, starting from different initial conditions and through a variety of different paths*" (Katz and Kahn, 1978, p. 30), suggests that in family SMEs with different configurations of gender leadership and

HRM practices can be equally effective in achieving low levels of turnover (Fiss, 2007; Katz and Kahn, 1978), indicating that despite varying approaches influenced by the family context and gender differences in leadership, multiple paths can lead to similar successful outcomes. Substitution implies that male and female CEOs and HRM practices can act as substitutes in implementing the HRM strategy itself in a family SME where these elements have overlapping goals (Jiang *et al.*, 2012).

The above theoretical constructs corroborate that female leaders in family firms make unique decisions on HRM configurations (Bağış *et al.*, 2023) to achieve the same organizational goals as men.

H1. Men and women in key HR managerial positions make different HRM practices configurations in family SMEs to achieve good organizational performance

Gender role theory explains that employees are managed differently based on gender, even in family SMEs (Bird and Brush, 2002; Danes *et al.*, 2007; Hernández-Linares *et al.*, 2023) and how men and women exhibit distinct gender norm-congruent leadership behaviors (Domańska *et al.*, 2024). Gender role theory (Eagly, 1987) highlights how women are more sensitive and empathetic than men, paying more attention to other individuals' needs and welfare (Domańska *et al.*, 2024) and exhibiting more altruistic behaviors (Gilligan, 1982; Mallin and Michelin, 2011) bring unique leadership perspectives and management styles, which can significantly shape organizational dynamics and outcomes (Eagly and Carli, 2003). Conversely, men are typically expected to demonstrate more agentic and masculine characteristics such as assertiveness, dominance, risk-taking, competitiveness, and confidence in managing employees (Hernández-Linares *et al.*, 2023; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). In contrast, women are expected to display more communal and feminine traits like sympathy, helpfulness, kindness, interpersonal sensitivity, and cooperativeness, focusing primarily on employee well-being (Bem, 1981; Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Karau, 2002).

Women leaders in family SMEs are pushed to express and integrate a "feminine" leadership style and communal characteristics to fit the employee's expectations. Women in family SMEs try to promote a collective approach to growing family assets (Cruz *et al.*, 2013, 2024), install a shared sense of responsibility and commitment (Poza and Messer, 2001; Bağış *et al.*, 2023) acting as a steward entrepreneur (Cruz *et al.*, 2024). Indeed, women in family SMEs managing people focus, more than men, on the development and mentoring of subordinates, encouraging them to reach their full potential (Eagly *et al.*, 2003), adopting a more relational and steward leadership style. Contrary to male leadership literature, which emphasizes command-and-control behaviors and the assertion of power (Paustian-Underdahl *et al.*, 2014), men manage people with a high degree of centralization, clearly defined tasks, and direct supervision in a patriarchal or agency-oriented manner (Bird and Brush, 2002).

Using more oriented stewards HRM practices configurations, women leaders shape an organizational climate that encourages employee involvement and empowerment, communicating openly and transparently, abiding by standards of accountability, and setting an example through their behaviors (Pearson and Marler, 2010; Neubaum *et al.*, 2017), all to acquire legitimacy as a leader. Women CEOs in family SMEs are likelier to adopt more stewardship-oriented HRM configurations to align with their leadership styles and goals and acquire legitimacy and congruence in "employees" eyes. The use of a more stewardship leadership style by women CEOs (Cruz *et al.*, 2024) led them to spend more time on coaching and developing employees in the organization than men (Eagly *et al.*, 2003; Krishnan and Park, 2005), increasing learning and motivation throughout the organization (Chadwick and Dawson, 2018).

H2. Female CEOs in family SMEs adopt more oriented steward HRM configurations than male CEOs.

The presence of women in top management teams (TMT) signals that the organization is inclusive and supportive of leadership regardless of gender, thereby increasing the motivation of minority members, such as non-family employees (Chadwick and Dawson, 2018). In family SMEs, the inclusion of women in key HR managerial roles can be perceived by employees as a strong indicator of inclusivity (Daily and Dalton, 2003; Dezsö and Ross, 2012). This perception can, in turn, enhance innovation, decision-making quality, and overall effectiveness (De Dreu and West, 2001; Jehn *et al.*, 1999; Van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004).

To foster an inclusive culture and meet employee expectations, female HR managers often implement HRM practices to support innovative behavior among all employees (Chadwick and Dawson, 2018). By encouraging and supporting their subordinates, female HR managers can cultivate optimism and enthusiasm about the future, traits assessed by the inspirational motivation subscale. This meaningful connection motivates female managers to engage in more long-term and empathetic behaviors toward their employees, reinforcing a supportive and inclusive work environment (Chadwick and Dawson, 2018). Indeed, the presence of HR women in family SMEs could increase the cognitive diversity of the employees, enabling them to utilize and integrate their different perspectives and informational resources necessary to innovate (Homan *et al.*, 2007; Van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004) and increase their motivation and development. Not only, considering the gender role theory and women leaders' expectation for cooperation, women HR in family SMEs are pushed to promote entrepreneurial behaviors, innovation, and creativity in their firms (Brush *et al.*, 2022; Bauweraerts *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, women HR managers could drive and are a symbol of stewardship climate work pushes employees to be innovative and to develop new ideas and approaches to solve organizational problems, thereby improving organizational efficiency and performance (Neubaum *et al.*, 2017).

H3. Female HR Managers in family SMEs implement HRM practices configurations that promote innovations

3. Research methods and data collection

3.1 Samples and data collection

Our research incorporated primary and secondary data sources to facilitate the collection and analysis of the firm's financial (Gomez-Mejia *et al.*, 2001; Rutherford *et al.*, 2008) and managerial characteristics (Guest *et al.*, 2003). The primary data, essential for understanding contemporary practices and viewpoints, comprised a questionnaire covering ownership, governance, strategy, management, and HRM practices. In contrast, secondary data was derived from the AIDA database. The AIDA database is the Italian provider of the Bureau Van Dijk European Database, reporting detailed financial information with up to ten years of history of Italian listed and non-listed companies.

To develop and validate the preliminary draft of our questionnaire, we organized 10 on-site guided discussions about the survey instrument with family firms' CEOs, academics, and consultants. Then, to check for a consistent understanding of terms and validate our assumptions about the appropriate vocabulary level (Fowler, 1995), we conducted in-depth pilot interviews with potential respondents of family firms. We also conducted a pretest (Fowler, 1993) to enhance the construct validity of the survey measures.

From the AIDA database, we randomly extracted our initial sample of SMEs, firms employing less than 250 employees, and presented an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million and/or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding EUR 43 million. We use a stratified sample method that guarantees the representation of the Italian SME population, of which 84% are family SMEs (Gnan *et al.*, 2015). The stratifying variables were turnover, range of employees, and industries. Consistent with the distribution found in similar publications (Songini and Gnan, 2013), we identified an initial sample of 7,500 Italian SMEs.

We delivered the questionnaire to our initial sample of Italian SMEs through face-to-face interviews and email. Both interviews and emails were addressed to the Top Management (Entrepreneur or Sole Director, Chief Executive Officer or General Manager), so that its compilation respected the truthfulness and reliability requirements. We viewed CEOs and co-CEOs as the best possible critical informants because they are generally knowledgeable on adopting and using HRM practices and are in an excellent position to report on management (Guest *et al.*, 2003). We also adopted some procedural remedies to reduce the potential common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003): (1) our cover letter guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, (2) dependent and independent variables in questionnaires were kept separate from each other, (3) we devoted careful attention to the wording of questions to avoid vague concepts and to reduce item ambiguity, (4) we stated clearly in the questionnaire that there were no right or wrong answers and that respondents should answer questions as honestly as possible, and (5) we carefully worded questions to minimize the likelihood of social desirability bias, using inputs from the pilot interviews. For the questions related to the adoption of HRM practices, we asked whether the firms implemented particular HRM practices and who was responsible for these practices. We adopted a dichotomous scale to measure the presence of HRM practices in family SMEs, enabling us to assess whether the practice was actually in effect (Boselie *et al.*, 2005). “Yes” responses were coded as 1, and “No” were coded as zero. For each HRM practice, we asked who was in charge of implementation: the owners or the HR manager, and if they were male or female, coding 1 for male and 0 for female.

After three rounds of delivering the questionnaire to 7,500 Italian family firms, a total of 849 responses were obtained, equal to 11.3%, which is low in absolute terms but in line with those normally obtained in Italy (Corbetta and Montemerlo, 1999; Giacomelli and Trento, 2005). We performed chi-square tests comparing our original sample to address potential non-response biases. These tests revealed no notable differences in variables such as industry, turnover, or employee numbers. Furthermore, following the methodology of Armstrong and Overton (1977), we compared early (first half) and late (second half) respondents. This comparison showed no significant discrepancies in factors like firm age, size (both in terms of employees and turnover), market conditions, or industry traits, indicating that non-response bias is likely not a significant issue in our study.

Subsequently, we excluded 226 nonfamily firms. We consider a family firm when the family owns the majority of the equity (Gnan *et al.*, 2015; Astrachan and Shanker, 2003; Sharma, 2004; Corbetta, 1995), one or more family members sit on the board of directors (Gnan *et al.*, 2015; Songini and Gnan, 2013; Anderson and Reeb, 2003), and one or multiple generations are involved in the firm’s management (Gnan *et al.*, 2015; Astrachan and Shanker, 2003; Westhead and Cowling, 1998).

Our final sample consists of 623 small and medium Italian family firms. The median number of employees is 26. The mean number is 39.5, with a standard deviation of 36.7. The median number of sales is €5.5 million. The median year of the foundation is 1980.

3.2 Variables

The first set of variables refers to the extent of utilization of Human resources Management Practices.

We used eight variables.

Workforce Planning (labeled PLANNING; Chang and Chen, 2002), compensation (labeled COMPENSATION; Ahmad and Schroeder, 2003), Recruiting and Selection (labeled RECESEL; Katou and Budhwar, 2006), Training and Development (labeled TRAINING; Katou and Budhwar, 2006), Performance Appraisal (labeled PERFORMANCEAP; Chang and Chen, 2002), Career Planning (labeled CARRIERPL; Schein, 1996), Job design (labeled JDESING; Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006), and Internal communication (labeled INTCOMM; Ulrich, 1997). All variables related to HRM practices were measured using dummy coding: their presence was 1, while absence was 0.

The second variable, the presence of a female HR Director (labeled Female HR Director, is measured using dummy coding: the presence was coded as 1, while absence was coded as 0. The third variable, the presence of a female CEO (labeled Female CEO), is measured using dummy coding: the presence was coded as 1, while the absence was coded as 0.

3.3 Analytical technique: the fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis

As noted by [Fiss et al. \(2013\)](#), the concept of configuration became central to organizational theory during the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. [Child, 1972](#); [Miles et al., 1978](#); [Mintzberg, 1983](#)) and continued into the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. [Child, 2002](#); [Doty et al., 1993](#); [Ketchen et al., 1993](#)). However, the development of the configurational approach stalled due to a lack of methodological support. The fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) technique offers a valuable solution by providing a holistic view of complex phenomena, using Boolean algebra and set theory logic to derive logical conclusions from datasets ([Akhmedova et al., 2020](#)).

FsQCA is distinct from cluster analysis and fuzzy-set regressions. While both assume configurations exist, cluster analysis struggles to disentangle complex causal processes ([Fiss, 2007](#)), and fuzzy-set regressions do not support the configurational approach ([Fiss et al., 2013](#)). Unlike Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) or Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), fsQCA studies causal complexity by considering cases as combinations of causes and conditions that correspond to outcomes. This method has been successfully implemented in several studies on family business research ([Akhmedova et al., 2020](#); [Garcia-Castro and Aguilera, 2014](#); [Kraus et al., 2016](#)).

To uncover the configurations of HRM practices that result in low turnover when adopted by male or female CEOs and HR Directors in family SMEs, we relied on fsQCA. This technique categorizes cases (i.e. family SMEs) into sets, each representing a configuration that leads to the desired outcome. FsQCA is particularly effective for our study's aims because it reveals the causal complexity by showing that cases belong to multiple sets representing causal conditions (e.g. HRM practices) and the outcome of interest (i.e. low turnover rate). It identifies whether cases sharing the same outcome also share membership in multiple causal condition sets.

FsQCA is especially suitable for this study for several reasons. First, fsQCA distinguishes between the necessity and sufficiency of causal conditions. Necessity means an outcome can only be achieved if a particular condition or combination of conditions is present ([Fiss, 2007](#)). Thus, fsQCA can determine whether HRM practices are essential tools for managing lower turnover rates in family SMEs.

Second, fsQCA examines how set memberships intersect, uncovering the inner workings of configurations. This helps identify which scenarios (combinations of HRM practices for different key decision-makers) produce low turnover rates in family SMEs, as summarized in [Figure 1](#). While conventional linear regression analysis can estimate interaction effects, these effects become difficult to interpret with more than three independent variables ([Fiss, 2007](#)).

Female CEO	31 (5.0%) Turnover: 0.026 (0.081)	57 (9.1%) Turnover: 0.0283 (0.056)
	435 (69.8%) Turnover: 0.0335 (0.090)	100 (16.1%) Turnover: 0.0308 (0.073)
Male CEO	Male HR Director	Female HR Director

Source(s): Created by authors

Figure 1. Sub-samples cases (% on the total sample) and turnover mean (STD)

FsQCA, by contrast, handles the interaction of eight causal conditions, revealing how various causal conditions combine to produce the desired outcome.

Finally, our study is based on the principle of equifinality, which posits that multiple configurations of HRM practices can lead to the same outcome, such as low turnover rates. FsQCA is more effective than conventional regression analysis, which assumes uniform causal relationships across all cases. FsQCA identifies multiple paths to the same outcome by using truth tables that represent all theoretically possible combinations of causal conditions. Each combination is a potential path to low turnover in family SMEs. FsQCA empirically analyzes which paths produce the desired outcome, allowing us to explore the various ways different key organizational decision-makers might combine HRM practices according to gender.

3.4 Fuzzy set calibration

Family SMEs are assigned degrees of membership in sets in fsQCA that represent the outcome and causal conditions through a calibration process. Calibration transforms variables into a degree of set membership based on three thresholds: full membership (degree of set membership = 1); full non-membership (degree of set membership = 0); and the cross-over point, which represents the point of maximum ambiguity as to whether a worker is more in or out of a set (degree of set membership = 0.5). These thresholds have to be determined by the researcher, so we followed Ragin's advice (2008) to rely on both empirical and theoretical arguments to avoid researcher subjectivity in setting thresholds.

In this study, the only variable that must be calibrated is the Turnover rate. Following others (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2008), we computed Turnover percentiles so that the upper 25 percentile serves as the threshold for full membership, the lower 25 percentile for full non-membership, and the 50 percentile represents the cross-over point.

We combined this empirical evidence with theoretical knowledge from the HRM literature to justify the calibration thresholds.

4. Results

4.1 FsQCA analysis results

To uncover the role of women as key organizational decision-makers, we split the analysis into two phases.

1. First, we analyzed the whole sample of family SMEs (i.e. 623 cases)
2. Secondly, we analyzed the four sub-samples with different roles of women in decision-making processes about adopting HRM practices, as reported in Figure 1.

Our analysis, aligned with existing literature, reveals a pronounced male dominance in key roles. Notably, 85.9% of CEOs in our sample are male, while female representation rises to 25.2% in HR Director positions. The least common scenario encountered is a female CEO with a male HR manager, representing just 5% of cases. In stark contrast, the most frequent combination is a male CEO paired with a male HR manager, accounting for 69.8% of cases.

Interestingly, our results show that family SMEs with a female CEO and a male HR Director have the lowest employee turnover rate. Conversely, the highest turnover rate within our sample was seen in companies with a male CEO and a male HR Director.

4.2 FsQCA analysis of the whole sample: necessary condition analysis

In our study of 623 family SMEs, we first examined the necessary conditions associated with low turnover rates. According to Fiss (2007), a condition is necessary if a low turnover rate only occurs when that condition is present. We assessed the necessity of various conditions using the concept of consistency. Consistency, as defined in fsQCA (Ragin, 2008), indicates

that an HRM practice is necessary if the presence of low turnover (the outcome) is consistently accompanied by the presence of the HRM practice (the causal condition).

Consistency is analogous to the significance of a correlation coefficient in traditional correlation analysis. It measures the extent to which family SMEs sharing a certain condition or combination of conditions (like various HRM practices) consistently exhibit low turnover rates. For a condition to be considered necessary, its consistency value should be close to 1, suggesting that all cases with the causal condition also display the desired outcome. Contrary to [Ragin's \(2008\)](#) recommendation, which suggests a threshold value of 0.80 for the consistency of necessary conditions, we adopted a more stringent value of 0.90 to ensure a higher level of rigor in identifying necessary conditions.

Set-theoretic coverage, another important measure in fsQCA, assesses the extent to which causal combinations explain instances of an outcome. It is similar to the role of correlation coefficients or β -values in correlation analysis, with high coverage values indicating the empirical significance of a single causal condition or combination of conditions.

Our necessity analysis showed that only six causal conditions had consistency values below 0.90, which is the threshold we adopted to establish necessary conditions, although [Ragin \(2008\)](#) recommends a lower threshold of 0.80. The results of this necessity analysis are detailed in [Table 1](#). Our necessity analysis showed that six HRM practices — Workforce Planning, Training and Development, Performance Appraisal, Career Planning, Job Design, and Internal Communication — had consistency values below the 0.90 threshold, indicating that they cannot be considered necessary conditions. Only Compensation and Recruiting and Selection had consistency values above the 0.90 thresholds, making them necessary conditions for the outcome. Consequently, our path analysis focuses on the interplay of these previous six HRM practices to assess their combined effects on turnover rates. The findings indicate that, while Recruiting and Selection practices along with fair Compensation are necessary, they alone are not sufficient to ensure low turnover. Our research indicates that family SMEs must implement effective recruitment-selection and compensation practices to achieve low employee turnover rates. These practices, recognized as primary tools for high performance ([Becker and Huselid, 1998](#)), are necessary but not solely sufficient for ensuring low turnover levels.

4.3 FsQCA analysis of the whole sample: uncovering sufficient causal conditions

Our study employed fsQCA to examine the sufficiency of causal combinations in predicting low turnover rates in family SMEs. This analysis began with constructing a truth table, a key component in fsQCA.

The truth table, a data matrix, accounts for all possible combinations of the causal conditions under study. With six causal conditions included in our analysis, the truth table comprised 26 (64) rows, each representing a different potential configuration of HRM practices.

Table 1. Necessity analysis results

Conditions tested	Consistency	Coverage
PLANNING	0.871	0.908
COMPENSATION	0.947	0.914
RECESEL	0.953	0.910
TRAINING	0.838	0.907
PERFORMANCEAP	0.780	0.907
CARRIERPL	0.121	0.908
JDESIGN	0.819	0.897
INTCOMM	0.673	0.901

Source(s): Created by the authors

We then categorized all 623 family SMEs in our sample into these 64 configurations based on their membership in the causal conditions. Notably, some configurations were represented by numerous cases, while others had few or none. The next step involved reducing these configurations to those with a minimum consistency level of 0.90. This process resulted in 24 configurations, encompassing 586 family SMEs, which reported low turnover rates.

To further refine our analysis, we applied Boolean algebra to simplify these 24 configurations into the most essential combinations of conditions sufficient to achieve low turnover rates. Our sufficiency analysis identified nine such configurations of HRM practices, with a solution coverage of 0.949 and solution consistency of 0.916, indicating high relevance and reliability. These configurations, varying in consistency from 0.894 to 1 and in raw coverage from 0.026 to 0.628, are detailed in Table 2 and are further explored in our study.

To enhance the readability and simplicity of the presentation, the results follow the notation introduced in prior studies (Fiss, 2011): the black circles (●) indicate the presence of a condition, the circles with a cross-out (⊖) indicate the absence of a condition and the blank spaces indicate a situation where that particular condition is not important for the configuration and can be either present or absent. Our results reveal that nine possible HRM practice combinations can effectively reduce employee turnover in family SMEs. Analyzing the practices in the different configurations of Table 2, we can observe that job design is the most present practice across the nine combinations.

4.4 FsQCA analysis of the four sub-samples

Our necessity analysis (Table 3) of the four sub-samples of family SMEs revealed distinct patterns based on the gender composition of their leadership.

In Scenario 1, which features a Male CEO and Male HR Director, five causal conditions showed consistency levels below the 0.90 threshold we adopted to establish necessary conditions, contrary to Ragin’s (2008) recommendation of 0.80. These conditions are Workforce Planning, Training and Development, Performance Appraisal, Career Planning, and Internal Communication. The necessary conditions are the presence of two HRM practices: Compensation and Recruiting and Selection.

In scenarios where women hold key organizational decision-making roles (Scenarios 2, 3, and 4), six HRM practices showed consistency levels below the 0.90 threshold we adopted to establish necessary conditions. These practices are the same as those observed in the broader

Table 2. Uncovering sufficient causal conditions

Causal conditions	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9
PLANNING	●		●			●		⊖	●
TRAINING		●	●	●		●	●	⊖	⊖
PERFORMANCEAP				●	●		●		●
CARRIERPL	⊖	⊖	⊖		⊖			⊖	
JDESIGN	●	●		⊖	●	●	●	⊖	●
INTCOMM			⊖	⊖	●	●	●	⊖	⊖
Raw coverage	0.628	0.583	0.214	0.144	0.437	0.534	0.514	0.026	0.004
Unique coverage	0.083	0.027	0.004	0.025	0.002	0.005	0.002	0.026	0.002
Consistency	0.898	0.895	0.939	0.968	0.894	0.896	0.897	0.967	1
Solution coverage	0.949								
Solution consistency	0.916								

Note(s): Black circles (“●”) indicate the presence of a condition, whereas barred circles (“⊖”) indicate its absence. Blank spaces indicate that the presence of the selected condition is irrelevant; that is, a high value can occur whether the condition is absent or present

Source(s): Created by the authors

Table 3. FsQCA analysis of the four sub-samples_necessary condition analysis

Female CEO	Male HR Director			Female HR Director		
		Consistency	Coverage		Consistency	Coverage
	PLANNING	0.861794	0.997692	PLANNING	0.895592	0.983922
	COMPENSATION	0.961462	0.997931	COMPENSATION	0.982152	0.982679
	RECESEL	1.000000	0.970968	RECESEL	1.000000	0.982983
	TRAINING	0.662791	0.997500	TRAINING	0.824201	0.982553
	PERFORMANCEAP	0.629900	0.997895	PERFORMANCEAP	0.824201	0.982553
	CARRIERPL	0.132226	0.995000	CARRIERPL	0.053543	1.000000
	JDESIGN	0.834219	0.965769	JDESIGN	0.265929	0.993333
	INTCOMM	0.762458	0.997826	INTCOMM	0.248081	0.992857
Male CEO	Male HR Director			Female HR Director		
		Consistency	Coverage		Consistency	Coverage
	PLANNING	0.864444	0.882101	PLANNING	0.888107	0.950675
	COMPENSATION	0.936119	0.889035	COMPENSATION	0.968511	0.951237
	RECESEL	0.946544	0.885780	RECESEL	0.937021	0.949681
	TRAINING	0.857746	0.884677	TRAINING	0.823344	0.945061
	PERFORMANCEAP	0.782162	0.882647	PERFORMANCEAP	0.793639	0.945125
	CARRIERPL	0.122498	0.886792	CARRIERPL	0.148525	0.943333
	JDESIGN	0.902262	0.878629	JDESIGN	0.804136	0.945803
	INTCOMM	0.724979	0.880253	INTCOMM	0.683636	0.943913

Source(s): Created by the authors

sample of family SMEs: Workforce Planning, Training and Development, Performance Appraisal, Career Planning, Job Design, and Internal Communication. However, contrary to Scenario 1, only two HRM practices – Compensation and Recruiting and Selection – are necessary to reach a low level of turnover. Consequently, our study conducted a path analysis to examine the combination of these six HRM practices in all scenarios to understand their impact on turnover rates.

Sufficiency analysis resulted in four different scenarios.

1. Scenario 1 (Male CEO and Male HR Director): 7 configurations of HRM practices for turnover with solution coverage of 0.943. The solution consistency was 0.891. The consistency for a single path ranged from 0.880 to 1. The raw coverage for a single path ranged from 0.005 to 0.738.
2. Scenario 2 (Female CEO and Male HR Director): 6 configurations of HRM practices for turnover with solution coverage of 0.961. The solution consistency was 0.999. The consistency for a single path ranged from 0.997 to 0.999. The raw coverage for a single path ranged from 0.166 to 0.531.
3. Scenario 3 (Male CEO and Female HR Director): 8 configurations of HRM practices for turnover with solution coverage of 1. The solution consistency was 0.953. The consistency for a single path ranged from 0.937 to 1. The raw coverage for a single path ranged from 0.021 to 0.540.
4. Scenario 4 (Female CEO and Female HR Director): 7 configurations of HRM practices for turnover with solution coverage of 1. The solution consistency was 0.983. The consistency for a single path ranged from 0.975 to 1. The raw coverage for a single path ranged from 0.035 to 0.664.

It is important to note that while Scenario 1 presents configurations with high coverage values, its overall solution consistency (0.891) is below the 0.90 threshold we adopted to establish sufficiency. Thus, the configurations in Scenario 1 should be interpreted with caution, as they do not fully meet the sufficiency criteria defined in our study.

These high-consistency configurations in the four scenarios are shown in [Table 4](#) and will be explained subsequently.

It's crucial to highlight that compensation, recruitment and selection, are absent in all four scenarios due to their exclusion from the necessity analysis, even though they are still part of the practices. However, Job Design is not included in Scenario 1 because it does not meet the 0.90 consistency threshold, even though it is present in other configurations.

In our study, different scenarios of leadership gender composition in family SMEs revealed distinct HRM practice patterns. When the CEO and HR Director are male (Scenario 1), the focus tends to be on patriarchal-control HRM practices, as defined in the work of [Lepak and Snell \(2002\)](#) and [Arthur \(1994\)](#). These practices prioritize task control and effectiveness, reflecting an agency approach to managing people. For instance, as shown in [Table 4](#), male-led leadership teams often adopt simpler HR configurations where, however, job design is a necessary practices. Configurations 1C1 and 1C2 involve just one practice (performance appraisal and career planning, respectively), while 1C3 lacks any specific HR practice. In contrast, configurations 1C4, 1C5, and 1C7 combine two practices, focusing more on task improvement. Only in configuration 1C6 we can observe a shift towards more employee-focused HR practices.

Conversely, in scenarios where the CEO is female and the HR Director is male (Scenario 2), the configurations, though fewer in number, demonstrate greater complexity. This scenario is characterized by the strong co-presence of two practices: Job Design and Internal Communication. This scenario is the only one out of (only) 6 possible configurations four of these require the coexistence of the Job Design practice, which is a practice necessary for the CEO man to have low levels of turnover and Internal communication, a typical practice aimed at creating stable long-term relationships close to the Steward orientation. In all the configurations present in scenario 2 it seems that steward practices and vice versa compensate agency practices. Not surprisingly, this is the scenario with the lowest level of turnover.

Scenario 3, when the CEO is a man and the Human Resources Director is a woman, is characterized by the greater number of configurations and, at the same time, the heightened richness and variability in HRM practices. In particular, numerous combinations range from straightforward configurations to highly sophisticated ones. In this scenario, planning is the most common HR practice, and all the configurations, except 3C6, denote the volunteer to transform employees into critical resources. We can observe that the combinations of HR practices are oriented to strategically managing people by experimenting and innovating with several combinations of practices.

In the scenario where the CEO and the HR Director are women (Scenario 4), we observed a range of HRM configurations. These configurations vary from minimal (4C1) to more complex arrangements involving up to five practices (4C5). A common feature across these diverse combinations is the emphasis on training and performance appraisal. This emphasis reflects a management style focused on long-term strategies, merit-based practices, and continual workforce development toward professionalization. Central to these configurations is workforce planning, which aligns the organization's objectives with the skills and talents of its employees. This alignment enables companies to design training programs that address current skill gaps and anticipate future requirements. Such training initiatives empower employees to significantly contribute to the organization's success. A well-structured performance appraisal system offers insights into employee performance and facilitates specific feedback and developmental opportunities. The interplay of these practices equips the workforce with the necessary skills, promotes a culture of ongoing improvement, and supports both individual growth and organizational excellence.

5. Discussion and implications

From [Table 2](#), we can observe how when there is exclusively a male presence in human resources management, the practices necessary to achieve low levels of turnover are different compared to all the other scenarios that imply at least one female presence. In particular, in the social contexts of family SMEs with a male CEO and male HR manager, job design, contrary to the other scenarios, is a necessary human resources management practice. This makes us accept [hypothesis 1](#).

In scenario 1, characterized by the presence of the male CEO and male HRM, the highest turnover rate is observed, and human resource management practices aimed more at satisfying the leader's need for control are used. In this scenario, it seems that a more agency-oriented style of worker management pervades.

In contrast, in scenario 2, characterized by the presence of a female CEO and a male HR, we can observe that the steward will of the female CEO mitigates the agency control of the male HR manager. In scenario 2, it seems that the female CEO uses steward-oriented HR practices such as internal communication and planning to balance agency practices such as performance appraisal and job design. This scenario is the one with the lowest level of turnover, which can be explained by the heavy gender interpretation by the protagonists in the eyes of the workers. This makes us accept [hypothesis 2](#).

Scenario 3, characterized by male CEO and female HRM, shows us how gender diversity in key managerial positions, even in family SMEs, can be a source of innovation and experimentation, confirming [hypothesis 3](#). Not only HR Women, perhaps protected by a patriarchal control emanated by the male CEO, have greater freedom and security to experiment and implement new HR practices, managing to promote an inclusive culture. This role of women, however, subordinated to a male CEO, which is aimed at strengthening a supportive and inclusive work environment ([Chadwick and Dawson, 2018](#)) that increases the cognitive diversity of employees, could meet the expectations of employees towards a HR woman. The stewardship will of the female HR will of the male CEO mitigate the agency.

5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

From a theoretical perspective, we contribute to debates about the presence and the effects of women in key roles in family SMEs ([Campopiano et al., 2017](#); [Naciti et al., 2021](#); [Sarto et al., 2021](#)) by mapping and analyzing the relationship between gender diversity and gender expectations, and HRM practices in different leadership configurations. Our findings confirm that gender-specific leadership styles influence the adoption of distinct bundles of HRM practices and ultimately affect organizational performance in family SMEs. We suggest that family SMEs are a social context requiring particular leadership styles that must meet certain expectations. In particular, when women assume formal roles in human resource management, they are more likely to implement steward-oriented HRM practices associated with lower turnover and higher organizational commitment. We also enhance our understanding of how women act as stewards to achieve high organizational performance. Indeed, our analysis also suggests that to fit gender expectations, women in family SMEs tend to implement steward-oriented HRMP. This reinforces the role of women as key players in improving organizational performance by adopting people-centered HRM practices that promote employee satisfaction and retention.

We also contribute to debates on HRM practices in family businesses ([Steijvers et al., 2017](#); [Flamini et al., 2022](#); [Neckebrouck et al., 2018](#); [Neubaum, 2018](#)). Our analysis suggests that, in smaller family firms, two (in some cases three) HRM practices – Compensation and Research and selection (and, in some cases, Job Design) – are necessary to achieve a low level of turnover. These HRM practices differ depending on the gender composition of the top management team, highlighting the influence of gender on HR strategy formulation and implementation. The different configurations of HRM practices in family SMEs could explain the different combinations of male and/or female CEO and male and/or female HRM that

reflect different steward–agency orientations on managing employees. Our results underline that the presence of women in strategic HR roles is associated with more relational and inclusive HR practices, which contribute to building trust and long-term relationships in the organization.

Finally, we contribute to the debates about gender diversity in family businesses. Using the equifinality perspective, we assess that men and women in family businesses use different HRMPs to achieve the firm’s survival. These different HRM configurations suggest that gender diversity in leadership teams can create complementary HR strategies that are aligned with both efficiency and employee well-being, leading to improved firm performance.

Practitioners must understand how different gender leadership styles in family firms could fit with the peculiar social context of family SMEs to achieve good financial and organizational performance. By understanding the effect of female and male leadership styles, practitioners should abandon the opposition between men and women in business performance and focus more on analyzing which management style of workers is more suitable for the specific organizational context. Given the peculiar culture of family businesses and the importance of non-economic factors, female leadership styles that are more oriented towards stewardship may be more effective in achieving organizational goals and employee engagement. Practitioners could encourage family businesses to involve more women in strategic roles to leverage their potential in driving HRM innovation and fostering an inclusive work environment.

Finally, our findings suggest that the presence of female leaders, whether in the role of CEO or HR Director, fosters more complex and innovative HRM configurations by strategically leveraging job design and internal communication (Scenario 2) or by integrating workforce planning and skill development processes (Scenarios 3 and 4). This dynamic interplay of HRM practices reflects a more relational and steward-oriented approach, which is more effective in creating an inclusive work environment, enhancing cognitive diversity, and supporting the professionalization of employees. This not only aligns with employees’ expectations but also promotes innovation and organizational resilience in family businesses.

6. Conclusion and limitations

Men and women CEOs in family SMEs interpret their roles differently and use different HRM configurations to align their roles to the employees’ expectations to achieve similar organizational performance. Our results show that women in top management roles lead family SMEs to adopt unique HRM practices configurations aimed at achieving low turnover, which are markedly different from those utilized by male CEOs and HR managers. To fit the employees’ expectations, women tend to interpret their leadership role in family SMEs differently than men (Chadwick and Dawson, 2018) and use different combinations of HRM practices to achieve the same goal as men: low turnover.

Specifically, the study highlights that when a woman serves as CEO, she tends to implement steward orientation on managing employees. When a woman is in the role of HR manager, there is a heightened focus on the professionalization of employees and practices and a trend of experimenting with innovative combinations of HRM practices. The diversity within the Top Management Team (TMT) significantly enriches the range of strategies applied to human resource management, enhancing organizational dynamics and effectiveness.

Our study, while comprehensive, has several limitations that should be noted. First, we focused solely on formal HRM practices in family SMEs. Other researchers, such as Steijvers *et al.* (2017) and Pittino *et al.* (2016), have delved deeper into HRM practices. Future studies could explore the impact of HRM practice complexity on employee retention and productivity in family SMEs.

Second, the fsQCA methodology we used has its constraints. The calibration of variables can introduce subjective biases, although we attempted to minimize this by relying on a mix of primary and secondary data and a large sample size. Furthermore, the number of family SMEs

in our sample might limit the range of theoretical configurations identified in the truth tables of the four scenarios. While we have highlighted a wide array of HRM system configurations, additional systems may not be captured in our study. Future research with a larger sample size could reveal more HRM systems in family SMEs, including the value of informal HR practices alongside formal ones.

Third, our analysis included the impact of female presence in top management on HRM practice implementation but did not differentiate between family and non-family members. The role of family women in HRM practices and the influence of different generations in top management could significantly affect HRM in family businesses. Future research could investigate these aspects, considering the dynamics of family members like daughters, wives or mothers in the decision-making processes of family SMEs.

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