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Help or Hindrance? South Asian Women in the Family Firm

Spinder Dhaliwal, Lecturer, University of Surrey
Jonathan M. Scott, Senior Lecturer, Teesside University
Javed Hussain, Reader, Birmingham City University

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses upon the often neglected issue of the contribution of South Asian women to both entrepreneurship and the management of family businesses. We conceptualise the family as a highly gendered institution. Two in-depth case studies, as illustrative typological exemplars, were undertaken with Asian women entrepreneurs who share both ownership and management of larger businesses which are household names, yet represent a tiny fraction of the Asian women in business. Respondents were interviewed by telephone.

A clearer picture emerges of the roles, responsibilities and relationships of the relatively few Asian women who are entrepreneurs in their own right, and the many more who physically and strategically help sustain many successful Asian enterprises. Methodologically, the paper is novel in so far as one of the authors (an Asian female from a "typical" family business background) has taken care to observe the cultural norms and proprieties within this particular group. Hence, the data are arguably more authentic than previous studies undertaken by "distant" researchers.

While policy makers are increasingly being reminded to appreciate the needs and the diversity of ethnic minorities in business, the findings of this paper reinforce this message by highlighting the distinctive experiences of Asian women in their own and family businesses. This is one of few studies to explore the role of South Asian women in family firms, and adopts institutional theory as an analytical framework.

Key words: Women, family firms, South Asian, ethnicity, families, business ownership.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this case-based paper, we seek to explore the contribution of Asian women to both entrepreneurship and the management of family businesses. In so doing, we conceptualise the South Asian family as an institution and, therefore, this paper builds theory by considering family firms as operating in that context and in a gendered manner. Hence, this paper seeks to explore the following research question: “How and why do South Asian women contribute to entrepreneurship and family firm management?”. We, therefore, seek to utilise two cases to answer these ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions, bearing in mind the classical definition of a case study as, “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003: 13). Whilst the family is seen as a source of strength for Asian men, in the sense that it provides emotional, financial and labour-related support, is it a help or hindrance for South Asian females? And how and why?

Ahl (2004: 161-163) highlights four assumptions that ‘scientifically reproduce’ gender inequality: first, that ‘entrepreneurship is a good thing’; second, that ‘men and women are different’; third, that there is ‘a divide between public and private life’, as within many families (as institutions) women are expected to adopt caring roles; and, fourth, that entrepreneurship is all about ‘individualism’. These assumptions by Ahl (2004) are particularly important to South Asian families in which the ‘divide between public and private life’ is much less clear, and indeed the whole notion of individualism is moot, where familialism (and, indeed, paternalism, itself a gendered term) is much more relevant. Others have questioned assumptions in policy and research:

‘Women ... need to be ‘fixed’ through appropriate policy, support and advice initiatives to encourage and enable them to adapt their behaviours to meet the standards established with a masculinised normative model of enterprise. However, this deficiency analysis is not suggesting that women lack the abilities and/or talent to be successful entrepreneurs. Rather, they need specific help to overcome constraints associated with their femininity which restricts entry to self employment and is detrimental to the accrual of entrepreneurial capital essential for business growth’ (Marlow et al, 2008b, p. 2).

UK women’s enterprise research and policy have notably been focused on start up to the detriment of growing firms (Añón Higón et al, 2008), as well as benchmarking UK and US levels of entrepreneurship despite major differences in the benefits system in both countries (Marlow et al, 2008a). Reviews of research in the field have highlighted shortcomings and pointed out future avenues for research (Carter et al, 2001; Carter and Shaw, 2006; de Bruin et al, 2006, 2007). As the above quote from Marlow et al (2008b) highlights, women’s business ownership and entrepreneurship is too often undervalued since it is compared to that of men (Ahl, 2006). Therefore, we seek, first, to move away from the stereotypical image of women

entrepreneurs; and, secondly, to highlight the role of entrepreneurial South Asian women in the growth strategies of family firms. We hope to make a major contribution to the debate on gender, ethnicity and family firms.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In section two, we explore gender, ethnicity and the family business, and then conceptualise the family as an institution. Section three is the methodology of the paper, section four presents two case studies of South Asian women in family firms, and section five includes a discussion of the key issues in the cases and some conclusions.

2. ETHNICITY, GENDER, AND FAMILY BUSINESS

2.1 South Asian family firms as gendered institutions

The dated view of Asian business is one of ‘taxis and curry houses’ and this stereotype is reinforced to some extent by established research (Ram and Jones, 2006). Many of these businesses and business families have developed over time, especially the second generation ‘New Asian Entrepreneurs’ (Hussain and Martin, 2005). Dhaliwal and Adcroft (2005) observed that ethnic minorities were entering non-traditional sectors, such as information technology and pharmaceuticals, and, indeed, these were amongst some of the fastest-growing and most highly capitalised ethnic minority businesses. Other research confirms a shift away from traditional sectors amongst the younger, more educated South Asian entrepreneurs (Jones and Ram, 2003; McEvoy and Hafeez, 2006). Indeed, Mason et al. (2006) also described graduate entrepreneurs’ sectors to be office-based, such as business services, as opposed to non-graduates being ‘located in a factory, workshop or business unit.’ The UK Annual Small Business Survey ethnic booster study identified that 90.4% of ethnic minority businesses, compared to 69.9% of non-ethnic minority businesses, were in service industries (Whitehead et al., 2006). Finally, in a study based on Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) data, Levie et al. (2007) found that 15.6% of Asian and 29.5% of black owner-managers of new and established businesses were in the business services sector. Of Asian nascent entrepreneurs, 19.2% were in business services (and 12.7% in computer-related services), while 27% of black nascent entrepreneurs were in this sector, although there is still evidence of start-ups in retail and restaurants (Levie et al., 2007). However, much of the analysis of South Asian family firms, as with family firms in general, is predominantly ungendered.

One issue of particular relevance to women in family firms is succession within the institution (e.g. Birley, 2001; Dunemann and Barrett, 2004; Malinen, 2001, 2004; Martin et al., 2002; Miller et al., 2003; Mustafa and Chen, 2008; Pardo-del-Val, 2009; Shepherd and Zacharakis, 2000). This process is complicated for ethnic minority family firms, which tend to have been started by first generation immigrants in traditional, declining, and low-profit sectors. Such sectors are often unappealing for the second generation, UK-born children of ethnic minority family firms, which have become better educated and have, therefore, in many cases either avoided starting a

business or have moved into higher value, high technology sectors (Jones and Ram, 2003; Hussain and Martin, 2005; McEvoy and Hafeez, 2006) – as Dhaliwal and Kangis (2006, p. 105) aptly describe: ‘entry into business by the second generation is a positive choice and not the last resort.’ However, breakout from ‘inadequate’ markets is an important and yet under-researched area (Ram et al., 2003; Ram and Jones, 2008, p. 366). Graduate ethnic minority entrepreneurs have been shown to be important to economic development, particularly in local economies in UK cities (Hussain et al., 2007, 2008). And yet the unspoken role of women in the gendered institution that is the family firm is deafening in its silence, and yet is clearly important (Ram, 2009). Bachkaniwala et al. (2001) identified the important role of education, job opportunities to the future performance of the family firm and the possibility of selling the business as one of the key determinants of whether these potential successors actually did succeed; in their study, they also profiled five cases in which only one child was ‘expected’ to succeed the founder – for the others, jobs elsewhere were an acceptable option (Bachkaniwala et al., 2001) but to what extent this is the case with all minority ethnic groups remains untested. Other studies have examined strategies for succession planning in South Asian firms, including the idea of a ‘good conversation’ between generations in order to achieve effective business succession (Janjuha-Jivraj and Woods, 2002a, 2002b). Furthermore, it is critical to highlight the role of women – given that they are ‘silent contributors’ within many BME owned family firms (Dhaliwal, 2000) and also since they are often not considered by founders (i.e. their fathers) to be appropriate successors more generally across the business population (Martin, 2001). It is, therefore, notable that Janjuha-Jivraj (2004) found that mothers in South Asian family firms were a ‘critical buffer between the generations’ in the succession process.

Several other authors have investigated the ethnic minority family business; e.g. Basu (2004, p. 31) notes that ‘some family business owners have non-economic aspirations of ensuring family succession in the business or of enjoying a comfortable lifestyle by achieving a satisfactory level of income.’ Basu and Altinay (2002) explored the relationship between ethnicity and culture which influences, for example, many Muslim women who work with their husbands in the family business. Bhalla et al. (2006) profiled an Asian family firm, a food and drink wholesaler, in which a member of the second generation made changes vital for the future success of the firm. The dichotomy between ‘continuity’, or maintaining the status quo, and ‘change’ between generations of BME is especially pertinent (Mascarenhas-Keyes, 2007). And yet where are the women in these analyses? We explore their role below.

2.2 Gender, ethnicity, and entrepreneurship

While male entrepreneurs have been eulogised by the popular press keen to promote free enterprise heroes, scant attention has been paid to Asian women who have become entrepreneurs in their own right or have energised family enterprises. Meanwhile, more detached academic commentary has sought to identify the key success factors for this entrepreneurial minority. Much less conspicuous has been the role of female Asian entrepreneurs and Asian women working in ‘family’ businesses.

Recently, Marlow et al (2008) have drawn the conclusion that many women are rational in adopting a less risky development strategy. Their analysis assumes women to be the lead entrepreneur in a business – but it is perfectly conceivable that women within family firms could be responsible for moderating the perhaps high risk activities of men. This does not imply that such firms will not grow, but rather that their growth is sustainable and they may, therefore, avoid failure. While differentials in levels of education between women and men can impact upon the ability to obtain different types of external capital, and it has been observed that men have more social networks than many women do, can be disadvantageous to women, particularly in terms of accessing finance (Carter, et al 2003; Carter and Shaw, 2006; Manolova et al, 2006; Heilbrunn, 2004), family firms do not suffer from such constraints because they pool the members' skills and deficiencies. As teams, they overcome such deficiencies and build on their collective skills and competences. Heilbrunn (2004) found that women believed that they had deficiencies in human capital, whilst Manolova et al (2006) concluded that social network diversity, used more effectively by men, makes entrepreneurs more likely to obtain external finance.

Smith-Hunter (2006) identified a 'double disadvantage' for ethnic minority women (in her case, African-Americans) involved in business, i.e. because of discrimination or disadvantage because of both their ethnicity and their gender. Other studies have explored more specifically issues related to minority women starting a small business (Dawe and Fielden, 2005; Inman and Grant, 2005). Meanwhile, significant part of the women's business ownership literature focuses upon the differences between men's and women's motivations to choose self-employment as a career choice (e.g. Clain, 2000; Buttner and Moore, 2001; Burke et al, 2002; Georgellis and Wall, 2005; Leung, 2006), while there are many unanswered questions about the experiences of South Asian women in family firms. We discuss this research gap below. Our model assumes that family firms are gendered institutions, which connect the family firm to four 'realms': the economy/market, individuals (family members), the family, and society. Ethnicity we consider to be 'a given' in South Asian family firms (hence "racialised" processes are only relevant in terms of the relationships of the institution and its members with non co-ethnics: customers and other stakeholders): conversely, there can be no doubt that the family firm is a highly gendered institution in which gender relationships and interactions play significant roles but the generalised view is that males are the dominant gender, specifically in making financial and strategic decisions. In the business world, there may be assumptions about what are 'appropriate' male or female industry sectors.

Meanwhile, in family firms, there are gendered issues of succession (which may be, in some cases, male only, i.e. primogeniture), the perceived “role” of women / mother / daughters in the business, and in the family itself (as distinct from the firm), in terms of work-life balance issues, such as childcare/domestic work. Whilst many of these issues are faced by women entrepreneurs, they do tend to be intensified, we argue, in the family. On the other hand, adopting a Bourdieuan approach to understanding the forms of capital possessed by the individuals – and, hence, by implication, by the family firm – social capital (networks), cultural capital (whether institutionalised – education – or not), financial capital (finance/inheritances), and symbolic capital (prestige etc) are all of critical importance, particularly since Bourdieu conceptualised the nexus between individuals and society [and, implicitly, families and familial institutions such as firms], which explains much about the resources available to the institution (Bourdieu, 1986; Elam, 2000).

And, finally, the model posits two scenarios, a potentially “worst case” future where a family firm adopts an “entrepreneurial” type (Chell et al, 1991), over-risky, male-oriented, potentially failure-inducing growth strategy or an “optimal” scenario where a business survives by a “caretaker” type (ibid) but a less risky, female-influenced strategy (cf Marlow et al, 2008). However, a ‘middle ground’ could exist where more realistic, carefully-planned strategies, fusing the risk-oriented, profit-maximising “entrepreneurialism” of the males with the more “caretaker”, family-finance-protecting, cautious approach of females could lead to a successful entrepreneurial venture. We use this paper as an opportunity to illustrate our thesis using two cases, while also providing answers for ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions.

2.3. The research gap

The ethnic minority business literature remains rather male-centric and ungendered (or under-gendered) in the way that it treats entrepreneurship, business ownership, and family firms – chiming with some of Ahl’s (2004) findings. Similarly, the women’s entrepreneurship and business ownership literatures tend to be largely un- or under-racialised in their analyses, although Carter and Shaw (2006: 26, 50) note that:

‘there has been surprisingly little analysis of ethnic minority women’s enterprise in the UK ... [but] ethnicity and gender interact to ensure that many ethnic minority women entrepreneurs have a distinctive experience of self-employment and business ownership. There is evidence that the economic, structural and cultural barriers faced by women may be exacerbated for women from minority groups. In addition to gender-related barriers, BAME women face the additional hurdles posed by the potentially racialised structures of work and society.’

Whilst many of the studies identified above are highly insightful, as are many of the other studies on women entrepreneurs, they do tend to focus on the ‘solo entrepreneur’. As a result, there is clearly a need, as we discuss below, for more in-depth studies into the experiences of women who are not ‘individualist’ and who are a key part of a familial business unit (Ahl, 2004) or, as

our model implies, a highly gendered institution, the South Asian family firm. Thus, though there have been many studies on (a) ethnic minority businesses, (b) family firms (some overlap with (a)) and (c) gender, and (d) the family in business, there is still a major research gap relating to female entrepreneurs. Studies such as Dhaliwal (2000) have made contributions to ethnic minority women entrepreneurs and Hussain et al (2009) consider gender bias for ethnic female entrepreneurs, but there is still a major knowledge gap. Therefore, we build theory and analyse results, based upon the research question identified in our introduction.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data are based on the Asian Wealth Index (Eastern Eye 1998 – 2008), which one of the authors has compiled for the past six years. The published Rich List profiles Asian entrepreneurs and their business developments and indicates their wealth. Its depth and authenticity has revealed not only changing sectoral patterns, but also how the family and community structures within the Asian community have made it more resilient to economic instability. The target population for the research comprised the richest cohort of Asians and their families who were resident in the UK, whose business headquarters were located in the UK, and whose main business activities were in the UK. Given the exploratory nature of our research, and the need to provide in-depth case studies as illustrative exemplars of women's role in both entrepreneurial and managerial activities within the highly gendered institutions that are South Asian family firms, we chose to focus upon two detailed and in-depth "best case" examples.

Hence, a limitation of this approach is that we do not provide sufficient number of cases that would be 'generalisable' or 'representative' of the population. Moreover, even the use of a single case is valid in testing and developing theory, but at least two cases are preferable to one, to improve analysis, insight, comparison and 'replication' (Yin, 2003: 40-47). These cases represent two sectors which are pertinent to the Asian success story (food and clothing, which are stereotypical "female" industry sectors, and yet these are illustrations of high-growth, "optimal" orientation where the 'male' inclination towards high-risk, potentially business-destroying strategy has been mediated by the influence of women). As a result, the data provides both richness and an in-depth perspective which enables powerful and insightful analysis. Therefore, developing a typology and theory-building becomes more achievable.

The respondents agreed to be interviewed having known one of the authors for several years and, although convenience sampling is positive in terms of accessing interviewees, it is also a limitation since it is not representative or truly random. As a research method, the interview is a favoured approach where there is a need to obtain highly personalized data, and where there are opportunities required for supplementary, probing questions (Gray, 2004), an approach extensively used in the qualitative literature over the last few decades – and essential for building high quality case studies. The interviews were conducted via the telephone using a semi-structured questionnaire. Telephone interviews are becoming one of the most widely used of all research methods, partly because of the spread of telephone ownership, but also because most

people are willing to be interviewed by telephone (Gray, 2004) once the contact is made. In contrast to postal surveys, it becomes possible for interviewers to convince respondents about the significance of the research and develop a rapport that enables the respondent to yield confidence and dispense with more information.

In this case, the respondents were familiar with the researcher and, before each interview, respondents were reassured about the confidential nature of the data, particularly since they would be used as the basis for writing case studies. It was felt more appropriate to conduct this pre-interview protocol via telephone as the respondents might construe formal letters as a bureaucratic intrusion, something that is often avoided by Asian business owners. This deliberate, personal, attempt to build rapport and trust can be important for strengthening the validity of the research (Arksey and Knight, 1999).

Interviews lasted about one hour on average where both closed and open-ended questions were asked. Firstly, the respondents were asked structured questions such as their age, education, family background. Earlier, the business-related information and background was researched using the internet to minimise duplication of questions being asked, an approach that has been embraced by researchers. Once the demographics and background were established and the owner was more comfortable with the interviewer, the interview progressed to more open-ended, semi-structured questions which explored respondents' motives for business entry; the role of their families, both at the start-up stage and subsequent management of the business and the factors which facilitated or inhibited their business. The respondents were able to elaborate on these questions and also discuss their current business challenges and their hopes for the future.

The interview questions revolved around identifying the nature of the respondents' business; the sector the business was located in; the business' location/base; the number of employees (other than family members); the background of the entrepreneur and her family and how the business emerged and developed were probed. The respondents were able to elaborate on their business and themselves as entrepreneurs. We found that once the trust deficit was overcome, respondents volunteered information that was not even asked for. All questions, particularly those concerned with descriptive responses connected with recent and future performance of the company were supplemented where necessary using additional probing questions. Finally, the data were written up in the form of case studies, which are presented in Section 4 below and discussed and analysed in Section 5.

4. CASE STUDIES

Case A: Clothing and Music

Case A is the eldest of five children. She was born in Karachi (a mega city) and came to England at the age of one and a half years, where she grew up in a former mill town in Lancashire.

In 1966, her father set up a market stall selling socks and ladies stockings. Her parents juggled the responsibilities of raising a young family with working long hours in a strenuous business; all the children were encouraged to help out. Case A had to shoulder responsibility from an early age. She is the eldest daughter and as far back as she can remember she was helping with the business. At the age of six years, she recalls, “I was packing tights in boxes so my father could sell them”.

The unusual feature in her family is that they do not value formal education, preferring the ‘hands on’ approach instead. Whilst most Asian parents stress the need to study further, and make many sacrifices for their children to gain academic qualifications, the family firmly believes in practical experience. The business always came first, education was not important and this was the case for the boys as well as the girls. The lack of academic training has not held them back in any way and this family illustrates the Asian success story where the first generation parents initiated the business and the second generation made the move from small time enterprise to the multimillion pound empire. The children were keen to move the business forward and the parents had faith in their children to take the risks to grow and innovate.

The comfortable lifestyle that she is now so accustomed to was not in sight in her early years where she attended state schools and her contempt for academia is plainly revealed by her remark, ‘I was crap at school and I don't care who knows it’. Since she was not academically inclined, she left school at the first available opportunity and joined the business full-time.

This was a strategically important event for the family as it enabled her father to be free to launch a new venture. He was considering venturing into the wholesale business in Manchester, and could concentrate on this now that she was involved full time. The move from retail into wholesale was instigated by her younger siblings, but she and her brother were the real driving force behind this move. The family took the risk and challenge of setting up a cash and carry.

She credits her formative years of ‘training’, where she was given a lot of responsibility, as the basis of her success today. In A’s case family served the mentoring function. Despite her parents’ beliefs in her abilities, she still had to prove her credibility to others. Being Asian, female and Muslim was interesting and, in addition, she was still only 15 years old when she was given the job of making purchases for the retail shops. Trying to negotiate and haggle, she had to overcome the patronising attitudes of men who wished to deal with her father. Today respect is automatic due to the phenomenal success of their businesses. She is now one of the most senior people heading the company as the Marketing Director and thrives on the fast pace of the

industry and loves making decisions, wheeling and dealing and being involved in every aspect of the fashion business. Her philosophy is, “to see your goals and then go for them, do what it takes to achieve them.”

Her father has now passed away and she felt acutely the devastation of the loss of a man who had been a tower of strength and source of advice all her life. The shock of the loss left the whole family so shattered that they feared that they were incapable of carrying on without him. Her father, however, had left a legacy of strength and the family is ultimately survivors and managed to endure the desolation of the following months to rebuild a stronger and more powerful empire. Her mother, the silent contributor, is credited with originating the business and, despite her modest profile, is a shrewd businesswoman. Like many Asian women, she is pivotal to the success of the business, and yet remains in the background as ‘a silent majority’. According to her, ‘My mother is generous, sensitive to plight, charitable, honest and direct,’ and clearly directness is a characteristic that has been inherited by her children.

In recent years, the fashion end of the business has been solidified and internationalized; the company now employs more than 2,000 people across the world. The next step is to take the brands online and to grow that way. Their Stores are due to open in Dubai, South Africa, India and across the Middle East. These openings were through business links and not through family or community connections. Their brand was sold by a major customer, which moved to Dubai and the Middle East and they were approached by people out there. They now sell online too. The management values in the organization to date have been largely Asian values of family unity and, even after the death of the founder, his wife has resided over the empire commanding the same respect. The second generation has brought in much of the Western business practices and ideologies, but has remained faithful to their roots.

Case B: Food

Case B was born and brought up in the province of Bihar in Northern India. Her father was an engineer and his work meant that the family was constantly moving around the country. This early influence gave her ‘a capacity to adapt’. She grew up in a large family of three brothers and one sister and had servants. From the age of 4, she undertook little tasks such as folding the samosas and kneading chapatti dough. Although she did not grow up in an entrepreneurial family, she credits her family for her inspiration and for enabling her passion for food to flourish. ‘From childhood I had seen the importance of food, of having fresh ingredients and creating fantastic flavours.’ She adds, ‘I got it from my grandmother and my mother.’ She grew up in a family that in some ways respected traditional ways whilst encouraging mould breaking.

Her passion for food developed alongside her entrepreneurial skills and visions. As early as her teens she dreamt of running a school. She spent hours planning her ideal school, trying to improve on her existing experiences. ‘As a young woman, I always had aspirations and a desire to achieve something on my own,’ she recalls. The school was not to be. Her life took a new turn

when at the age of 17 she accepted a traditional, arranged match. In 1975 they migrated to Britain, lived first in Wales and then Yorkshire, before finally settling in a major city in the East Midlands.

In 1986, with the complete support of her family and friends, she decided to create a business using her own recipes. She had been increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of Indian products already on the market. She started off with a tiny cottage industry which was later to grow into a major enterprise. Her first step was to produce finger food in her own kitchen for a local Greek restaurant. She was soon in great demand and began to market herself more effectively and the orders poured in. 'From day one, my aim was to have products on supermarket shelves nationally,' she says.

She extended her kitchen and began to employ a number of women. Most of these women were of Indian descent and many of them did not speak English.

'As a woman, you wear two hats. My family and husband have been very supportive. He was always there to help me in any way that he could. My customers have been very understanding, for example, in the early days, I knew little about food hygiene, quality control, product launches and quality systems. We worked together and I learnt a lot in the early days from them.'

Determination and ambition played an important role and she approached several major supermarkets with her products. After six months, a major supermarket finally gave her an opportunity. She won her first major contract to supply chilled and frozen Indian dishes to the supermarket. This success, however, presented her with a problem. She realised that larger premises were needed to accommodate the growing business. She needed to expand rapidly in order to meet the orders and access to finance was proving to be difficult. Financiers were cautious and were looking for at least a three year track record. Her few months of experience in her own kitchen did not leave them feeling comfortable about the venture. After some deliberation, she joined forces with a local company, in order to generate funds to build a factory. A purpose built factory was designed specifically to produce chilled Indian ready meals. By 1989 the first foods factory was built in her home town in the East Midlands, creating over 100 jobs.

Further contracts to supply major supermarkets were signed and her business grew, and established itself in an industrial unit. This success enabled her husband to quit his profession and join her full-time.

Success continued and the business flourished. She introduced a greater variety of dishes, as well as innovations in packaging. Three years later the family had to fight to regain control after the local company went into receivership and after a long drawn battle, she and her husband completed a management buy-out in November 1991 with the backing of venture capitalists. This was a very difficult period not only because of the legal troubles. The company also faced stiff competition. Many food manufacturers were competing for a share of the lucrative ready

meal business. She began diversifying into Thai, Malaysian, Chinese and American food to keep ahead of the game. She plans to 'keep the business in the family' rather than float on the stock market.

In 1996, with continuing success and need for expansion, an £8 million new bespoke factory was built next to the original site. Since then the business has continued to prosper so that it now employs over 600 people. This has enabled the company to strengthen its position in the UK and overseas markets and to meet growing demands for supermarket own-label meals as well as its own range of branded products. The company has ventured into France, Holland and Denmark as part of a concerted export initiative.

In May 2004, she regained 100 per cent ownership of the business with the acquisition of the shareholding of venture capitalists. She believes in developing a strong 'family' culture amongst employees who are encouraged to challenge their personal and professional boundaries and strive for excellence.

She is an example of the very essence of the dynamic entrepreneurial female and she has exploited the food revolution to overcome barriers that would, and have, deterred many others. She is no stereotypical silent entrepreneur. Yet she is still from the mould where her family have supported her and continue to play a pivotal role in her business. She herself states that without the support of her husband and family this level of success would not have been possible.

There are no moans or whines about being a woman or of being Asian - both are pluses as far as she is concerned, 'I have not experienced anything negative in my career as a business woman.' She continues, 'I am me, I am who I am. I have confidence in myself. I have knowledge, I have the expertise. My gender is irrelevant.'

Her passion for her business and its success together with her sensitivity in dealing with people and situations have held her in good stead. She has a high self esteem and a lot of inner confidence. 'I love challenges, I thrive on them' she explains enthusiastically.

Her son and her husband are in the business too. Her Indian heritage and its value system are very important to her, 'My family is of the utmost importance to me.' She appreciates the importance of support, 'Women generally support their husbands, I was lucky mine supported me. I could not have done this without the support of my husband. He used to help me in the factory, even after a long day in surgery.' They have both worked so hard, particularly in the early days when she had two infant sons to look after and her husband was a full time working doctor in a busy practice, 'the early days were not easy. I was juggling everything.' It was a difficult period for her, 'I was in anguish because I was not willing to compromise anything. My family were important and my sons so young they needed their mother and yet I could not give up on the business, it was my passion and I was determined to see it through.' She credits her family, friends and the people around her for seeing her through. Her next goal is to expand into more international markets.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our contribution to the literature is, firstly, that we seek to defeat the notion – which ignores the fact that large numbers of self-employed men are subcontractors in the construction and other masculine-dominated industries – that there really is an ‘enterprise gap’ between women and men. Whilst Marlow et al (2008a) have already gone a long way to doing so, we demonstrate that there are different typologies of women entrepreneurs because the role of women in family firms is often invisible, i.e. they are ‘silent contributors’ (Dhaliwal, 2008). In effect, the institutional impact of the family, which seeks to act as one coherent whole when it is involved in running a business, leads to indirect rather than direct entrepreneurship for many women. Our case studies demonstrate the different experiences of South Asian women entrepreneurs within family firms.

Such women clearly make major contributions to the entrepreneurial strategy of the firm – they are not merely ‘passengers’ – it is clear that they are drivers and have a significant strategic role, as our conceptualisation shows in terms of the fusion of forms of capital as familial capital reserves, and the risk-mediating role of women. Yet they are often hidden in enterprise statistics.

During the interviews, the women elaborated on their role and contribution to the management of the business. Issues covered included their ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ position within the firm; the balance between domestic and business responsibilities and the influences, if any, of cultural factors in the nature of their presence within the enterprise. There is variation, for example, between Case A’s early family business experience and Case B’s lack of such a background (but vocational cooking experience as a child, potentially more useful); and the respective non-traditional (i.e. not valuing education) or much more orthodox traditional viewpoints of the families. Discursively, these South Asian women do not divide the “individual” from the “familial” as they are clearly symbiotic.

This symbiosis, and indeed synergy, of the familial firm institution (an ideal “entrepreneurial team”, and one which is more closely wedded – literally – than unrelated individuals fusing together a new venture), as much an economic unit as a social unit, was critical to the establishment of the firm. For both, the family institution supported the start-up (i.e. being in agreement and having commitment to this decision), but the family also provided monetary and other forms of support – essentially, taking the risk – to enable the business to start and grow. These cases confirm, and illustrate, many of the assumptions in our model.

However, in terms of a typology of South Asian women entrepreneurs in family firms (an objective of future research following on from this exploratory exercise), these two cases present quite contrasting examples. Case A is clearly strategically important (‘pivotal’ as she described herself) to the family firm, and yet so too are her siblings, and the death of her father created a succession scenario in which she chose not to take a lead role but to remain in the background. Conceptually, she is and was as much involved in the entrepreneurial start-up of the business

(and its subsequent entrepreneurial growth), particularly since she is the Marketing Director, and yet 'statistically' she would be regarded as a mere 'director' of a company. Clearly, common assumptions about what makes an entrepreneur are based upon assumptions that are both culturally-/racially-insensitive and male-centric and so South Asian women entrepreneurs such as Case A remain hidden and unidentified. Case B, however, is much more of an 'overt' entrepreneur in that she is identifiable as a more classic example of an entrepreneur who started and leads the business, and yet the family support has clearly been important in the success and growth of the business.

This paper sheds light on a number of neglected issues within the increasingly important area of Asian entrepreneurship. First, a clearer picture has emerged of the roles, responsibilities and relationships of both entrepreneurial and managerial South Asian. Second, we have observed the cultural proprieties within this particular group and thus the data are arguably more authentic than previous studies undertaken by 'distant' researchers. Finally, policy makers are increasingly being reminded to appreciate the needs and the diversity of ethnic minorities in business. The findings reinforce this message by highlighting the distinctive experiences of South Asian women in business.

Far from being 'silent contributors' (Dhaliwal, 1998), these cases demonstrate that these South Asian women are leading the business strategically and playing a pivotal role in the family firm. They are supported and given the freedom to grow and gain experience with the enterprise. Whilst these are just a small sample of Asian women in enterprise and we have concentrated on the more successful players, they do serve to illustrate the trajectory of family firms within this community. Future research efforts ought to concentrate on developing a typology and deeper conceptual understanding, in order to understand the relationships and interactions between individuals, families, society, and the economy – and the forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Elam, 2008), whether individualistic or familial – and, therefore, the role of South Asian women in the gendered institution that is family firm, in particular in relation to risk mediation, growth-orientation and entrepreneurial strategy. Such research should capture a wider perspective by testing these conceptual innovations on a much larger, more representative sample and by adopting a longitudinal perspective to track temporal change in a group of South Asian family firms, whether they help or hinder women.

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