

FEMININE LEADERSHIP AND CHALLENGES IN THE BUSINESS SECTOR. CASE STUDY: CALARASI COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract

Feminine leadership is an increasingly relevant field of research, having a significant impact on organizational development and progress. Studies show that women in leader positions bring an unique and valuable perspective, contributing to innovation and performance within the organizations they lead. However, the perception of feminine leadership is often influenced by gender stereotypes that can create barriers to women's professional advancement. The main objective of this study was to identify and analyze leadership styles in feminine entrepreneurship in Călărași county, with a particular focus on how female entrepreneurs adapt and respond to the specific challenges of the local business sector. The selection of the sample was carried out through a stratified methodology, ensuring a proportional distribution for each of the demographic and professional categories specific to feminine entrepreneurs. This approach allowed a detailed and specific analysis of the distinctive features of female leadership in entrepreneurship in Călărași. Sample variables: age: the sample included women entrepreneurs between the ages of 25 and 52, thus ensuring the representation of a wide spectrum of life and professional experiences; level of education: from high school to postgraduate studies, including master and doctorate; residence area - urban and rural women, highlighting how geographic context and access to resources can impact leadership styles; the type of Commercial Company - from individual enterprises, to limited liability companies and joint-stock companies, highlighting the flexibility in choosing the business structure; field of activity: the participation of women entrepreneurs in a wide range of fields, from trade and services, to manufacturing and IT, highlighting the diversity and adaptability of businesses led by women. The methodology used in carrying out this research includes a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire distributed to a sample of 120 women entrepreneurs from Călărași county, Romania. The qualitative analysis involved detailed but unstructured interviews with the sampled participants to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perceptions regarding the challenges they face in a diverse and competitive business sector. In order to evaluate the results of the questionnaire and the association with the sample variables, the χ^2 test was used, the null hypothesis was formulated, to determine if there is a causal relationship between the two variables-questions. The obtained results revealed significant insights about the leadership dynamics in the region. The analysis indicated a diversity of leadership styles, with a notable prevalence of the collaborative style, suggesting a general trend towards participative leadership models within the investigated organizations. Despite all the challenges they faced, women entrepreneurs demonstrate resilience and innovation, contributing significantly to the socio-economic development of the community. Their success highlights the importance of implementing policies and initiatives that promote gender equality in entrepreneurship and support the development of businesses led by women.

Key words: entrepreneurship, questionnaire, leader, challenges, leadership styles.

INTRODUCTION

The promotion of women in key positions in Romania was a significant catalyst for changing the leadership style, favoring the transition from an authoritarian, control-centered model to a more inclusive and participatory one. This evolution reflects a recognition of the unique skills and perspective that women bring to leadership roles,

emphasizing the need for a style that values diversity, creativity and collaboration [17,11]. This new paradigm encourages approaches that not only support innovation, but also promote an organizational culture that is adaptable and responsive to global market dynamics [1, 11]. The contribution of women in entrepreneurship is vital for stimulating and sustaining economic development at the regional level. By starting and managing their own businesses, women entrepreneurs generate jobs, contribute to the

diversification of the local economy and increase the competitiveness of the organizations they lead. Their role extends beyond the economic sphere, having a significant impact on the community through involvement in various social and philanthropic activities. This involvement not only strengthens their businesses, but also supports initiatives that improve the quality of life in the community [13, 5].

One of the main obstacles faced by women leader is fighting gender stereotypes that traditionally associate them with traits such as empathy and caring for others, at the expense of those associated with leadership, such as assertiveness and decision [3, 9]. This perceived incongruity between the feminine gender role and that of leadership contributes to the „glass ceiling”, phenomenon, limiting women's access to top positions [12]. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on promoting feminine entrepreneurship, while recognizing the importance of creating an enabling area for the development of businesses led by women [13,18].

Promoting gender equality in economic policies and business legislation is crucial. Legislative measures that prohibit gender discrimination and promote equal opportunities in business can significantly contribute to reduce the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs. Such initiatives may include objective criteria in hiring and promotion processes, eliminating wage discrimination and guaranteeing equal access to finance [2, 7]. As for the profile of women entrepreneurs, it explores the characteristics, motivations and challenges faced by women who choose to open their own businesses. The profile of women entrepreneurs reflects a wide diversity of educational backgrounds, life experiences and ambitions, but there are also commonalities that define this distinct group in the global entrepreneurial landscape. [2, 18].

Women entrepreneurs are often motivated by a desire for financial independence, flexibility in managing work-life balance, and passion for a particular field. These motivations are supported by studies showing that women place a high value on autonomy and the ability

to achieve personal goals through entrepreneurial activities [12, 6].

A notable feature of women entrepreneurs is their tendency to start businesses in service-oriented, education, health and social care sectors, although their presence in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields is increasing. This indicates an adaptation to market needs, but also an alignment to personal skills and interests [7, 8].

A distinctive aspect of women entrepreneurs is their ability to build and maintain strong business relationships, often using their communication and empathy skills to create networks of support and collaboration. This tendency to value interpersonal relationships can serve as a competitive advantage in the business sector [4, 10].

The profile of women leaders reflects a mix of determination, innovation and the ability to navigate a complex economic and social landscape. Recognizing and supporting this vital group within the entrepreneurial community can lead to the development of a more diverse and inclusive business sector [8, [16].

The purpose of this research is to identify both the challenges faced by women leaders in the diverse landscape of businesses in Călărași county and the leadership styles shown by women entrepreneurs in the county, evaluating how these styles directly influence the success and sustainability of the businesses they lead.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the social economic and cultural context specific to Călărași county, the research aims to provide a brief analysis of the whay in which feminine leadership contributes to the local economic development and to the promotion of an inclusive and equal business sector in various organisational contexts in different fields of ativity of the business sector specific to the county.

The main objective of this research is to evaluate and compare the effectiveness of authoritarian, collaborative and facilitative leadership styles, taking into account the concrete challenges faced by the feminine

business sector in Călărași county. The study aims to identify the specific characteristics of each leadership style and their impact on organizational success, in the context of feminine entrepreneurship.

By analyzing these leadership styles, the research intends to reveal how the authoritarian style, characterized by centralized decisions and firm control, influences operational efficiency and employee commitment, to what extent the collaborative style, which promotes the involvement and contributions of team members, facilitates organizational innovation and adaptability, and the effects of the facilitative style, focused on supporting and personal development of employees, on team morale and productivity.

This objective allows a deep understanding of how feminine leaders can use these styles to improve business performance, adapted to the local socio-economic context in Călărași.

The methodology used in carrying out this research includes a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire distributed to a sample of 120 women leaders from Călărași county. The qualitative analysis involved detailed but unstructured interviews with the sampled participants to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perceptions regarding the challenges they face in a diverse and competitive business sector.

The sample was structured on 2 levels, respectively, identification data that included age, level of education, resident area, type of commercial company, field of activity, which included organizations from different fields, from food and production services to IT and renewable energy, thus ensuring a broad and representative coverage of the local business sector. The second part of the semi-standardized questionnaire, through which we aimed to assess the ways in which leaders behave in usual situations of leading their teams, composed of 12 questions, the feminine entrepreneurs were asked to choose the answers that best reflect their typical actions within the team, respectively, their attitude when debating organizational issues within the team, the way they lead the meetings, how they inform and accept the opinions of subordinates

regarding the development of the company, how they communicate and how they pursue the achievement of the team's objectives, how they facilitate/moderate a brainstorming, etc. Each question had a set of predefined answer options to simplify the process of filling in and analyzing the results. The answer options allowed respondents to choose the one that best reflects their perception of the respective question.

The responses were then scored and interpreted to classify leadership styles as authoritarian, collaborative or facilitative, based on a scoring system detailed in the questionnaire. The participants completed the questionnaire in an informal setting, at the workplace of the interviewed persons, the questionnaire being physically applied.

This methodology allowed not only the identification of individual styles, but also the aggregation of data to observe trends across the entire sample. In order to determine the cumulative distribution function that applies to statistical distributions we used the χ^2 ("hi-square") concordance test, a general test, applied to frequency data, by associating columns and lines in a two-entry contingency table, where the data were classified by many segmentation variables [14].

Thus, the null hypothesis was formulated, to determine if there is a causal link between the two variable-questions; the significance threshold was chosen and the number of degrees of freedom of the table was calculated, according to the formula $(r-1)*(c-1)$; it was taken from the distribution table of theoretical χ^2 ; the obtained results were compared and it was determined if the null hypothesis is rejected, respectively, if there is an association between the studied variables; the contingency coefficient C was calculated, to measure the degree of association between the variables of the contingency table [14]. The calculated χ^2 is compared with the theoretical χ^2 for different probability thresholds. The closer the value of C is to 1, the more closely the variables are correlated.

The information collected was centralized and analyzed to extract meaningful insights about leadership dynamics in the region. The analysis indicated a diversity of leadership styles, with

a notable prevalence of the collaborative style, suggesting a general trend towards participative leadership models within the investigated organizations.

The information obtained through the application of the questionnaire and free discussions with women entrepreneurs provided a deep and multifaceted perspective on leadership styles, highlighting the importance of adaptability and reactivity in

contemporary leadership practices. These findings support the continuous need to develop and adjust leadership styles to effectively respond to the dynamic challenges of the modern business sector.

Table 1 shows the structure of the sample participating in the study, by age category, level of education, resident area of the respondents, legal form of their business, field of activity.

Table 1. Sample structure and social characteristics

Category	Description	Number of persons
Age		
20-30 years old	Young entrepreneurs	32
31-40 years old	Entrepreneurs at professional maturity	40
41-50 years old	Entrepreneurs with wide experience	38
51+ years old	Seniors in entrepreneurship	10
Total persons depending on: age		120
Study level		
Highschool	Pre-university education	24
University	Basic university education	40
Postuniversity	Advanced studies	56
Total persons depending on: study level		120
Residence area		
Urban	Live in town	68
Rural	Live in rural area	52
Total persons depending on: residence area		120
Type of commercial company		
SRL	Limited liability company	110
SA	Shares company	6
Sole enterprise/PFA	Sole owner	4
Total persons depending on: type of commercial company		120
Activity object		
Services	Including consultancy, education, health	32
Production	Food, textile, industrial	28
IT and Technology	Development of software and consultancy IT	18
Commerce	Retail and distribution	16
Other fields	Including tourism, design, beauty & wellness	26
Total persons depending on: activity object		120

Source: Centralization of information obtained based on questionnaire [6].

The study highlights the diversity and peculiarities of the group of feminine entrepreneurs participating in the research through a sample of 120 feminine entrepreneurs from Călărași county, reflecting a wide spectrum of demographic and professional characteristics according to Table 1. In order to better understand the context in which these leadership styles are applied, it is

essential to also analyze the business sector in which they operate.

Firms exclusively led by women range from innovative start-ups to traditional organizations with a strong presence in the local market.

The economy of Călărași county is dominated by the agricultural and industrial sectors, with a strong emphasis on grain cultivation, agro-zoology, steel industry, food industry, as well

as the glass, paper and pulp industry, to which are added small and medium-sized businesses in various fields [6].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The business sector in Călărași county is characterized by an interconnection of the agricultural and industrial sectors, supported by a natural and demographic framework leading to economic development as can be seen from Table 2.

Development and modernization efforts continue, accompanied by legislative initiatives and strategies of economic growth, promise a positive evolution of the business sector in this region, and underline the significant potential of Călărași county as an important economic center in South-Eastern Romania.

Table 2. Fields with the highest turnover, in Călărași county

No. crt.	Code CAEN	Activity field	Turnover
1	0111	Cereals growing (exclusively rice), vegetale plants and oil-seed plants	3.5 billion
2	4621	Wholesale trade of cereals, seeds, fodder and raw tobacco	1.2 billion
3	2410	Production of ferrous metals under primary forms and ferroalloys	743.1 billion
4	3832	Recovery of sorted recyclable materials	515.6 billion
5	4711	Retail trade in non-specialized stores, predominantly selling food, beverages and tobacco	513.6 billion

Source: Processing data taken from: TopFirme.com-Top firms in Romania [19].

In Călărași county, as in the rest of the country, women entrepreneurs represent a vital part of the business sector, contributing to the economic diversification and development. According to the data available at national level, about 40% of business in Romania is led by women, either as administrator, or as majority shareholders. This trend highlights the increasing role the women play in the Romanian economy, including in Călărași county.

Businesses led by women in Călărași, according to national trends, are concentrated in sectors such as trade, services, business and management consulting, freight and passenger transport, as well as accounting and tax consulting. These businesses are predominantly small and medium-sized, reflecting the general trend in the Romanian economy and offering essential services to the local community.

According to Table 3, The diversity of businesses led by women in Călărași county is reflected in Table 3.

Table 3. Structure of business sectors led by women, in Călărași county

	Business sector	Short description	No. business
1	Trade	Retail sells and online.	588
2	Consulting	Services specialized for other organizations or entrepreneurs.	360
3	Education and Training	Vocational training programs and tutoring.	240
4	Health and personal care	Beauty saloons, private clinics and wellness.	240
5	Food and Catering	Restaurants, cafes and catering services.	192
6	IT and digitalization	Software development, design web, IT services.	192
7	Fashion and Design	Clothes design workshops and clothing stores.	168
8	Agriculture and food production	Agricultural and food production, including bio.	168
9	Tourism and Hospitality	Guesthouses, travel agencies.	120
10	Arts and Culture	Cultural events, creative workshops, workshops.	120

Source: Processing data taken from Călărași Trade Register [15].

The percentages in Figure 1 show us their distribution in different fields, based on the information available at the county level. Trade is the dominant sector, followed by consulting and education, which indicates an orientation towards services and high value-added sectors. The lower percentages allocated to areas such as tourism and art highlight

potential market niches and opportunities for diversification and innovation in feminine entrepreneurship in the county.

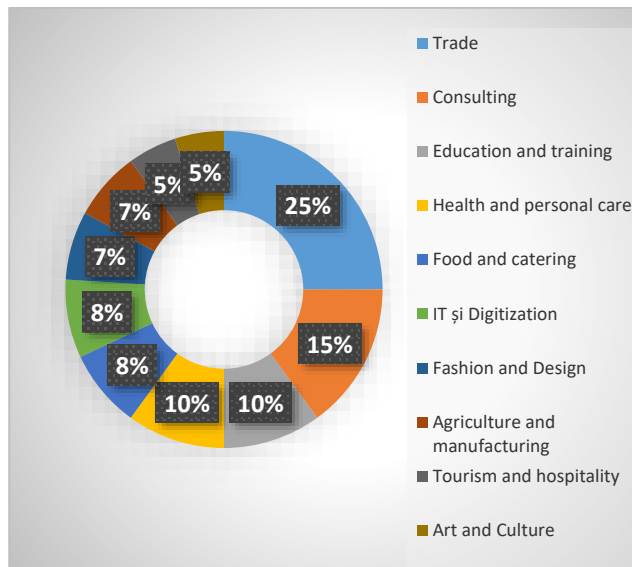


Fig. 1. Percentage structure of business led by women in Călărași county
 Source: own processing.

Regarding these challenges, it is essential the development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem to support women through easy access to funding, mentoring and professional development programs.

The analysis of the organizational culture in feminine entrepreneurship in Călărași county offers a unique perspective on how cultural values, norms and attitudes influence the conduct of businesses led by women, highlighting the particularities that contribute to the creation of a distinct and favorable entrepreneurial area for feminine leaders.

The organizational culture in feminine entrepreneurship in Călărași is structured in a way that values diversity and collaboration, while addressing specific challenges, such as combating gender stereotypes and promoting an inclusive and egalitarian area, as shown in Table 4, built based on the information received through the unstructured interview with women entrepreneurs.

These values are reflected in the leadership styles adopted by feminine entrepreneurs, which tend to place more emphasis on cooperation and personal development than on fierce competition. This approach helps create

a positive work area that encourages innovation and employee commitment.

Table 4. Correlation of organisational culture elements with feminine entrepreneurship features

Organisational culture elements	Features
Leader communication	Feminine leaders emphasize open and transparent communication, facilitating dialogue and collaboration within teams.
Leader values	The promoted values include cooperation, flexibility, communication and equality, reflecting an orientation towards personal development, teamwork, supporting creativity and innovation.
Leader behavior	Behavior is influenced by local cultural traditions and the needs of an ever-changing business sector, with a focus on adaptability and inclusion.
Working conditions	Flexible organizational policies that allow for a healthy work-life balance, contributing to employee satisfaction and loyalty.
Professional development	Investments in training and professional development programs to improve the skills and increase the self-confidence of women entrepreneurs.

Source: Carried out by authoris based on information received at interview with women entrepreneurs.

One of the major challenges in businesses led by women is balancing cultural traditions with the needs of an ever-changing business area. Women entrepreneurs often face prejudice and gender stereotypes, which can influence perceptions of their ability to run successful businesses.

In order to strengthen the organizational culture in businesses led by women in Călărași, it is essential to implement strategies that support their development and success, such as investments in training and professional development programs.

The organizational culture in female entrepreneurship in Călărași county plays an essential role in defining and supporting the success of businesses led by women and by adopting strategies oriented towards development, collaboration and inclusion, it is

possible to create a dynamic and sustainable entrepreneurial environment that values and promotes women's contribution to the local economy.

Table 5 classifies and presents the leadership styles identified among the companies participating in the study, grouped by their fields of activity. Leadership styles are divided into three categories: Authoritarian (12-18 points), Collaborative (19-30 points), and Facilitative (31-36 points). The number in each column represents the number of persons in that company who fit into each leadership style.

Table 5. Leadership styles of women leader participating in the study

	Activity field	Authoritarian	Collaborative	Facilitative
1	Food Retail	3	6	1
2	Food production	3	1	1
3	Architecture	1	2	4
4	Textile Production	1	2	4
5	Food and Catering	1	2	1
6	Health	1	1	2
7	Interior Design	1	4	2
8	Renewable energy	1	2	2
9	Pharmacy	3	2	1
10	Education	2	8	1
11	Beauty & Wellness	2	2	2
12	IT/Consulting	1	12	2
13	Agriculture	4	2	1
14	Fashion	1	2	2
15	Technology	1	1	2
16	Legal Services	1	2	2
17	Tourism	2	2	2
18	Consulting in Management	2	3	2
	TOTAL	32	56	32

Source: Centralization of information obtained based on questionnaire [6].

Each field of activity in the table is evaluated according to the responses of women entrepreneurs to the questionnaire, thus providing an insight into the prevailing trends in management approaches in various economic sectors. This organization of data helps identify leadership patterns and adapt organizational strategies to optimize leadership and performance in different business sector.

Figure 2 shows the share of leadership styles specific to feminine entrepreneurship in Călărași county. We find that 46.7% of respondents identify themselves as having a collaborative style, this category dominating the sample, reflecting a trend towards participative leadership models in feminine entrepreneurship in the region. The authoritarian and facilitative styles are equally represented, each with 26.7%, indicating a diversity in the leadership approaches of female entrepreneurs. This distribution suggests a balance between more direct approach and more permissive or supportive in business management.

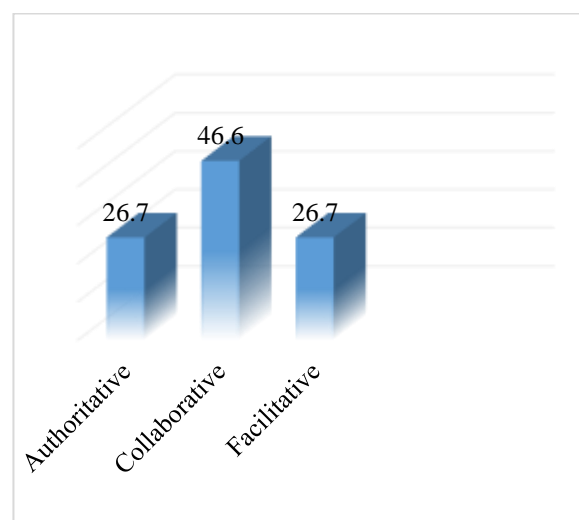


Fig. 2. Percentage distribution of leadership in the sample of women entrepreneurs in Călărași county
 Source: Centralization of information obtained based on questionnaire [6].

The most frequent leadership style identified in the sample is the collaborative one, with 46.7% of the participants adopting this approach. This style is characterized by an emphasis on teamwork, effective communication, and sharing power and responsibility with team members. The prevalence of the collaborative style reflects a trend towards creating inclusive and supportive work environments that value the contribution of each member and encourage innovation and active involvement in decision-making processes. Authoritative and facilitative styles are equally represented in the sample, each with a percentage of 26.7%. The authoritarian style, characterized by centralized decision-making and firm control over organizational direction

and activities, can be effective in situations that require quick decisions and clear direction. On the other hand, the facilitative style, which emphasizes the development and support of team members, highlights a concern for the personal and professional growth of employees, being appropriate in contexts that require adaptability and continuous learning.

Table 6 shows the correlation between the leadership style and the respondent age. It is found that, by age category, in the categories 20-30 years, 31-40 years and 41-50 years, the weight is owned by the collaborative style, while in the age category, over 50 years, the weight it is owned by the authoritarian leadership style.

Table 6. Evaluation of correlation between leadership styles and respondents age

Age	MU	Leadership style			Total	
		Authoritative	Collaborative	Facilitative	No.	%
Between 20- 30 years old	No.	9	16	7	32	26.7
Between 31-40 years old	No.	11	18	11	40	33.3
Between 41-50 years old	No.	5	20	13	38	31.6
Over 50 years old	No.	7	2	1	10	8.4
TOTAL	No.	32	56	32	120	100
	%	26.7	46.6	26.7	100	X
CHIINV (Chi theoretical)	≥	15.7	17,9	19.2		
CHIINV (Chi calculated)	18.03	**				

Source: Own calculations.

Analyzing the collected data it results that there is a difference (**) of leadership style and the respondents age that is appreciated statistically

as being significant by value of 18.03 of Chi calculated.

Table 7. Evaluation of correlation between leadership style and respondents residence area

Residence area	MU	Leadership style			Total	
		Authoritative	Collaborative	Facilitative	No	%
URBAN	No.	11	30	27	68	56.7
RURAL	No.	21	26	5	52	43.3
TOTAL	No.	32	56	32	120	100
	%	26.7	46.6	26.7	100	X
CHIINV (Chi theoretical)	≥	14.3	17.1	20.4		
CHIINV (Chi calculated)		21.11			***	

Source: Own calculations.

Table 7 shows the correlation between the leadership style and the residence area of the respondents. It is found that feminine entrepreneurs from rural area hold the weight in the authoritarian style category, while the weight reverses in the facilitative style. Analyzing the data collected, it appears that there is a significant differentiation (***) of the leadership style practiced and the residence area of the respondents which is statistically assessed as very significant by the value of 21.11 of the calculated Chi. From the analysis

carried out in Tabel 8, it is find out that, as the study level increases, the respondents leadership styles is included in the collaborative category. Related to preuniversity studies, the authoritarian style is the predominant one. Analyzing the collected data it results that there is a difference (**) of leadership style practiced and respondents education level, that is appreciated statistically as significant with value of 20.28 of Chi calculated.

Table 8. Evaluation of correlation between leadership style and study level of respondents

Residence area	MU	Leadership style			Total	
		Authoritative	Collaborative	Facilitative	No	%
Preuniversitary (highschool)	No.	11	6	7	24	20,0
Universitary	No.	13	18	9	40	33.3
Postuniversitary	No.	8	32	16	56	46.7
TOTAL	No.	32	56	32	120	100
	%	26.7	46.6	26.7	100	X
CHIINV (Chi theoretical)	≥	16.5	18,4	20.9		
CHIINV (Chi calculated)		20.28			**	

Source: Own calculations.

In Tabel 9, it is presented the correlation between leadership style practiced and commercial company type, legally, coordinated by the respondent.

It was found that, in the category of limited liability commercial companies (SRL) all three leadership styles are found, while in share companies (S.A.) we do not see facilitative leadership style.

At sole enterprises individuale (I.I) and autohired natural persons (PFA) we do not find the authoritarian leadership style.

Analyzing the collected data it results that there is a major difference (***) of leadership style practiced and the legal status of organisations led by women entrepreneur that is appreciated statistically as being distinctly significant by value of 16.21 of Chi calculated.

Table 9. Evaluation of correlation between leadership style and commercial company type

Residence area	MU	Leadership style			Total	
		Authoritative	Collaborative	Facilitative	No	%
S.R.L.	No	27	52	31	110	20,0
S.A.	No	5	1	0	6	33.3
I.I./PFA	No	0	3	1	4	46.7
TOTAL	No.	32	56	32	120	100
	%	26.7	46.6	26.7	100	X
CHIINV (Chi theoretical)	≥	11.2	13.3	15.1		
CHIINV (Chi calculated)		16.21			***	

Source: Own calculations.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the business sector in Călărași county, in particular, of feminine entrepreneurship, requires a complex approach that takes into account a series of internal and external factors essential for understanding the economic landscape and the challenges and opportunities encountered by feminine entrepreneurs. At internal level, human resources, including the skills and training of feminine entrepreneurs, play a crucial role in business development and success. Local infrastructure, access to basic services and financing, as well as the entrepreneurial culture prevailing in the county directly influence

women's ability to start and lead successful businesses.

Externally, the legislative and political framework, the local and global economy, market trends are factors that determine the environment in which women's businesses evolve. The diversity of leadership styles among female entrepreneurs in Călărași county emphasizes the importance of adaptability and flexibility in the leadership style approach, it should be influenced by the specific context, organizational objectives and team needs, with an inclination towards the collaborative style that promotes the employees participation and commitment.

The analysis of feminine leadership in entrepreneurship in Călărași county highlights

both the valuable contribution of women leader to economic and social development, and multiple challenges encountered. These challenges include flight against gender stereotypes, difficulty of accessing the necessary resources and challenges of balancing the professional with personal life. In this context, it is vital to create a favourable area that support and promote the feminine entrepreneurship. Feedback received following the questionnaire application and interview regarding the challenges of business area for women entrepreneurs was extremely valuable. Many feminine leaders appreciated the clarity of questions and remarked that this exercise provided the opportunity to reflect on own methods of leading. Also, the results allowed leaders to identify the specific needs for their training and development.

The study highlighted the crucial role that women leaders play in the economic and social development of the region, bringing valuable skills as empathy, flexibility and a participatory approach. These features contribute to the creation of some positive and innovative working areas, but, at the same time, women leader face significant challenges, including gender stereotypes, limited access to resources and difficulty of balancing professional and personal responsibilities.

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