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Counting Women, Keeping Men in Power? Willingness–Ability–Authority in Family Firms

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ABSTRACT

This commentary unsettles the "add-women-and-stir" perspective and re-centers gendered power in family firms as a question of governance, not headcounts. We see family firms as gendered regimes where kinship, ownership, and succession intertwine with broader societal gender norms to maintain patriarchal settlements. Building on feminist analyses of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity, we advance a willingness–ability–authority framework to illuminate how managers and family members navigate gender equality in these organizations. We argue that willingness tends to be shaped by masculinity-contest norms that frame equality work as status-threatening, whereas ability can be constrained by kin coalitions, heir-first legitimacy, and informal governance structures. We argue that discourses of ESG and "family values" risk remaining symbolic unless reforms meaningfully redistribute decision rights over pay, promotion, and succession. In this commentary, we set an agenda for future research around (i) the "ideal-heir" scripts, (ii) feminized glue work that sustains legitimacy without jurisdiction, (iii) temporal dynamics of rupture and return across generations, and (iv) intersectional variation across class, ethnicity, religion, and family forms. We suggest the value of feminist methodologies in research on family firms through institutional ethnography, memory-work, and participatory action research, in order not only to map chains of ruling but also to co-produce institutionally grounded interventions. This commentary calls for shifting from counting women to examining the governance arrangements that structure authority, and therefore moves the field toward genuinely gender-equitable family firms aligned with SDG 5.

1 | Introduction

Workplace gender inequality remains deeply entrenched, even in organizations that proclaim commitments to "family values" or alignment with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). A decade of scholarship in *Gender, Work, & Organization (GWO)* has illustrated with clarity that gendered power is neither neutral nor incidental: Patriarchal logics inhabit organizational architectures, cultural norms, and everyday practices that continually shape who is recognized, who is authorized to lead, and whose labor is rendered indispensable yet undervalued (Bastian et al. 2025; Ferry 2025; Kataria et al. 2021). Against this backdrop, the enduring tendency within mainstream family business research to portray family firms as harmonious, gender-neutral, or innately nurturing organizational forms is analytically limiting. Such portrayals

risk reproducing an idealized narrative in which familial cohesion obscures the mechanisms through which sons, husbands, and brothers are preferentially groomed for power, whereas daughters, wives, and sisters are tasked with sustaining harmony rather than shaping governance. What emerges is the risk of a version of SDG 5 reduced to a symbolic commitment rather than a substantive agenda for addressing inequality.

Studies published in *GWO* have repeatedly shown that gendered inequalities are sustained not only through exclusion but also through silencing and narrative control. Gröschl's (2025) analysis of migrant women entrepreneurs, characterized as "without a voice," offers a reminder that narratives of cohesion or tradition often marginalize those whose experiences complicate the official family business storyline. A similar erasure occurs when family business scholarship foregrounds intergenerational harmony without interrogating the affective, emotional, and relational labor disproportionately performed by women. Representation alone is not a proxy for empowerment; *GWO* research demonstrates that women's presence is frequently leveraged as reputation work rather than as a commitment to power redistribution (Martín-Zamora et al. 2025). Even when women reach governance roles, they often do so under heightened scrutiny, facing masculinized expectations of competence and contending with the contradictory demands placed upon minoritized actors: To be exceptional yet modest, authoritative yet deferential.

Family business research has relied heavily on the concepts of managerial willingness and ability to explain why some leaders initiate change while others maintain the status quo (De Massis et al. 2014). Yet, as feminist scholarship consistently argues, individual-level dispositions cannot be disentangled from the organizational, cultural, and familial contexts that enable or constrain them. Women in family firms may be highly motivated to advance gender equality but find their efforts undermined by informal patriarchal coalitions, kinship entitlements, and legacy narratives that center male heirs as "natural" successors. Studies of part-time female managers (Durbin and Tomlinson 2014) and women union activists (Cornejo-Abarca et al. 2025) remind us that capability flourishes only when structural supports are present; where authority is centralized or opaque, even the most willing actors confront institutionalized ceilings. Conversely, relational leadership can disrupt patriarchal routines, but only where actors possess the structural latitude to do so.

To foreground gendered power more explicitly, our commentary brings Expectation States Theory (Correll and Ridgeway 2003) into conversation with feminist analyses of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. This allows us to interrogate how family logic, rooted in lineage, tradition, and an ethic of sacrifice, naturalizes assumptions of male competence and crafts gendered scripts of legitimacy.

The heir is not merely appointed; he is culturally groomed as the rightful inheritor of leadership, often through rituals, narratives, and practices that privilege specific masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). At the same time, we acknowledge that matriarchal authority can reproduce exclusion through different mechanisms, rewarding loyalty, seniority, or familial closeness over merit and suppressing dissent in the name of harmony (Smith 2014). Family culture thus becomes the pivotal analytic locus: The site where gendered authority is produced, legitimized, and maintained.

Recognizing these mechanisms compels a shift in analytical focus. Rather than asking whether women are present, or whether managers are willing or able, we argue that the more foundational question concerns governance: Who holds the authority to make decisions about pay, promotion, and succession, and on what terms? To answer this, we extend the established *willingness–ability* framework by introducing a third dimension: *Authority*, defined as the distribution of enforceable decision rights. This addition is crucial in family firms where governance arrangements are frequently informal, path-dependent, and heavily shaped by kin dynamics. Authority determines whether equality initiatives can be enacted, resourced, and sustained; without it, willingness and ability remain constrained or symbolic.

This shift is especially important as family firms increasingly draw on ESG discourse to signal ethical leadership. Although ESG commitments can create openings for accountability, they often serve as optics rather than engines of reform when they are not accompanied by changes to who is empowered to act. Aligning with SDG 5 requires more than adopting its language; it requires interrogating and remaking the gendered settlements embedded in family governance.

In this commentary, we therefore place gender theory at the center of family business analysis. By tracing how gendered authority is constituted, reproduced, and occasionally destabilized, we outline a power-sensitive framework for understanding change in family firms. Our aim is not merely to describe incremental progress but to challenge the governance structures that reproduce inequality across generations. Only by examining the interplay of gender, kinship, organizational design, and intersectional identities can scholarship and practice move toward genuinely gender-equitable family firms aligned with both the spirit and substance of SDG 5.

2 | Managers' Willingness Reframed: From Disposition to Politics

Willingness has long been treated as a matter of managerial disposition: a personal openness to equality, shaped by values, prior experiences, or individual motivations (De Massis et al. 2014). In family firms, however, willingness cannot be understood apart from the political, relational, and gendered configurations in which managers operate. Power differentials, kinship expectations, and legacy narratives affect what is seen as possible, desirable, or risky. Willingness is therefore not simply about whether managers "care" about equality but about the costs attached to challenging entrenched gender orders and the privileges that cushion some actors from recognizing inequality in the first place.

Research on managerial power suggests that actors with higher status are more likely to raise the threshold of what they consider "unfair" and therefore less likely to perceive inequality as warranting intervention (Cortis et al. 2022; Miron et al. 2025). In family firms, such thresholds are further shaped by kinship scripts that naturalize male authority and intertwine leadership

with lineage, inheritance, and obligation. What appears as an absence of willingness may therefore reflect the political risks of deviating from these scripts. Conversely, women and minoritized actors often demonstrate high willingness to champion equality, yet do so from structurally disadvantaged positions: their willingness is interpreted through gendered stereotypes of care, moral duty, or emotional sensitivity, rather than as legitimate claims for institutional redesign.

Expectation States Theory (Correll and Ridgeway 2003) helps explain why these dynamics endure. Gendered status beliefs amplified by family narratives inform assumptions of competence and authority, shaping whose assessments of "fairness" command attention and whose concerns are dismissed or minimized. Empirical studies across family firm settings confirm that deeply rooted stereotypes continue to influence evaluations of women's capability, leadership potential, and readiness for succession (Lerner and Malach-Pines 2011; Dettori and Floris 2023; Nguyen et al. 2022). These beliefs do not merely distort perception; they organize the distribution of legitimacy and voice.

Hegemonic masculinity further structures willingness through the scripts that define the "ideal heir." Succession is not only a transfer of assets but a performative process in which heirs are expected to embody toughness, omnipresence, risk appetite, and stoicism, traits culturally coded as masculine (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). These scripts are enacted through rituals, humor, informal mentoring, and rites of passage (Barrett 1996; Whitehead 1999). Within this context, endorsing gender equality may be construed as a denial of the masculine ideals that secure one's standing within the family and the firm. Masculinity-contest cultures intensify this dynamic: Men may privately support equality yet publicly resist it to avoid status loss among influential peers (Berdahl et al. 2018).

Willingness is thus politically regulated by both familial expectations and organizational masculinities. Even when male successors possess substantial formal ability due to their position within the governance structure, the norms that govern legitimacy can depress willingness by linking equality advocacy to weakness, disloyalty, or deviation from the lineage script. Conversely, women's willingness is routinely reinterpreted as emotional labor or relational maintenance, forms of work that are essential yet insufficient to alter power structures unless coupled with institutional authority and structural ability.

Intersectionality adds further nuance. Family firms are embedded in cultural, religious, and community contexts that shape gendered expectations differently across classed, ethnicized, and religious lines. Women from some backgrounds may face heightened scrutiny, narrower legitimacy claims, or greater reputational risk when advocating equality. Men from marginalized backgrounds may also navigate competing masculinities that complicate their willingness to endorse reforms without jeopardizing their own fragile authority. Willingness, in this sense, is relationally produced at the intersection of gender, kinship, and social difference, not an individual orientation but a negotiated position within a gendered governance system.

Understanding willingness as political rather than merely psychological, therefore, shifts the analytic focus: *The question is not simply whether actors are willing but what it costs them to be willing, and how organizational and family structures differentially distribute those costs*. This reframing also clarifies why willingness alone cannot advance equality in family firms. Without structural ability and enforceable authority, willingness remains vulnerable to co-optation, symbolic absorption, or marginalization.

2.1 | Identity, Alignment, and Their Limits

Identity-based explanations suggest that actors are more likely to advocate on behalf of groups with whom they identify (Rees and Garnsey 2003; Ashforth and Mael 1989). In family firms, it might thus be expected that women managers or younger-generation actors would be more inclined to challenge gender inequality, whereas more privileged incumbents might prioritize it less. Yet such alignment is neither uniform nor inherently emancipatory. Identity intersects with gender, generation, marital status, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality, producing uneven legitimacy and authority for those seeking to challenge the status quo.

At the senior levels where strategic decisions are made, attraction–selection–attrition dynamics ensure that homophily remains pervasive; those who resemble existing leaders, often in gendered, classed and racialized ways, are more readily perceived as legitimate (Rovelli and Mismetti 2025). In family firms, these patterns are reinforced through kinship scripts: The "good daughter," "loyal son-in-law," "supportive wife," or "prodigal heir" each carries normative expectations that shape how identity is mobilized. Women may gain relational acceptance by embodying roles of care and sacrifice, but these same roles can restrict their authority to challenge unequal governance. Identity-driven willingness thus risks being co-opted into feminized labor: Managing emotions, preserving harmony, and protecting reputation rather than redistributing power.

Similarly, men from dominant groups may view equality work as identity-incongruent, particularly when hegemonic masculinity scripts frame authority as individualized leadership, stoicism, and command. For some men, endorsing gender equality can be seen as jeopardizing alignment with the masculine ideals through which they are recognized as legitimate heirs or leaders. For others, particularly men from marginalized racial, ethnic, or religious groups, identity may shape their willingness differently, as they navigate complex pressures to perform particular masculinities to maintain authority or avoid stigma.

Identity alone, therefore, does not determine willingness; it shapes the political costs and possibilities of action. Individuals with high willingness but low authority may expend emotional and political labor advocating for change, but find their efforts diluted by family-centric deference norms or sidelined into symbolic initiatives. Those with high authority but low willingness may deploy identity narratives through tradition, legacy, and stewardship as legitimizing myths that justify incrementalism or inaction. The interplay of identity and authority is thus central: Identity shapes who feels authorized to act, but authority decides whose actions matter.

2.2 | Incentives, ESG Logics, and the Politics of Optics

Incentives can enhance willingness when accountability mechanisms are explicit, measurable, and tied to meaningful consequences (Cobb 2016). ESG frameworks have generated optimism that external pressures, that is, investor expectations, regulatory scrutiny, and public visibility, might stimulate reforms within family firms. Studies have indeed found links between ethical orientation, ESG engagement, and financial performance in family-controlled enterprises (Gangi et al. 2025). Yet such findings must be interpreted cautiously. Without shifts in internal governance, ESG adoption risks becoming a reputational exercise rather than a reallocation of authority.

Family firms often frame ESG as an extension of "family values," reinforcing stewardship identity narratives. These narratives can be double-edged: They provide entry points for articulating equality commitments but can also stabilize symbolic compliance by portraying the family as inherently ethical. Where equality becomes a component of brand identity, organizations may prioritize maintaining positive optics through gender-balanced photos, mentorship programs, and diversity statements, in fact, without altering the decision-making structures that produce inequality. Recent research shows that family firms may lag behind non-family firms in women's representation at the top, even when they demonstrate narrower pay disparities within elite groups (Jain et al. 2021). Such patterns can signal bounded progress: Equality for a few without opening the pipeline or redistributing decision rights.

From a willingness–ability–authority perspective, ESG logics often expand *ability*: Managers gain new tools, metrics, and external mandates. But unless families cede *authority* to those charged with implementing reforms by granting binding decision rights to remuneration committees, audit boards, or equality officers, ESG remains dependent on the goodwill of those already in power. Seen through a feminist lens, ESG commitments that lack authority transformations may risk obscuring the ongoing extraction of gendered labor and preserving masculine norms of leadership under the guise of modernization.

3 | Ability as Structural Power, Not Personal Bandwidth

In much of the family business literature, *ability* is interpreted as an individual resource through competence, time, skills, or managerial bandwidth. Yet such a definition obscures the structural nature of ability: the institutional, organizational, and governance arrangements that determine whether actors can access and deploy the levers that materially change outcomes. Ability is not about capacity in the abstract; it is about whether individuals occupy positions that grant them jurisdiction over consequential decisions, whether rules are transparent or selectively enforced, and whether organizational designs confer or withhold procedural rights.

Organizational design sets the outer limits of ability (Greenwood and Hinings 1988). In many family firms, formal organizational structures coexist with unwritten norms, kinship expectations, and discretionary decision rules that centralize influence in a patriarch, matriarch, or a tight kin coalition. As a result, managers, particularly those who are non-family or younger-generation family members, may appear to possess significant responsibility yet lack the authority to shape reward systems, governance procedures, or succession decisions. This creates a form of organizational decoupling: Structures suggest empowerment, but decision rights remain highly concentrated (Martìnez Ferrero et al. 2016).

Ability, therefore, depends on access to and legitimacy within the decision-making arenas that matter. Gender equality initiatives such as mentoring schemes, dashboards, or symbolic diversity roles often expand visibility but not ability. Such tools may generate data, but do not by themselves alter promotion criteria, budget allocations, or leadership nominations unless paired with enforceable governance mechanisms. Family firms are particularly prone to this pattern because the imperative to preserve harmony, unity, and legacy can override procedural fairness, leaving equality work vulnerable to veto, delay, or symbolic absorption (Abernethy and Vagnoni 2004; Um 2023).

Studies in *GWO* show that ability is quietly shaped by organizational culture and by what is considered "appropriate" practice within a given context (Lansu et al. 2019). In family firms, cultural norms often privilege tradition, implicit trust, and personalized judgment over formalized transparent processes. Whereas these norms may generate cohesion, they also risk reinforcing opaque practices that shield inequality from scrutiny. The ability to act on inequality thus hinges not only on structures but also on the cultural grammars through which certain interventions are deemed legitimate while others are interpreted as disruptive or disloyal.

This also clarifies the distinction: *Formal ability* refers to the procedural and structural mechanisms that enable actors to pursue change (access to committees, decision-making processes, budgets, and information), whereas *formal authority* refers to the right to make binding decisions. Ability without authority results in responsibility without power; authority without ability results in symbolic power divorced from operational reach. In family firms, these two dimensions are often misaligned: Successors may have formal authority but lack process-level ability due to entrenched kin preferences, whereas women may have considerable ability through relational expertise yet lack formal authority to convert it into institutional change.

Intersectional dynamics further mediate ability. Women, younger-generation managers, daughters-in-law, non-family executives, or individuals belonging to minoritized racial, ethnic, or religious groups often find their access to key governance spaces more tightly policed. Their contributions may be welcomed in domains perceived as relational or reputational, but resisted when they seek involvement in financial, strategic, or ownership-related decisions. Ability is therefore stratified not merely by gender but by social location within the family and wider community. Conversely, certain male actors, particularly those positioned as heirs, may possess structural ability even before formal appointment, through early grooming and socialization, tacit knowledge transfers, and embedded familiarity with unwritten rules.

External forces can broaden ability but rarely transform it without internal shifts. Regulations, stakeholder scrutiny, and market expectations, including ESG pressures can widen operational discretion for managers advocating equality (Colley et al. 2021; Henderson and Mitchell 1997). Yet without changes to internal decision rights, these external pressures are often recast as compliance obligations rather than as opportunities to reconfigure gendered power. Managers may be able to collect data or propose initiatives, but remain constrained from altering succession criteria, remuneration structures, or governance charters unless empowered by the family.

Crucially, ability must be understood not as an attribute but as a positional effect: it emerges from the interplay of organizational rules, cultural expectations, and family governance. Managers are "able" only to the extent that they can intervene in the processes that distribute resources, recognize contributions, and determine leadership legitimacy. Without this structural conception of ability, equality work risks becoming a form of gendered labor, performed by those already overburdened, applauded but ultimately inconsequential for redistributing power.

Understanding ability in structural terms also lays the necessary groundwork for the third component of our framework, *authority,* which we develop next. Ability determines whether actors can mobilize resources and influence processes, but authority determines whose decisions rule the organization. Without authority, ability remains contingent; without ability, authority remains symbolic. It is their alignment or misalignment that dictates whether gender equality initiatives in family firms can move beyond intention toward durable structural transformation.

3.1 | Interdependence, Misalignment, and the Costs of Goodwill

Willingness and ability are frequently misaligned in family firms. Actors may be deeply committed to gender equality but unable to effect change due to restricted access to governance arenas or lack of enforceable authority. Conversely, those endowed with considerable authority, often heirs or controlling family members, may have little willingness to challenge patriarchal norms, or may interpret reforms as posing risks to legacy, family unity, or their own status.

This misalignment has consequences. Research in *GWO* and adjacent fields shows that equality advocates who lack authority often experience frustration, burnout, and reputational costs (Amstutz et al. 2021; Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark 2016). In family firms, these burdens are intensified by relational proximity as disagreeing with senior family members can threaten not only career progression but also familial relationships, inheritance prospects, and community standing. Feminized "glue work" that has the potential to mediate conflicts, maintain trust, and smooth transitions, can further entangle actors in labor that sustains the system they seek to change.

Conversely, ability without willingness often produces procedural compliance: diversity dashboards, training sessions, and symbolic committees that generate activity without altering authority structures. Change becomes performative, reinforcing the appearance of progress while reproducing existing gendered arrangements. Furthermore, external pressures of legal, market, or reputational nature can shift willingness over time (Appleton et al. 2025; Duckworth and Gross 2020). However, without sustained authority redistribution, these shifts remain fragile.

This means that temporal dynamics matter here. Authority configurations are reproduced across generations through habituated practices, selective memory, and inherited scripts of leadership. Even when reforms occur, for example, appointing women to boards or granting daughters interim leadership, they may not survive succession if successors interpret equality as incompatible with their own legitimacy. The very features that make family firms resilient, such as long time horizons, deep relational commitments, and strong identity narratives, can also stabilize inequality unless governance is intentionally redesigned.

4 | Authority: Governance, Ownership, and the Gendering of Decision Rights

If willingness foregrounds motivation and ability foregrounds structural capacity, *authority* foregrounds jurisdiction: Who has the recognized right to decide, whose decisions bind others, and how those rights are allocated, maintained, and contested over time. Authority is thus inseparable from governance in family firms. It is anchored in ownership structures, formal roles, board compositions, family governance bodies, and the informal hierarchies that determine whose judgment ultimately prevails when interests collide. In family firms, where ownership and control are often tightly intertwined, authority typically resides with a small subset of family members whose positions are legitimized through narratives of sacrifice, founding, lineage, and continuity.

Corporate governance research in family firms has documented the concentration of decision-making authority and voting rights in the hands of controlling families, frequently exceeding their proportional equity stakes (Villalonga and Amit 2006; Villalonga et al. 2015). Family ownership is routinely associated with strong influence over strategic choices, the appointment and dismissal of executives, and the composition and functioning of boards and advisory bodies (Bammens et al. 2011; Basco 2015). Work on family governance mechanisms similarly shows that family councils, shareholder agreements, and constitutions are designed to protect family control and coordinate intra-family interests, but are rarely scrutinized through a gender lens (Parada et al. 2020; Howorth et al. 2010). Taken together, this literature underscores that authority in family firms is both *formal* (rooted in legal control and board positions) and *relational* (buttressed by family identity, reputation, and soft power).

From a feminist perspective, authority is also a gendered resource. Nelson and Constantinidis (2017) define gender inequality in family business succession as the unequal division of authority and resources based on sex, including ownership, leadership, and participation in decision-making. Succession research shows that daughters frequently confront resistance not only in being considered as potential successors but also in being granted equivalent decision rights once they assume leadership roles (Dumas 1990; Constantinidis and Nelson 2009;

Xian et al. 2021). Daughters' authority is often conditional, mediated through fathers or male relatives, and may be framed as "second leader" status or as stewardship rather than sovereign control. Recent work also shows how patriarchal norms, religious traditions, and community expectations shape the legitimacy of daughters' claims to authority, particularly in contexts where women's leadership is tolerated but not fully endorsed (Rónaföldi-Széll 2024).

Authority is allocated not only through explicit ownership transfers or board appointments but also through the invisible design of governance arenas. Studies of boards in family firms show that these bodies can be advisory rather than controlling, with key decisions reserved for a small inner circle of family members (Bammens et al. 2011; Collin and Ahlberg 2012). Even where independent directors or professional managers are present, their influence on core matters such as succession, compensation, dividend policy, and major strategic shifts may be constrained. Authority, in other words, is often fragmented across formal and informal arenas: the board, the kitchen table, the founder's office, or the family council. Feminist work on authority in family firms invites us to ask who is invited into which arena, on what terms, and with what voice.

Distinguishing authority from ability further clarifies the stakes. Ability, as we argued, concerns access to levers and processes, that is, being in the room where pay bands are reviewed, promotion criteria defined, or succession plans drafted. Authority concerns whose view is decisive when there is disagreement, and who can veto or mandate changes. Family members, particularly controlling owners, may delegate ability (e.g., tasking HR with designing diversity policies) without ceding authority (reserving final say over key appointments, ownership transfers, and strategic direction). Equality work that is high on delegated ability but low on redistributed authority risks becoming technocratic: dashboards without consequences, policies without enforcement, and targets without sanctions.

Authority is also deeply entangled with ownership in family firms. Property rights theory and family business research highlight how control rights attached to ownership stakes allow families to maintain influence over firms even with relatively modest equity holdings, leveraging dual-class shares, pyramidal structures, or shareholder agreements (Anderson and Reeb 2003; Villalonga et al. 2015; Debellis et al. 2023). From a gender perspective, a central question concerns the ways in which ownership itself may be gendered. There is a risk that sons are more often positioned in controlling or governance roles, while daughters are allocated non-voting shares, minority stakes, or deferred rights. Likewise, spouses may remain outside formal ownership arrangements, despite assuming substantial labor and risk. These patterns suggest how gender inequality can emerge through the structuring of ownership, even if not uniformly or intentionally. Intersectional dynamics further shape these patterns: Daughters-in-law, widows, or women from minoritized racial, ethnic, or religious groups may have even more precarious authority claims.

Authority is also temporal. Succession processes reveal how authority is staged, phased, and sometimes revoked. Succession research documents cases in which successors—often daughters—are granted nominal authority but remain dependent on ongoing endorsement from the senior generation, creating a "father paradox" in which their legitimacy is contingent and reversible (McAdam et al. 2021). Interim or emergency leadership by women during crises or illness may not translate into enduring authority once the crisis subsides (Meroño-Cerdán 2023). Authority can thus be extended temporarily, framed as exceptional, and subsequently withdrawn, reinforcing the idea that "real" authority belongs elsewhere.

The ESG turn in family firms adds another layer. Studies of corporate social performance and ESG engagement suggest that family firms often underinvest in such initiatives when weak external shareholder protections allow controlling families to prioritize their own preferences (Rehman et al. 2023). Where families adopt governance reforms, such as formal boards, remuneration committees, or diversity policies, research cautions that these mechanisms may be adopted for legitimacy or compliance rather than for genuine power sharing (Ponomareva and Ahlberg 2016). From a gendered governance perspective, ESG-inspired reforms can be effective only to the extent that they shift authority: Who sits on committees with binding powers, whose votes carry weight, and whether those tasked with equality have the authority to override resistance from entrenched elites.

Bringing authority explicitly into the willingness–ability–authority framework allows us to see how gendered power is reproduced in family firms even when willingness and ability registers look promising. Actors may be willing and appear able and supported by policies, committees, and metrics, yet lack authority to alter succession shortlists, veto homosocial appointments, enforce pay equity, or challenge abusive workplace cultures. Conversely, those individuals endowed with authority (typically members of the controlling family) may lack the willingness to prioritize equality, or may strategically deploy their authority to preserve existing hierarchies. Authority, then, is not a neutral resource but a resource shaped by historically embedded inequalities that are gendered, kin-based, and classed.

An intersectional analysis extends this perspective by suggesting that authority in family firms may not be distributed solely along the broad categories of "men" and "women." Instead, it may be shaped by more specific positional differences, including, for example, age hierarchy among siblings, marital status, birth status, sexual orientation, and family members living in the home country versus those living abroad. Legal frameworks, inheritance regimes, and religious norms further mediate these patterns across contexts (Reay et al. 2015; Dagoudo et al. 2024). Some actors' authority is bolstered by alignment with dominant gender, class, and ethnic norms; others' authority is conditional, precarious, or undermined by the very scripts through which family identity is constructed.

In sum, authority is the missing link that converts willingness and ability into structural change or prevents it. By examining who holds authority, how it is justified, and under what conditions it is shared, delegated, or revoked, scholars can better understand why gendered inequalities in family firms persist despite apparent progress. In the next sections, we build on this tripartite framework to reconsider identity-based accounts,

interrogate the ESG-driven politics of optics, and develop a research agenda that centers the remaking of authority structures as a core task for those seeking gender-equitable family firms.

5 | Implications for Family Firms: From Rituals to Rule Changes

For family firms seeking to advance gender equality, the central question is not merely how to increase women's visibility, but how to transform the authority structures that determine who can make consequential decisions. Integrating gender equality into succession planning is necessary but insufficient when readiness remains coded through masculinized ideal-worker norms. Formal governance mechanisms, such as remuneration committees, nomination procedures, and transparent criteria, can constrain bias only when they possess binding authority and include individuals whose perspectives represent more than a narrow kin coalition.

Empowering women and minoritized actors requires shifting from *recognition* to *jurisdiction*: Enabling them not only to contribute expertise but also to influence decisions, allocate resources, and veto inequitable practices. Without jurisdiction, willingness is converted into gendered labor, sustaining reputational benefits without altering outcomes. Governance reforms must therefore address informal power: Who shapes the agenda, which conversations occur off-record, whose dissent is permissible, and whose expertise is trusted.

Redistributing authority may involve redesigning ownership structures, formalizing board processes, diversifying governance bodies, instituting gender-equal succession clauses, or adopting collective decision-making mechanisms less vulnerable to kinship bias. Equally important is cultivating organizational cultures that legitimize dissent, decouple gender from leadership norms, and treat equality work as substantive and strategic rather than symbolic.

6 | Where Next: Re-Centering Gender Theory in Family-Firm Research

Advancing a research agenda centered on gendered authority requires methodological approaches capable of uncovering the formal, informal, and affective dimensions of power in family firms. Feminist methodologies offer precisely such tools. Rather than treating governance as a set of neutral procedures, feminist inquiry foregrounds the situated, embodied, and relational character of organizational life. It brings into focus how authority is accomplished through everyday interactions, for instance, whose stories are recorded, whose memories count as institutional knowledge, and whose discomfort is dismissed in the name of harmony or tradition.

Ethnographic approaches, long underutilized in family business scholarship, are particularly well suited for tracing the microprocesses through which authority is enacted (Crosina et al. 2025). Sitting in on governance meetings, succession discussions or family councils allows researchers to observe how legitimacy and deference are produced through gestures, silences, interruptions, humor, and ritual. Ethnography reveals the unspoken rules that determine who speaks first, whose input is solicited, and whose dissent is tolerated. It makes visible how gendered expectations of care, diplomacy or sacrifice compel women, and often younger-generation actors, to shoulder relational burdens that sustain the very structures that marginalize them.

Narrative and memory-work approaches likewise allow researchers to center voices historically relegated to the margins of family business histories. Official narratives of stewardship, sacrifice, and continuity often exclude the experiences of daughters, daughters-in-law, spouses, and non-family managers who perform vital but unrecognized labor. Memory-work unsettles these silences by examining how family stories are constructed, who is granted interpretive authority, and how competing memories reveal fissures in the governance settlement. These approaches enable scholars to document the forms of labor that are indispensable to family-firm functioning yet are discounted in succession or ownership decisions.

Institutional ethnography offers another powerful lens. By tracing "chains of ruling," documents, templates, decision protocols, and financial artifacts, researchers can map how gendered assumptions become embedded in processes that appear neutral. Family constitutions, for instance, may reproduce patriarchal norms through gendered language around leadership or expectations of availability. Shareholder agreements may encode differential rights for sons versus daughters under the guise of tradition. Examining these documents as artifacts of authority reveals how gendered power flows through the infrastructure of governance.

Participatory and action-research designs further extend feminist commitments by engaging family members, employees, and stakeholders in co-producing interventions. Rather than merely observing inequality, such approaches develop institutionally grounded solutions, rewritten bylaws, gender-equal succession criteria, shared workload agreements, or transparent grievance procedures, and study their effects in practice. This collaborative orientation reduces extractive dynamics and recognizes the relational ethics central to research in family firms, where participants' identities and livelihoods are deeply intertwined with organizational outcomes.

Across these methodological traditions, feminist reflexivity is paramount. Researchers must attend to their own positionality, to the relational dynamics of access, and to the ethical complexities of studying families who may experience scrutiny as a threat. Feminist methodologies do more than illuminate gendered authority; they model ways of engaging with family firms that prioritize care, reciprocity, and accountability.

Taken together, the argument advanced in this commentary urges a fundamental reframing of gender equality in family firms: From counting women to remaking the rules that govern authority. Representation without decision-making authority is unlikely, on its own, to alter existing gendered arrangements. Likewise, willingness without authority may leave equality initiatives largely symbolic, whereas ability without authority may limit their organizational effectiveness. The *willingness–ability–authority* framework, therefore, directs scholars to the

structural conditions under which equality initiatives *do* or *do not* translate into durable change.

Family firms remain one of the most pervasive organizational forms in the global economy. They are also among the most consequential sites for understanding how gendered power persists, adapts, and can be transformed. By placing gender theory and feminist methodologies at the center of family business research, scholars can rethink previous research that has been gender blind and illuminate how gender plays a role in not only how authority is reproduced but also how it might be redistributed. This, we argue, is the necessary step if SDG 5 is to become a substantive call to action rather than a symbolic commitment. Shifting from incrementalism to institutionally grounded reform requires nothing less than a sustained interrogation of the gendered architectures of governance and a commitment to redesigning them for a more equitable future.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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