Spotlight
by CeFEO

What if the business you built also reshaped your marriage and sense of self?

A four-year case study of a Turkish-Swedish couple reveals how gender and ethnicity shape entrepreneurial identity

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In family businesses, who you are matters as much as what you do. That is especially true when business ownership intersects with migration, marriage, and multigenerational expectations. This study offers a deeply contextual exploration of identity formation within a migrant-owned family firm, tracing how a married couple navigated the overlapping demands of business, family, gender, and ethnicity over four years.

WHAT WE STUDIED

The research followed a Turkish-Swedish couple—Sema and Ender—who built a small food business together in Sweden. Using extensive life story interviews, field observations, and conversations with family members across a four-year period, the researchers analyzed identity work: the ongoing process through which individuals shape their self-concept in response to social expectations and personal experiences. Two "habitats of meaning" structured the analysis—gender and ethnicity—as the symbolic spaces through which the couple understood themselves, their roles, and their place in both the family and the business.

KEY INSIGHTS

Identity is negotiated continuously, not fixed at the start

Sema and Ender did not arrive at their entrepreneurial identities once and settle into them. Their sense of self shifted across business phases—startup, growth, conflict, dissolution. Each phase demanded a renegotiation of who they were in relation to each other, to the business, and to the cultural expectations they carried. Identity work in a family firm is not a background process. It is a central strategic activity that shapes every decision.

Gender shapes how each partner engages with the business

Sema framed the business as a space for independence and caregiving. Being a "good woman" meant balancing productive work with emotional labor for the family. Ender sought validation as a provider and authority figure—roles that had been disrupted by migration and the loss of his professional status. The business became a vehicle for reasserting his masculinity. These gendered narratives were not conscious strategies. They were deeply embedded frameworks that governed how each partner interpreted success, failure, and fairness in the business.

Ethnicity operates differently for each partner

Ender experienced migration as a disruption to his career trajectory and worked to distance himself from the stereotype of the unskilled migrant. For Sema, her bicultural background became a practical asset—enabling her to navigate Swedish institutions, build local networks, and bridge cultural contexts. Ethnicity was not a uniform influence on the business. It created different constraints and resources for each partner, depending on how it intersected with gender and professional identity.

Extended family involvement brings both support and friction

When personal crises hit, extended family members entered the business—providing emotional support but also introducing disputes over ownership, authority, and decision-making. These conflicts exposed underlying tensions about gendered power and family

loyalty that the business structure alone could not resolve.

The next generation sees burden, not opportunity

Despite the financial stability the business provided, the couple's children viewed it as a source of lost childhood and strained family relationships. They did not want to take over. This finding complicates assumptions about succession in migrant family firms—emotional readiness and personal aspirations matter as much as financial inheritance.

TAKEAWAYS

Make identity work visible in family business governance

Entrepreneurship involves psychological and emotional labor, especially when roles overlap between family and business. Acknowledging this explicitly—in family meetings, advisory conversations, or governance structures—helps prevent burnout and fosters mutual understanding between partners.

Challenge gendered assumptions about leadership

Avoid defaulting to traditional assumptions about who leads and who supports. Shared leadership models that value caregiving alongside strategic direction produce more sustainable arrangements, particularly in businesses where both partners are actively involved.

Plan succession around emotional readiness, not just legal transfer

Children may not want to inherit the business. Succession planning must account for their aspirations, their relationship with the business, and the emotional residue of growing up in an entrepreneurial family—not just financial and legal considerations.

IMPACT

This study demonstrates that identity in family firms is not stable—it is continuously negotiated through the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and family dynamics. For migrant entrepreneurs, these pressures are amplified by the additional identity work required to navigate a new cultural context. The contribution is methodological (showing what a four-year interpretive case study can reveal that surveys cannot) and substantive (demonstrating that identity work is a central mechanism shaping business decisions, family relationships, and succession outcomes).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Encourage open dialogue about roles and expectations.** Surface hidden tensions about gender, authority, and cultural identity before they escalate into business conflicts.
2. **Invest in leadership development for all partners.** Provide training and mentorship that supports both women and men without assuming predefined roles based on gender or cultural background.
3. **Build flexible succession models.** Include options for partial ownership, interim leadership, or alternative career paths that respect the next generation's autonomy.
4. **Connect migrant entrepreneurs to local networks.** Cultural mediators, professional associations, and language support help migrant business owners build the institutional legitimacy that sustains their enterprises.

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