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IMPACT OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP ON FAMILY BUSINESS GROWTH AND INNOVATION IN NIGERIA

BY

[1]Sodeinde Gbemi Moses, [2]Segun Anthony Olatoyan, [3]Adedoyin Funmilayo Adebayo & [4]Ayoola Samuel Olawemo
[1]Precious Cornerstone University, Ibadan, Oyo State. Department of Business Administration.
[2]Petrolex Oil & Gas Ltd, Lagos State, Nigeria.
[3]Polaris Bank Ltd.
[4]Firstmidas Microfinance Bank Ltd.
Email: gbemisodeinde@pcu.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between female leadership styles and the growth and innovation of family businesses in Nigeria. To achieve a clear and structured understanding of the research problem, a quantitative research approach was adopted. Data were collected through a survey administered to 50 women leaders actively involved in family-owned businesses. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify patterns and relationships. The findings reveal that both transformational and servant leadership styles have a positive influence on the survival and sustainability of family businesses. These leadership approaches appear to foster collaboration, trust, and long-term strategic thinking, which are essential for business continuity and innovation. This study contributes to existing literature by offering valuable insights into the roles, leadership styles, and contributions of women in family business development within the Nigerian context. It also highlights the challenges faced by female leaders and their impact on business growth. The implications of the findings are relevant for family business owners, policymakers, and leadership development initiatives aimed at supporting women in leadership. Future research should consider examining how cultural factors shape women's leadership styles and influence the sustainability of family businesses.
Keywords: Female leadership, Family businesses, Transformational leadership, Servant leadership

Introduction

Family businesses are a vital part of Nigeria's socio-economic landscape, contributing significantly to job creation, wealth generation, and entrepreneurial innovation. These enterprises are often rooted in cultural values and serve as strategic mechanisms for survival, particularly in an economy marked by volatility and limited formal employment opportunities. Despite their contributions, family businesses in Nigeria operate in a challenging environment shaped by globalization, rapid technological change, and evolving socio-cultural dynamics (Aina & Ajayi, 2019; Nzekwe & Emenalo, 2018). The terrain is further complicated by intense competition and internal dynamics such as succession planning, power distribution, and balancing professional demands with family cohesion. These factors create a complex context that requires adaptive leadership and strategic management to ensure long term business survival. One of the most significant transformations in the Nigerian family business landscape over the past decades is the increasing involvement of women in leadership roles (Omotayo & Adeyemi, 2019).

Traditionally, Nigerian society assigned women secondary roles within the family and business structures, shaped largely by patriarchal norms. However, this narrative is gradually shifting. Improvements in female education, changing societal attitudes, and a growing appreciation of women's leadership capabilities have led to a surge in women actively leading and managing family enterprises (Nzekwe & Emenalo, 2014; Aina & Ajayi, 2019). These women often bring distinctive leadership strengths such as collaborative approaches, ethical decision-making, strong interpersonal skills, and a focus on employee engagement and well-being (Ojo & Akinbode, 2021). These traits have been associated with increased innovation, better staff retention, and enhanced organizational performance.

Nevertheless, despite these promising developments, women leaders in Nigerian family businesses continue to face substantial challenges. Patriarchal structures, gender biases, and resistance to change often hinder their leadership effectiveness and limit their ability to fully implement their vision (Ogundiran & Abiodun, 2022). Many operate in environments where their authority is questioned, and decision-making is constrained by familial expectations and entrenched power dynamics. These conditions not only affect the personal experiences of women leaders but also influence broader business outcomes such as continuity, growth, and intergenerational sustainability. Although there is growing scholarly interest in women's leadership within family businesses, significant research gaps remain. Existing studies often rely heavily on quantitative data and small sample sizes, neglecting the contextual nuances of Nigerian socie**ty incl**uding culture, socio economic realities, and family dynamics that shape leadership behavior and effectiveness (Aina & Ajayi, 2019; Omotayo & Adeyemi, 2019). Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on the specific leadership styles adopted by women in family businesses and how these styles impact business survival across various dimensions such as financial performance, social impact, and employee well-being (Abiodun & Ogundiran, 2023). Understanding these dynamics is essential, especially in the context of Nigeria where leadership is often influenced by traditional roles, religious beliefs, and kinship expectations. The problem, therefore, lies in the limited understanding of the leadership styles adopted by women in Nigerian family businesses, and the extent to which these styles influence business survival. Despite the increasing visibility of women in leadership roles, research has not adequately explored how cultural, social, and organizational factors shape their leadership approaches, nor how these approaches affect key performance indicators. Addressing this gap is critical for developing inclusive strategies that support not only the growth of family businesses but also the empowerment of women as transformative leaders within them.

Literature Review

Leadership, entails influencing individuals or groups to achieve shared goals (Northouse, 2019). Yet, its manifestations and effectiveness vary across diverse contexts, prompting continuous exploration and debate. Early leadership theories adopted trait-based perspectives, suggesting innate qualities like intelligence, decisiveness, and charisma distinguished effective leaders (Bass, 1990). However, these approaches had faced criticism for neglecting the dynamic nature of leadership and its dependence on situational factors (Yukl, 2013). Also, there are others believe in transformational leadership, emphasizing that leader behaviors that inspire, motivate, and intellectually stimulate followers, leading to collective growth and goal achievement (Bass & Avolio, 1994). In addition, another type of leader refers to Servant leadership, posits leaders prioritize the needs and growth of their followers, fostering a collaborative and service-oriented environment (Greenleaf, 1970).

Contemporary explorations delve deeper, recognizing the complexities of leadership styles and their nuanced interplay with contextual factors like gender, culture, and family dynamics (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This aligns with findings by Aina and Ajayi (2019) in the context of Nigeria family businesses, where women leaders demonstrate

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strengths in communication, empathy, and ethical decision-making. However, cultural norms and entrenched patriarchal structures in Nigeria can pose challenges for women leaders, as stated by Nzekwe and Emenalo (2018). It allows us to move beyond simplistic comparisons based on gender and delve into the specific leadership styles, strengths, and challenges they navigate within this unique socio cultural and familial setting. By critically analyzing existing research and considering the insights offered by different theoretical frameworks, we can build a more comprehensive understanding of how women's leadership shapes the survival and sustainability of family businesses in Nigeria.

Historically, leadership roles in Nigerian family businesses were male-dominated, reinforcing deep seated stereotypes and under representation of women. However, this trend is gradually shifting, with more women ascending to positions of authority and demonstrating a range of competencies in leadership styles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In the domain of family enterprises, women are increasingly challenging prevailing norms and redefining traditional roles (Nzekwe & Emenalo, 2018). Aina and Ajayi (2019) underscore this shift, noting a steady increase in women who not only lead family businesses but also contribute significantly to their economic performance and long-term sustainability. Female leaders often exhibit communal leadership qualities characterized by collaboration, relationship building and an emphasis on group well being (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women in family businesses were found to bring strengths such as strong communication, empathy and ethical decision making to their roles (Ajayi & Ogunlana, 2015). Furthermore, Aina and Ajayi (2019) argue that these leadership behaviors help foster trust and loyalty within family structures, a critical factor for the enduring success of family control enterprises. Previous research has shown that women leadership plays a crucial role in the survivability of family firms. A study covering over 500 respondents across southwest Nigeria found that effective leadership positively influences long term business success (Abiodun et al., 2019). The findings suggest that adaptive leadership approaches, such as those often observed in women-led contexts, can help ameliorate internal power struggles and enhance organizational resilience. Several challenges still undermine the experiences of women leaders. Role Congruity Theory indicates that women in leadership may be perceived less favorably due to the mismatch between gender stereotypes and traditional leadership expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002), undermining their credibility and reducing support for their leadership. In family businesses, these challenges are exacerbated by entrenched patriarchal structures and complex power dynamics (Adeyemi & Ogunlana, 2015). Moreover, women leaders frequently face added pressures from dual roles at home and in business a challenge documented among working-class married women in Kwara State who struggle with family-related responsibilities (Ileoma & Ifeoma, 2024)

Access to resources also remains a significant hurdle. Female entrepreneurs in Nigeria often grapple with limited access to financing, constrained collateral due to property and inheritance laws, and lack of familial support factors that collectively stifle the growth potential of women-led businesses (Obstacles: Ogotun case study and others on a more positive note**,** however, numerous mentorship and empowerment programs are emerging to support women entrepreneurs and leaders. These initiatives include Women in Business Nigeria (WIBN), She Leads Africa, and the Tony Elumelu Foundation Entrepreneurship Programme, which offer training, funding, and valuable networks to help women scale their ventures (ShakersDomain, 2023) Additionally, mentoring has been empirically linked to improved business performance in Nigeria by enabling knowledge transfer, psychosocial support, and leadership development (Ifeoma, 2019). Family businesses are diverse and multifaceted, often resisting a singular definition due to the varying degrees of family involvement, ownership structures, and generational influence (Sodeinde etal,,2025, Khatabook, 2023, Tagiuri and Davis (1982) provide one of the most enduring and comprehensive definitions, describing a family business as one where two or more family members are involved and where the family significantly influences the company's vision and strategic direction. This perspective is supported by Ajayi and Adeboye (2017), who highlight the prevalence of multigenerational ownership and management in Nigerian family firms, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These businesses often span traditional sectors such as trade, manufacturing, and agriculture, reflecting not only economic imperatives but also deep-rooted cultural practices and family values. Family businesses offer several unique advantages that differentiate them from non-family enterprises. The close intertwining of family and business values fosters a shared commitment to long-term goals, often resulting in greater resilience, stronger organizational culture, and employee loyalty (Omotayo & Adeyemi, 2016). Nzekwe and Emenalo opine that (2018), the sense of legacy and stewardship that comes from family involvement can drive innovation and promote business continuity across generations. These firms also benefit from informal governance mechanisms, flexible decision-making structures, and faster communication advantages that can translate into quicker responses to market changes and stronger competitive positioning (Khatabook, 2023; Astrachan & Shanker, 2003). Furthermore, family firms often have a strong reputation within their communities, enhancing customer trust and stakeholder goodwill (Chrisman, Chua, & Sharma, 2005).

However, family businesses are not without their challenges. A major concern is the blurring of family and business roles**,** which can lead to nepotism, favoritism, and a lack of meritocratic decision making (Adeyemi & Ogunlana, 2015). This dynamic may hinder organizational growth and create internal tensions, particularly when leadership or key roles are assigned based on family ties rather than competence. Succession planning remains one of the most difficult aspects, particularly in patriarchal societies like Nigeria, where leadership transitions are often fraught with cultural expectations and generational conflict (Nzekwe & Emenalo, 2018). Sharma et al. (2001) emphasize that poorly planned successions are one of the leading causes of failure in family firms after the first generation. Additionally, while the inter generational transfer of values is often seen as a strength, it can become a liability when it impedes adaptation to changing markets and technological trends. Aina and Ajayi (2019) argue that maintaining traditional business practices in the face of global competition may result in lost opportunities, particularly when younger family members are restricted from introducing innovation. Family conflicts, such as disputes over inheritance, compensation, or role clarity, can escalate into major governance crises that threaten the stability of the enterprise (Le & Miller, 2006). Understanding the specific cultural and economic context in which Nigerian family businesses operate is essential. In cities like Ibadan and Lagos, family enterprises dominate the informal sector and often function without formal governance frameworks (Ajayi & Adeboye, 2017). This can make them agile but also vulnerable to regulatory and structural challenges. Recognizing the dual identity of these businesses as both economic units and social institutions is key to formulating support policies, succession plans, and training programs that reflect their unique dynamics. While family businesses offer significant economic and social benefit, including long term orientation, trust-based leadership and resilience, they also face substantial internal and external challenges. These include governance issues, succession difficulties, and resistance to change. Addressing these complexities requires a nuanced understanding of cultural context, family dynamics, and strategic management, particularly within Nigeria's evolving business landscape.

Agency Theory serves as the foundational framework for this research. It posits that within a principal agent relationship, the principal (family business owners) entrusts the agent (women leaders) with the authority to make decisions on their behalf (Eisenhardt, 1988). However, this delegation creates the potential for agency risks, where the agent's actions may diverge from the principal's interests (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). : The extent to which women leaders have the freedom to make strategic decisions for the family business without undue influence from family members or cultural norms.. The degree to which the goals and objectives of women leaders are congruent with those of the family business owners. This includes exploring potential conflicts arising from gender stereotypes or differing risk appetites. Monitoring and control mechanisms: The strategies employed by family business owners to monitor the performance of women leaders and ensure alignment with family business goals. This could involve formal performance metrics, informal oversight from family members, or a combination of both.

The role of female leadership in the development of family businesses in Nigeria has garnered increasing academic attention, especially as gender dynamics and leadership paradigms evolve in the African socio-cultural context. Empirical studies suggest that women in leadership positions within family enterprises contribute significantly to innovation, sustainable growth, and organizational cohesion, albeit while navigating systemic barriers shaped by patriarchal norms and cultural expectations. Aina and Ajayi (2019), found that women often adopt communal leadership styles characterized by collaboration, empathy, and effective communication. This finding aligns with the earlier conceptual framework proposed by Eagly and Carli (2007), who argued that female leaders tend to engage more in participatory decision making and transformational leadership. Abiodun and Ogundiran (2023) state that women are effective in family business settings, as they foster trust, loyalty, and team cohesion, essential for long term sustainability. Omotayo and Adeyemi (2016) futher validate the intersection of contextual influences and leadership adaptability. They posited that leadership is not only gendered but also contextually situated; thus, Nigerian women in family businesses often blend assertive and communal traits to balance business demands and cultural expectations. Aina and Ajayi (2021) support that women leaders navigate cultural boundaries by aligning with traditional values of respect and deference while maintaining strategic decision-making roles.

The leadership trajectories of women in family businesses are often constrained by socio cultural and institutional barriers. Nzekwe and Emenalo (2018) highlighted how patriarchal structures continue to limit women's access to key resources and decision-making authority within family businesses. This is further echoed by Ajayi and Ogunlana (2016), who noted that women are often excluded from succession plans and leadership roles due to gender biases and inherited norms within Africa and Nigeria in particular. Emenalo and Nzekwe (2020) also emphasized the dual burden faced by female leaders, who must balance professional responsibilities with familial roles, often at the expense of career progression or innovation efforts. The collectivist nature of Nigerian culture adds another layer of complexity. Adebayo and Ajayi (2019) argue that cultural expectations around leadership styles particularly respect for elders and male dominance can suppress assertive leadership among women. Yet, this cultural dynamic also enables women leaders to deploy relational leadership strategies that emphasize consensus building and inter generational collaboration (Aina & Ajayi, 2021). Such strategies can become competitive advantages in family business contexts, where kinship and relational ties are central to governance and succession planning. Beyond managing inter personal dynamics, evidence showts that women leaders drive innovation and business transformation. Aina and Ajayi (2019) observed that female led family businesses in Nigeria exhibit higher degrees of transformational leadership**,** often leading to improved product development, customer relationship management, and employee engagement. Similarly, Abiodun and Ogundiran (2023) found that women leaders effectively leverage supportive networks and emotional intelligence to foster innovation and build inclusive work environments. Omotayo and Adeyemi (2016) opion that ethical leadership and strong communication often associated with women build trust within the family and enterprise, which can enhance strategic alignment and long-term planning. Nonetheless, gaps persist in the literature. Many studies are limited to case studies and qualitative accounts, often focusing on southern Nigeria or urban family businesses. There is limited longitudinal evidence assessing the long-term impact of female leadership on financial performance, inter generational succession, and resilience in diverse geographic and cultural contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge these empirical gaps by

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investigating the long-term influence of female leadership on business innovation and growth across varied Nigerian socio-cultural settings**.**

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon. The target population comprises women leaders occupying management positions in family businesses within Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 50 respondents for the survey. Data collected from the respondents were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to ensure a thorough examination of the relationships and patterns within the data. This approach enhances the reliability of the findings and supports meaningful conclusions about the role of female leadership in family businesses.

Results

Table .1 Descriptive Statistics of Servant Leadership

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I focus on building strong relationships with employees.	50	3	5	4.26	.633
I am open to new ideas and suggestions from employees.	50	3	5	4.54	.542
I believe in the importance of delegation and trust in my employees.	50	1	5	4.36	.802
I am comfortable taking risks and making bold decisions.	50	2	5	4.48	.762

Author's Computation (2026)

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for statements related to servant leadership, reflecting how leaders perceive their own behaviors and attitudes in a leadership context. On average, respondents agree that they focus on building strong relationships with employees with mean value of 4.26. The Std. Deviation of 0.633 suggests that while most respondents focus on this, some may have different approaches, while Std. Deviation of 0.542 indicates a strong consensus among respondents on being open to ideas. On average, respondents agree that they value delegation and trust in employees with mean value of 4.36, the Std. deviation of 0.802 suggests a wider range of opinions, indicating that while many agree, others might be less inclined to delegate or trust fully Respondents generally agree that they are comfortable taking risks and making bold decisions with a mean value of 4.48, while the Std. Deviation of 0.762 suggests differences in comfort levels with risk-taking among respondents. The implication of this finding is that the high mean scores across the statements suggest that leaders perceive themselves as adopting key elements of servant leadership, such as relationship-building, openness, delegation, and risk-taking. While the mean score for comfort with risk-taking is high (4.48), the standard deviation (0.762) suggests some leaders might be more risk-averse. This could have implications for organizational decision-making, as some leaders may need support or training to feel more comfortable with bold decisions.

VOL. 5 (2), DECEMBER, 2025
ISSN 2756-4444
E-ISSN 2756-4452

Table 2 **Descriptive Statistics of Transformational Leadership**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I always inspire and motivate my employee to exceed their own expectations.	50	3	5	4.06	.803
I serve as a role model, demonstrating high standards of ethical behavior and professionalism.	50	3	5	5.94	.592
I encourage employees to think creatively and challenge traditional ways of doing things.	50	1	5	4.74	.702
I provide personalized support and encouragement to help employees achieve their goals.	50	2	5	4.08	.772

Author's Computation (2026)

This table provides descriptive statistics related to different aspects of transformational leadership based on a survey of 50 respondents. I always inspire and motivate my employees to exceed their own expectations has a mean of 4.06, indicating moderate to high agreement. I serve as a role model, demonstrating high standards of ethical behavior and professionalism has a mean of 5.94, which is exceptionally high, suggesting near-universal agreement and possibly a ceiling effect (a clustering of high scores). I encourage employees to think creatively and challenge traditional ways of doing things has a mean of 4.74, showing strong agreement. I provide personalized support and encouragement to help employees achieve their goals has a mean of 4.08, indicating moderate to high agreement. The high means for most items suggests that respondents perceive themselves or their leaders as embodying transformational leadership qualities to a significant extent. The high score and low variability in the role model statement imply that ethical behavior and professionalism are particularly emphasized.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Survival of Family Businesses Growth

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
There is a clear succession plan in place for the family business.	50	2	5	4.38	.805
The family business has a strong sense of shared values and goals.	50	2	5	4.10	.707
Family conflicts negatively impact the business performance.	50	1	5	4.22	1.282
There is a clear separation between family and business matters.	50	2	5	4.18	.774
Balancing family and business responsibilities is a significant challenge.	50	1	5	4.20	.990
Gender bias affects my ability to lead the family business.	50	1	5	4.04	1.195
There are opportunities for women to innovate and grow the family business.	50	1	5	4.20	.904
Access to finance is a major challenge for women-led family businesses.	50	1	5	4.42	.883

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I have faced challenges in accessing business networks and support systems.	50	1	5	4.20	1.050

Author's Computation (2026)

The table presents descriptive statistics for various statements related to the survival of family businesses. On average, respondents strongly agree that their family businesses have a clear succession plan in place with mean value of 4.38. The relatively low standard deviation indicates that most respondents have a similar opinion on this matter. The mean of 4.10 indicates that there is also strong agreement that family businesses have shared values and goals. The low standard deviation suggests consistency in this belief. Respondents generally agree that family conflicts negatively impact business performance with a mean of 4.22, but the higher standard deviation indicates more varied responses, suggesting that this issue may be more significant in some businesses than others. Most respondents agree that there is a clear separation between family and business matters (M= 4.18), with responses showing relatively low variability. Balancing family and business responsibilities is seen as a significant challenge, with a mean response indicating general agreement. The standard deviation shows some variability in how challenging this is perceived to be (Mean = 4.20, Std. Dev. = 0.990). the mean of 4.04 shows that there is agreement that gender bias affects leadership ability in family businesses, but the higher standard deviation suggests mixed experiences among respondents. There is a general agreement that there are opportunities for women to innovate and grow the family business (mean = 4.20), though the standard deviation indicates varying degrees of agreement. Access to finance is perceived as a major challenge for women-led family businesses, with strong agreement and a standard deviation indicating moderate variability in responses (Mean = 4.42, Std. Dev. = 0.883). Respondents agree that accessing business networks and support systems is a challenge, with a higher standard deviation indicating diverse experiences (Mean = 4.20, Std. Dev. = 1.050). The implies that the high means and low standard deviations suggest that clear succession plans and shared values are likely critical to the survival and continuity of family businesses. These are areas where family businesses seem to be performing well. The high mean score and variability in responses regarding the impact of family conflicts indicate that while this is a significant issue, the degree to which it affects businesses may vary widely. Addressing family conflicts could be key to improving business performance. Overall, the descriptive statistics suggest that while family businesses have strengths in areas like succession planning and shared values, there are significant challenges, particularly related to family dynamics and gender, that need to be addressed to ensure long-term survival and success.

Hypotheses Testing

Table . Result of Regression Analysis

Variable	Model (Survival of Family Businesses)
Constant	**3.067**
Transformational Leadership	
	5.721
	0.000**
Servant Leadership	**6.429**
	0.000**
R	**.605**
R Square	**.597**
F-Statistics	**23.231***

*P<0.05 **P<0.01

Author's computation (2026)

The beta-value of 5.721 indicates that transformational leadership as a whole has a strong positive effect on the survival of family businesses, with each unit increase in this leadership style leading to a 5.721 unit increase in survival. The p-value (0.000**) also shows this is statistically significant. Servant leadership, where leaders prioritize the needs of their followers, has an even stronger positive effect on family business survival, with a coefficient of 6.429. This means that increases in servant leadership are associated with a substantial increase in the survival rate. The p-value (0.000**) confirms this result is statistically significant. An R value of 0.605 indicates a moderate to strong positive relationship. The R^2 of 0.597 indicates that 59.7% of the variance in the survival of family businesses can be explained by the independent variables (, Transformational Leadership, and Servant Leadership). This suggests the model has a reasonably good fit. The F-Statistic tests the overall significance of the regression model. A significant F-statistic (often marked with an asterisk, as here) indicates that the model is statistically significant, meaning that at least one of the predictor variables (Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership) is significantly related to the dependent variable. The implication of this finding is that the model suggests that leadership styles, particularly Transformational Leadership, and Servant Leadership, are crucial factors in the survival of family businesses. Businesses that emphasize these leadership approaches may have better chances of long-term success. Family businesses might consider investing in leadership development programs that foster these leadership styles, as they are statistically significant predictors of business survival. The low p-values across all leadership variables among women indicate that these factors are reliably associated with business survival, making them critical areas of focus for researchers and practitioners interested in enhancing the longevity of family businesses

Conclusion

This study explores the leadership styles and contributions of women leaders in family businesses in Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study finds that women leaders in family businesses exhibit unique leadership styles that blend traditional and modern approaches. The study also identifies challenges faced by women leaders, including cultural and societal expectations, family dynamics, and limited access to resources. Despite these challenges, women leaders make significant contributions to the survival and sustainability of family businesses. The growing body of knowledge on women's leadership in family businesses, particularly in the Nigerian context. The findings highlight the importance of considering the intersection of gender, culture, and family dynamics in understanding leadership styles and contributions. The study also underscores the need for policies and programs that support women leaders in family businesses, including training and development programs, access to finance, and mentorship initiatives. Ultimately, this study demonstrates the significance of women's leadership in family businesses and the need for further research to explore the complexities of women's leadership in diverse cultural contexts.

Reccommendatios

1. Family business owners especially women leaders should be encouraged to undergo structured leadership training that emphasizes transformational and servant leadership practices.

2. Given the strong influence of servant leadership (as reflected in high means for openness, trust, and relationship-building), family businesses should adopt more inclusive management systems that actively involve employees in decision-making.

3. Considering the identified challenges such as gender bias, limited access to finance, and restricted business networks, there is a need for targeted institutional and policy support. Government agencies, financial institutions, and business associations should design programs that improve women's access to funding, mentorship, and professional networks.

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