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Article

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Administrative Sciences

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Suggested Citation: Cosentino, Antonietta; Paoloni, Paola (2021) : Women's skills and aptitudes as drivers of organizational resilience: An Italian case study, Administrative Sciences, ISSN 2076-3387, MDPI, Basel, Vol. 11, Iss. 4, pp. 1-18,
<https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci11040129>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/275247>

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Article

Women's Skills and Aptitudes as Drivers of Organizational Resilience: An Italian Case Study

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Abstract: The economic system has experienced heavy consequences caused by the recent pandemic. This paper investigates the interaction between the crisis and organization reaction, focusing on the female managerial role and contribution to overcoming the crisis in male-owned and managed companies. To achieve the research objectives, we used a qualitative research method based on an explorative case study. The results show that female managerial skills have fostered organizational resilience in terms of: (i) the attitude to change; (ii) the ability to promote new initiatives; and (iii) the ability to have initiated, consolidated, and managed solid formal relationships with institutional stakeholders. Our results also highlight the decisive contribution of corporate governance (even if male-oriented) in favoring the growth and autonomy of women in positions of responsibility. This contribution is evidenced by (iv) increasing delegation of roles and responsibilities in managing relationships with institutional stakeholders to women managers; and (v) recognizing women managers' talents in terms of career progression. The originality of this work is represented by the survey that aims to determine how the female management of businesses managed and owned by men can foster the resilience of companies. On the other hand, this paper investigates how female leadership drives organizational resilience during unexpected shocks, opening an interdisciplinary viewpoint.

Keywords: woman managers; relational capital; COVID-19; personal aptitude; skills



Citation: Cosentino, Antonietta, and Paola Paoloni. 2021. Women's Skills and Aptitudes as Drivers of Organizational Resilience: An Italian Case Study. *Administrative Sciences* 11: 129. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci11040129>

Received: 29 September 2021
Accepted: 7 November 2021
Published: 10 November 2021

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1. Introduction

The crises that have characterized recent decades' economic and social scenarios have made more complex how people, businesses, and territories operate, innovate, and explore, organizing activities and behavior to identify new growth and development paths (Caputo et al. 2019; Rullani 2014). Notably, there has been a rise in the strength and variety of challenges that threaten organizations. We think of the global economic downturn, natural catastrophes, industrial accidents, the withdrawal of dangerous products, information technology breaches, data security violations (Williams et al. 2017), and, finally, the COVID-19 pandemic. The current Coronavirus crisis emerged from the propagation of SARS-CoV-2 beyond China, severely affecting various countries, including Italy, Spain, Germany, France, Iran, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and the United States, becoming a global pandemic. The International Monetary Fund (2020) has stated that the world entered a crisis comparable to or worse than the 2008–2009 financial crisis (Mora Cortez and Johnston 2020). However, many aspects make the crisis caused by COVID-19 different from the last global financial crisis, which started in the financial sector and primarily affected companies by making it difficult for financial intermediaries to perform their function (He and Harris 2020).

The recent pandemic has caused a human tragedy of lost lives, broken families, scarred communities, and economic and social changes prompted by organizations' answers to the pandemic-driven shutdown. Various phenomena, such as the unusual shutdown of businesses in specific sectors, social distancing prescriptions, and the general uncertainty

prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in the temporary halt of significant parts of the economy in many countries in 2020 (Apostolopoulos et al. 2021). Thus, the economic system as a whole has experienced heavy consequences as many firms have suddenly experienced a stoppage in their capacity to generate revenues (Milani 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the public debate as to what extent the female working population has suffered more significant income and employment reductions. This aspect is due to women frequently being the primary caregivers in the family and, as such, women were faced with the closure of schools and daycare facilities (Graeber et al. 2021). On the other hand, some scholars believe that the COVID-19 crisis can bring about changes that can potentially reduce gender inequality in the labor market (Alon et al. 2020). An aspect less investigated by the more recent literature concerns the contribution that women entrepreneurs or managers' attitudes, skills, and characteristics can make in identifying and managing the resilience strategies of companies in the face of unexpected shocks.

In this scenario, the health emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic requires scholars to investigate its effects on companies (Mullins 2020; Lucchese and Pianta 2020; Paoloni et al. 2021). On the one hand, the investigation can provide visibility to the current conditions of the productive world. On the other hand, scholars can propose concrete solutions and suggestions that help businesses recover more quickly from the crisis. Notably, scholars are called to investigate the interaction between the crisis and organization reaction. This stream of research includes improving organizational resilience to react to adversity and decrease it before it arises (Van Der Vegt et al. 2015; Van Wart and Kapucu 2011).

Great attention should be paid to the role and contribution of female entrepreneurship (or managerial skills). Indeed, in the changed environmental context, it has become central to investigate the contribution of women managers to overcome the crisis caused by unexpected shocks. The recent literature less explores this aspect. We aim to fill this gap by paying attention to the role played by women managers in the COVID-19 era.

Based on the relevant literature on organizational resilience, we formulated the following research question:

R.Q.: What is women managers' contribution to the ability of firms to overcome the crisis caused by an unexpected shock?

We used a qualitative research method based on an explorative polar case study (Yin 2014). We investigated a cooperative agricultural enterprise active in the wine sector, with a long tradition that has been firmly rooted in Italy's center for over a century. Despite the territorial connotation, it is a company that operates throughout the national territory and abroad, even if only to a minimal extent.

The results show that female managerial skills have been drivers of critical success factors both during the management of shutdowns and during the subsequent phase of progressive reopening. Notably, our study found several characteristics and skills attributable to the female manager who has fostered organizational resilience: (i) the attitude to change; (ii) the ability to promote new initiatives; and (iii) the ability to have initiated, consolidated, and managed solid formal relationships with institutional stakeholders.

This paper investigates women's role in the economic systems. We adopt an original perspective less investigated in recent literature, to the best of our knowledge. Notably, we analyze how female leadership drives organizational resilience during unexpected shocks. It provides an interdisciplinary perspective and offers research ideas in other subjects, such as sociology, psychology, and neuroscience. Even if the results have been obtained concerning an Italian case study, we believe they are of broad international interest and application because they refer to a general context, and female aptitudes and skills are not referable to a local context only.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 analyses the relevant literature on the topic. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Section 4 shows the results. Finally, the conclusions of the research are presented in Section 5.

2. Organizational Resilience and Relational Capital

The need for companies to identify new growth and development paths takes on very particular connotations during unforeseen shocks (He and Harris 2020; Mora Cortez and Johnston 2020), such as that caused by the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Ali et al. 2021). The current events affect the health and economic systems of the entire planet, as shown by all the leading economic indicators (Eurostat 2021; Istat 2021).

The scientific literature has already observed what happens when sudden situations arise, such as those caused by catastrophic events, and has argued that resilience is a survival factor in facing threats from the external environment (Van Der Vegt et al. 2015). The term ‘resilience’ has been adopted to describe organizations, systems, or individuals who react to and recover from pressure or disorders with minimal effects on their stability and functioning (Linnenluecke 2017).

The resilience concept refers to an organization’s ability to absorb an environmental shock and learn to bounce back (Meyer 1982; Gittel et al. 2006; Gittel 2008). Resilience is due to an organization’s cognitive, behavioral, and contextual properties that increase its ability to understand its current situation and develop customized responses that reflect that understanding (Lengnick-Hall et al. 2011). Studying a system’s resilience requires the identification of the aptitudes and capacities of significant parts of the system and an analysis of how they interact with each other and their environment. This analysis allows us to predict key performance outcomes at different levels of research before and after a disruptive event.

Some scholars have observed that the composition of individual characteristics determines the system’s potential for resilience (Page 2014; Bell 2007), while the relationships between individual employees and the network in which they are embedded (social relationships) influence the availability and accessibility of these capabilities and the resources for adaptive responses (Carmeli et al. 2013).

The most important parts of organizations as complex systems are their employees. A significant source of capacity for organizational resilience is contained in the characteristics of employees, “including individuals’ skills and capacities, cognition, affect, behaviors, and self-regulatory processes (. . .), intelligence, self-efficacy, emotional stability, openness to experience, social support, emotion recognition, self-discipline, resourcefulness, and cognitive flexibility” (Van Der Vegt et al. 2015, p. 6). Many of these characteristics can be traced back to the feminine universe (Reiter 1995; Nelson 2006; Eagly et al. 2014).

The so-called ‘organizational resilience’ can be included in this stream of research. Organizational resilience is defined primarily as the capacity of an organization to develop the ability to prevent certain events. It is secondarily defined as the ability to adapt to unexpected interruptions (the proactive aspect) and to suddenly take the actions necessary to respond to such a disruption, guaranteeing business continuity (the reactive aspect) (Jia et al. 2020).

The analysis of organizational resilience in states of emergency emphasizes how relational capital reveals all its functionality as a value driver (Prasad et al. 2019). Indeed, relational capital allows organizations access to critical information and resources to achieve proactive and reactive organizational resilience (Bode and Macdonald 2016; Johnson et al. 2013). The attention paid to relational capital improves the willingness to take care of relationships, implements contact with stakeholders, and facilitates open communication and information sharing by building behavioral transparency, which is more sought-after during disasters and natural calamities (Villena et al. 2011; Lengnick-Hall et al. 2011). Previous studies highlighted companies’ collaborative strategies during COVID-19 (Crick and Crick 2020; Bapuji et al. 2020) and hypothesized that it would be difficult to maintain existing ones (Obal and Gao 2020).

A central aspect to investigate is relationships as development drivers (Palmatier 2008), which have become critical factors of resilience and business development during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eggers 2020). First of all, is the relationship with the territory.

The territory is the physical and geographical place where the company operates and represents a strategic resource, becoming the space where intangible resources are developed (e.g., knowledge, creativity, culture, and art). The territory is also characterized by an identity, where companies define their economic, social, and environmental development (Barzotto et al. 2016). Finally, relationships between the various actors capable of encouraging a harmonious development process are born and developed in the territory.

The territory's function surrounding companies and their actions following a different logic should not be overlooked. While the company is a production system, the territory must be interpreted as an exchange system where individuals are simultaneously economic operators, family members, institution members, and consumers. The result is the company's new vision, which includes relationships with the external environment (Paoloni 2021; Paoloni et al. 2019; Tseng 2014). Thus, the company's value should reflect the economic-financial performance and those that feed the collective well-being, although it is difficult to quantify (Paoloni et al. 2018; Iaia et al. 2019; Cosentino 2020).

Intangible resources, such as trust, relational systems, reputation, legitimacy, and consensus constitute the so-called 'territorial social capital' (Manning and Sun 2015; de Castro et al. 2004). The skills and attitudes of human resources (Belso-Martinez and Diez-Vial 2018), the level of social cohesion, the quality of life, and the vitality of economic and social exchanges are the bases of the harmonious development of the territory (Boedker et al. 2004; St-Pierre and Audet 2011; Goldsby et al. 2021).

In companies' development processes, as in those of resilience to economic crises, the relationships between companies and the territory become central since it is in the environment that the relationships between the various actors are born and developed. These relationships encourage the harmonious development of firms. By adopting this perspective, the economic development of businesses becomes an objective that is fully realized if combined with the other purposes of the territory, such as quality of life, conservation of the landscape, enhancement of available resources, and social growth (Cantino et al. 2019; Bresciani 2017; Goldsby et al. 2021; Cosentino et al. 2021). Therefore, the territory is understood not as a passive entity devoid of stimuli but as a place capable of generating innovation and development, thanks to the actors who collaborate to create new knowledge. At the same time, a territory is a place of coordination of production activities and residence of the governing bodies that provide the policies for allocating resources. The contribution of the latter to overcome the crisis is easy to understand.

The Factors Influencing a Firm's Value during a Crisis: Relational Capital, Other Intangibles, and Female Capabilities

The resilience literature has investigated the various resource endowments that are likely to positively influence an adjustment to challenges and, as a consequence, the value creation of the firm in a state of emergency. These resources are the endowments in financial, cognitive, behavioral, relational, and emotion regulation capabilities (Williams et al. 2017). In this research, we focus on relational abilities.

Relational capabilities can be defined as the social connections that enable access to and exchange of tangible and intangible resources (Paoloni 2021). In the context of adversity, intangible assets such as relational capabilities, trust, and knowledge play a crucial role in shaping actions and enabling positive functioning in the face of an unexpected shock (Williams et al. 2017; Colquitt et al. 2011; Gittel 2008).

The links between intangible assets, such as relationships and corporate performance, are central to the business-economic studies. The international literature has tackled the issue from an organizational perspective, highlighting the correlation between the production sector, the company's structure, and the company's performance (Mason 1939; Bain 1968). It then analyzes the resources used (Penrose 1959; Peteraf 1993), which attributes the main effects on performance to the possession of company resources and capabilities. According to the strategic approach, intangibles, particularly knowledge, credibility, and organizational cohesion, are levers of competitive advantage (Guthrie et al. 2001).

More recently, scholars have recognized the possession of unique and rare knowledge to be the leading resource for creating business value (Belso-Martinez and Diez-Vial 2018). The conservation of knowledge and its application are the basis of economic growth and well-being. The organization's ability to innovate is closely related to its endowments of intellectual capital and its capacity to effectively use its knowledge resources (Guthrie et al. 2001). The development of this approach led to the relationship-based vision (Dyer and Singh 1998), according to which the value created by companies is not based solely on the possession and dissemination of knowledge, but also on the relationships that the company fosters, which constitute the so-called relational capital (Johansson 2007). Thus, the knowledge incorporated in customers, suppliers, and consumers and the organization's internal and external relationships (Boedker et al. 2004) constitute the relational capital. Intangible assets such as reputation, corporate image, business partnerships, and alliances are examples. The value of the company's relationships with other social agents and the surrounding environment (Apostolopoulos et al. 2021) expresses the relational capital (Johansson 2007; de Castro et al. 2004). Relational capital is also seen as part of a company's strategy for obtaining a competitive advantage (Subramaniam and Youndt 2005; Paoloni 2021), even in times of crisis (Crick and Crick 2020; Bapuji et al. 2020).

Notably, while entrepreneurs by nature are resilient, the COVID-19 crisis, due to its magnitude and length, has led to specific challenges being faced by entrepreneurs when adapting to the new environment (Apostolopoulos et al. 2021). These challenges may be related to the way entrepreneurs respond to uncertainty by being flexible and supporting an entrepreneurial ecosystem environment that includes formal and informal relationships (Ratten 2021; Paoloni 2021). According to studies on leadership in organizations, women tend to adopt a more democratic or participative style and a less autocratic or directive style than men. This conclusion is consistent with the gender-stereotypic expectation that women lead in an interpersonally oriented manner and men in a task-oriented style (Eagly and Johnson 1990).

The topic of relationships and their contribution to the company's value can be explored concerning women managers' roles in building these relationships. Some research on leadership style suggests that females have an advantage. Thus, the effects of sex-related values, attitudes, and ethical tendencies (e.g., benevolence and universalism) warrant consideration (Eagly et al. 2014). The mainstream business literature has shown that firms set up and run by females exhibit a set of distinctive features (Bruni et al. 2004; Paoloni 2021; Gawel and Głodowska 2021; Knowles and Mainiero 2021). Some scholars increasingly assert that females have an advantage in leadership, whereby women are more likely than men to lead in a style that is effective under the current conditions. Eagly and Carli (2003, p. 807) show that "women have some advantages in typical leadership style but suffer some disadvantages from prejudicial evaluations of their competence as leaders, especially in masculine organizational contexts. Nonetheless, more women are rising into leadership roles at all levels, including elite executive roles". The issue is of great interest, considering that companies face one of the greatest crises of the modern era because a crisis can be a source of valuable learning (Shepherd et al. 2014).

Stephens et al. (2021) indicate that exploring a crisis episode's personal/emotional and business/financial costs is essential. Furthermore, it is crucial to assess the impacts that a temporary shutdown can have on business models and operations carried out because the ability of an entrepreneur to manage a crisis successfully can mean the difference between survival and failure. We propose investigating this ability insofar as it is attributable to female management because the literature less explores this aspect with some exceptions (Vasilic et al. 2020).

More recent literature has analyzed other aspects. Scholars' attention has focused on the effects of lockdowns on care work and the gender gap, which have produced a marked worsening of women's conditions (Collins et al. 2020; Kramer and Kramer 2020; Blundell et al. 2020; Bahn et al. 2020; Hennekam and Shymko 2020). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the public debate on the extent to which the female working population

has suffered income and employment reductions. This aspect is due to women frequently being the primary caregivers in the family and, as such, facing the closure of schools and daycare facilities (Graeber et al. 2021). On the other hand, some scholars believe that the COVID-19 crisis can bring about changes that can potentially reduce gender inequality in the labor market (Alon et al. 2020).

Previous studies show that crises damage the performance of female-run S.M.E.s in terms of production and profit (Davidson 2012; Cesaroni et al. 2015; Giotopoulos et al. 2017). The same evidence has emerged in the COVID-19 era (Sultan and Sultan 2020). Otherwise, Castiglione et al. (2020) found that a firm's productivity is positively influenced by the presence of women managers in post- and pre-crisis periods, revealing that female human capital is essential to the management of manufacturing companies. Grandy et al. (2020) show that structural inequality and the (in)visibility of women's entrepreneurship have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this changed environmental context, investigating women managers' contribution to the productive world has become central to gender equality because investment in women boosts economic development, competitiveness, job creation, and G.D.P. (Gawel and Głodowska 2021; Marlow and McAdam 2013). The OECD estimates that, on average, across the OECD, a 50% reduction in the gender gap in labor force participation would lead to an additional gain in G.D.P. of about 6% by 2030 (OECD 2021). Furthermore, these studies trigger the insertion into the economic theory of values such as cooperation, loyalty, and reciprocity (which derive from applying feminine qualities such as flexibility, intuition, and humanity) (Knowles and Mainiero 2021). This insertion could prompt mainstream theory to elaborate economic models that account for the connection between individuals and the influence that social and cultural factors exert on individual choices (Baldarelli et al. 2018).

In summary, one of the least-investigated aspects of the literature that we believe deserves to be examined concerns the contribution that women entrepreneurs or managers' attitudes, skills, and characteristics can make to identifying and managing the resilience strategies of companies in the face of unexpected shocks.

In this paper, we aim to fill this gap, paying particular attention to the role played by women managers in manufacturing firms in the COVID-19 era.

3. Research Methodology

We used an exploratory study to answer the research question (*"What is women managers' contribution to the ability of a firm to overcome a crisis caused by an unexpected shock?"*) through a qualitative research method. The data for the study were collected through semi-structured interviews, and a thematic analysis was conducted to obtain the research findings.

Our research approach is supported by the calls from Ratten (2021) and Paoloni and Serafini (2021) for empirical work on COVID-19 to be exploratory. Furthermore, we follow the recommendation from Nummela et al. (2020) and use a narrative-based approach to report how COVID-19 has changed entrepreneurs' lives and behaviors. Other scholars have already used this approach (Stephens et al. 2021; Spadavecchia and Yu 2021).

Our approach allows us to fill the gap in the literature concerning the contribution of the skills and attitudes of women managers to identifying timely and effective strategies for overcoming the crisis (Paoloni and Serafini 2021).

3.1. Research Context

Before starting qualitative research, context analysis is required (Kohlbacher 2006; Miller and Dingwall 1997).

The agro-food sector has been deeply affected by the economic crisis and by governments' lockdowns. It represents an integral part of the European and Italian economies. Firms operate in a highly competitive market due to increasing globalization, the progressive reduction in entry barriers, and the presence of large multinationals. Faced with

essential constraints, such as the slowing demand and the strengthening of the food retail sector, agro-food companies have developed new sector strategies, especially in Western countries. They have expanded their markets towards emerging economies in the fight for leadership positions. These strategies lead to a greater concentration of capital and highlight the global food oligopoly (Gumbert and Fuchs 2018; Caiazza and Volpe 2014).

In Europe, the sector is characterized by small enterprises with crops that do not exceed 5 hectares. These are mainly family businesses. Investments made in 2018 amounted to E.U.R. 59 billion, an increase of 4% compared with 2017. Agriculture contributed 1.1% of the European Union's G.D.P. in 2018 (Eurostat 2021, European Union). Based on the available data, the wine sector is one of the most affected by the restrictions, essentially due to the closure of the *Hôtellerie*, Restaurant, Catering, and café channel (Ho.Re.Ca). The latest data show that the lockdowns imposed on the Ho.Re.Ca—in addition to the intrinsic–emotional factors due to the state of emergency—have influenced the population's consumption choices. These aspects have profoundly affected wine production (Istat 2021; Ismea 2021). A decline in Italian wine exports was confirmed in October 2020, which matured significantly during the first months of the health crisis. Still, this volume could not be sustained during the autumn period. The month's exact data show a decrease in volume of 6% compared with the same month of the previous year, against a loss in value of 3%.

In 2020, the exports reduced by -2.7% for 5.11 billion in revenue. The loss in value was more than proportional, with a reduction of -3.4% compared with 2019. The year 2020 closed with 20.8 million hectoliters shipped across the border for a turnover of 6.2 billion and a loss of -3% compared with 2019. However, the results are less critical if evaluated in light of the sharp reduction in the international wine trade and the even more disappointing performance of the main competitors.

According to ISMEA's elaborations, there was a loss of 7% in the volume of exports and over double that loss in value (-15%) for France, while Spain lost 10 and 5 percent, respectively. Italian exports recorded significant setbacks in two important client countries (the United States (-5.9% in value) and the United Kingdom (-9.5%)) and significant losses in the Far East (-18.6% in Japan and -33.6% in China). On the other hand, the turnover in Germany ($+4\%$), the second most important destination for Italian wineries, the Scandinavian Peninsula, Switzerland, and Canada, grew against a hold on the Russian market (Ismea 2021).

3.2. Research Method

Having defined the context, we started our investigation through an in-depth analysis of an explorative case study. Notably, to comply with the study's aim, we used a qualitative investigation methodology to analyze a polar case study (Yin 2014), which is particularly suitable for understanding complex phenomena according to a holistic approach (Flynn et al. 1990; Gummesson 1988). The case study approach is ideal for responding to "how and why" questions about a contemporary set of events (Yin 1993; Leonard-Barton 1990). Furthermore, researchers have argued that several data groups can be difficult or impossible to tackle by means other than qualitative approaches such as a case study (Sykes 1990).

The research was structured based on the following research protocol (Miles and Huberman 1994):

Stage 1: industry choice. This study builds on previous research on agro-food companies. The changed context due to COVID-19 has prompted us to update prior conclusions and deepen the study of these companies' behavior during the crisis, focusing on the contribution of women managers.

Stage 2: case study choice. We selected a case study that, albeit indirectly, would allow for a broader framework of observation. Thus, we analyzed a cooperative in the wine sector with a long history currently active in the center of Italy.

To identify the connections between the relevant aspects, we selected three variables: (a) company size; (b) company longevity; and (c) territory (Stake 2006):

- (a) company size: we investigated a medium/large cooperative with over 200 agricultural entrepreneurs;
- (b) company longevity: to have a broad time frame of reference, we observed a mature enterprise, which allowed us to reach conclusions of general validity;
- (c) territory: the choice of the operational area was strategic. Since the research began during the first lockdown (March–April 2020) and the research protocol provided for on-site visits, it was necessary to identify a company that was active in the Roman territory and easily accessible to the researchers in compliance with the limits imposed by the restrictive measures. Simultaneously, to validate our conclusions, the company needed national relevance to offer an observational area that extended to the Italian territory.

Stage 3: Relevance of females to the management area. We required the presence of at least one female manager in a relevant strategic area (Paoloni 2021). Thus, we focused on an Italian wine cooperative whose quality manager (QM) was a young female winemaker.

Data sources are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Data sources.

Database	Typology	Subjects	Interview Code
Primary data	Interviews	Quality Manager	I1
		Company president	I2
		Professional Accountant	I3
Secondary data	Documents and virtual tours	Scientific literature	
		Social media	
		Specialized newspapers	
		Web sites	
		Accounting system	

The interviews lasted a total of 300 min, and we guaranteed the anonymity of the interviewees. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were investigated using *in vivo* coding in NVivo (Miles 2015), and each author performed reliability checks. The results obtained were discussed among the authors and with the interviewees (Yin 2014). The data were collected in two phases over twelve months (June–July 2021).

Phase 1 occurred in mid-June 2020, circa four weeks after the first economic lockdown had been removed. The activities referred to in the Ho.Re.Ca were permitted in Italy starting from 18 May 2020 in compliance with the anti-COVID regulations on social distancing.

Phase 2 occurred in mid-July 2021, circa four weeks after the (re)opening of the economy. The majority of businesses had (re)opened but in a limited capacity.

The following sections present the data collected during two periods of great uncertainty for entrepreneurs and at times when their availability to participate in research was limited. In our case, on the other hand, we were able to count on the company's collaboration, which was driven by a desire to show determination and confidence in the adopted choices.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Company Analysis

Our case study is a cooperative founded in 1945 by farmers motivated by a desire for aggregation. In 1946, the company began marketing packaged wines throughout the country. In the 1960s, the top wines crossed national borders and actively participated in affirming "Made in Italy" throughout the world. Starting from the end of the 1960s, the organization received DOC wine awards for its productions. In 1989, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry declared a "cooperative society of national interest". The

company's mission is to keep the millennial Roman peasant civilization alive and enhance the territory and viticulture of the "Castelli Romani" (the area in the center of Italy).

Currently, the cooperative has 200 members who cultivate 1200 hectares of land and produce 120,000 quintals of grapes. The 2019 turnover exceeded E.U.R. 17 million. The production structure is spread over two factories (Marino and Frascati) close to Rome (Italy). There are 29 employees.

Interestingly, I2 states that: '*Considering all the member companies, we can estimate that the entire supply chain involves 500 farmers, 100 units of transport workers and seasonal laborers*'. Tables 2 and 3 summarize some relevant data about the dimensional characteristics of the case study. This information helped us compare similar firms' results by the sector of activity (Yin 2014).

Table 2. Dimensional variables.

Main Variables Observed	Value (Euro) 2019
Production value	17,380,274
Hectare Shareholders	1200
Tangible fixed assets	4,032,523
Labor cost	1,553,394
Employee number	29 units
Inventories of raw materials and finished products	9,934,262
Net assets	3,122,611

Table 3. The territorial distribution of turnover.

Distribution of Turnover	Percentage
Local	0.04
Regional	0.30
National	0.61
Foreign	0.05
Total	1.00

4.2. The Shutdown's Impact on Turnover and Distribution Channels

Turnover during the pandemic slowed sharply. In 2020, the turnover growth was reduced by 2%, while inventories fell by over 24%. These reductions were primarily due to two factors:

- the blockade of the Ho.Re.Ca. channel, which caused national and international orders to fall; and
- the propensity to consume and the demand characteristics impacted the types of wines purchased rather than the sales volumes.

Wine is one of the products with the highest symbolic value and a cultural asset with a social meaning (Paoloni et al. 2021). The state of emergency due to the pandemic has hurt consumption choices. A 30% drop in "bubbly" sparkling wines, and sparkling wines associated with celebrations, was observed, and consumption initially turned towards low-end wines. As I1 points out:

'In the initial phase of the lockdown, the consumer preferred low-end wines, afraid that the situation was grave and had economic consequences. Later, he gave "value" to the wine, as if it were a "treat he deserved" for the isolation he was forced into, and he turned to wines of a slightly higher range.'

As a result of the first lockdown, the company decided to close the main store, to minimize the movement of people and, consequently, minimize the possibility of employees contracting COVID-19, which would have forced the production departments to lockdown.

Temporary staff replacements were not a solution. Indeed,

'The company's characteristics make it impossible to imagine the temporary replacement of staff through temporary employment agencies, which many large-scale retail companies have used instead.' (I1)

The company also had to stop tastings and sommelier courses, which it had recently started, strengthening the corporate image and increasing brand visibility.

4.3. The Contribution of Female Management

To respond promptly to the changed context, the company had to reinvent the local visibility channel. *'The Q.M. played a central role, but the decisions adopted result from a shared process'* (I2).

A team formed by five to six women aged between 35 and 55 years managed the renewal process. The Q.M. coordinates with the (male) president, to whom she refers proposals and initiatives developed by the female team.

'The president and the board of directors have given me confidence and autonomy both in the management of internal processes (development of the e-commerce channel) and in external ones (relationships with banks and Public Administration).' (I1)

'We have chosen to strengthen the e-commerce channel, already present among the possible purchasing options, but developed in the past especially for higher-end wines less appreciated by other consumers due to the higher costs that home delivery would have entailed.' (I1)

The tools chosen to strengthen the channel took into account the needs identified by the female team during the telephone contact with old and new customers. *'We have intercepted the customers' need to increase personal relationships abruptly interrupted by lockdowns and restrictive measures and have added a WhatsApp number to the traditional online sales'* (I1). This social tool, now widely used among all generations as it is easy to use, has allowed old and new customers:

- to have direct contact with the company;
- to be guided in their purchases based on specific needs and tastes, and
- to obtain personalized home delivery on time and accurately.

Consumers highly appreciated this "human" profile of the relationship, and, throughout the lockdown, one staff member was entirely dedicated to the new service.

'Social channels (Instagram and Facebook) have played a central role in developing the renewed marketing strategies by offering a personalized digital service combined with home delivery.' (I1)

Table 4 illustrates the initiative's success, in terms of new customers acquired and the increase in turnover, compared with the corresponding months of the previous year.

Table 4 shows that more than 30 percent of the orders processed during the first months of the lockdown are represented by new customers acquired thanks to the launch of the new business model. Furthermore, the analysis of the internal accounting made it possible to observe an increase in turnover of 24% compared with the same period in the previous year solely through the traditional point of sale.

Various critical drivers of success related to female management emerged from the interviews: (i) a prompt reaction to the lockdown and the identification of new sales strategies; (ii) effective communication in disseminating the new model to the board of directors; and (iii) the availability and welcoming attitude towards the customer, primarily for orders fulfilled via the new model, which did not allow for tangible contact with the customer at the point of sale.

Table 4. Performance of the digital distribution channel during the lockdown (March–April 2020).

New Business Model			
Virtual shop	Access Number	Traditional store	Number of orders
Managed contacts	917	Closed until 3 June 2020	0
Orders processed by telephone	308		
Orders processed on WhatsApp	171		
Orders processed by email	37		
Orders Acquired during the Lockdown			
From old customers	Number of orders	From new customers	Number of orders
Orders from card customers (15% discount)	222	Orders from new customers	163
Member/Employee Orders (20% discount)	97		
Point of sale (no card)	36		
Total orders from old customers	355	Total orders from new customers	163
Summary of Data on Sales during the First Lockdown (March–April 2020)			
Number of orders processed	518	Average order amount	EUR 90.18
New customers	163	(from social media advertising)	96
Increase in turnover thanks to the new business model (compared with the traditional store)	+24%		

4.4. The Contribution of Female Relationships

From the interviews, the strong personality of the female Q.M. emerged, who, over time, was able to consolidate old relationships and start new ones, both formal and informal.

The esteem and trust generated by relations with institutional stakeholders (banks, the Italian Government, the Lazio Region) favored the achievement of different results, including: (i) the obtaining of loans and facilities; (ii) the adoption of advanced software for the management of production processes; and (iii) an improvement in relations with Public Administration and banks.

‘The company was able to access subsidized bank loans for over 3 billion Euros, provided for by the subsidy measures arranged by the Italian Government. It also obtained various non-repayable loans to encourage digitalization and smart working.’ (I3)

Table 5 summarizes the loans and subsidy measures obtained by the company thanks to the skills and abilities of the female Q.M.

Table 5. Partnership with institutional stakeholders during COVID-19.

Facilitation and Support Measures Provided by the Lazio Region (Value in Euros)			
Facilitation typology	State of request	Request Amount	
		Request	Contribution
OCM ¹ 2020 I.T. system innovation (software and hardware)	Admissible but not financeable due to a lack of funds	273,932	109,572.80
Facilitation and Support Measures Provided by the Italian Government			
Facilitation typology	State of request	Request Amount	
		Request	Contribution
Disinfection	Obtained	7850	7850
Smart Working 2020	Processing	15,000	15,000
Loan moratorium	Obtained	600,000	600,000
Replacement and new liquidity	Obtained	3,000,000	3,000,000

Notably, we identified the following aptitudes: (i) a persuasive capacity; (ii) precision in loan requests; and (iii) timely identification of the main subsidy measures available.

All of the requested funding was disbursed except for the first (O.C.M.) due to the unavailability of funds. The projects and requests were processed by the Q.M. and the (female) supporting administrative staff.

The different stakeholders include consortia and other wineries spread throughout the Italian territory. The partnerships with them favored the selection of innovative software to manage production processes and quality control.

'Existing relationships were consolidated to obtain the necessary support for choosing the most appropriate and efficient software (. . .). I trusted large consortia in central Italy, who suggested advanced software to improve the product's internal control system.' (I1)

In summary, some results in the process management innovation were obtained thanks to informal relationships with other companies in the sector.

The interviews revealed a different role of the Q.M.'s skills and attitude in fostering the company's resilience.

'Over the past year, the board of directors and I have let the Q.M. lead and strengthen relationships with banks and Public Administration.' (I2)

At the same time, I1 points out that: *'I noticed an increase in trust in me, which has favored the relationships between the company and external stakeholders and my career within the company. I recently obtained the qualification of quality director, thanks to the results achieved in relationships with institutions and external lenders'*.

In conclusion, we found that the Q.M.'s ability to consolidate stable relationships with external and internal stakeholders made it possible to: (i) identify commercial and financial strategies; (ii) innovate production processes using support measures and internal financial resources; and, consequently, (iii) contain the effects of the crisis.

However, we also noted a substantial opening of the board of directors and the chairman (who were all male) and a propensity to leave ample room for female management to maneuver.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the case study allowed us to answer our research question: *What is women managers' contribution to the ability of a firm to overcome the crisis caused by an unexpected shock?*

Our results show that female managers significantly contribute to the ability of companies to overcome the crisis (Castiglione et al. 2020; Vasilic et al. 2020).

In the case analyzed, the interpersonal skills and attitude of the quality manager and those of the female staff made it possible to: (i) identify innovative marketing strategies; (ii) introduce technological innovations for the intelligent management of processes; and (iii) maintain and develop relationships with external institutional stakeholders (Paoloni 2021; Paoloni et al. 2018). Thus, the skills of the female employees allowed the investigated company to contain the effects of the pandemic crisis.

Our results also highlight the decisive contribution of (male-oriented) corporate governance in favoring the growth and autonomy of women in positions of responsibility (Giotopoulos et al. 2017). This contribution is evidenced by: (iv) the increasing delegation of roles and responsibilities in managing relationships with institutional stakeholders to women managers; and (v) the recognition of women managers' talents in terms of career progression (Castiglione et al. 2020).

The results show that female managerial skills have been drivers of critical success factors both during the management of lockdowns and during the subsequent phase of progressive reopening. Notably, we found several characteristics and skills attributable to the female manager fostered organizational resilience: (vi) the attitude to change; (vii) the ability to promote new initiatives; and (viii) the ability to have initiated, consolidated, and managed solid formal relationships with institutional stakeholders.

Table 6 summarizes our main conclusions, highlighting those attributable to the personal characteristics of management and those relating to professional skills.

Table 6. The primary skills and attitudes of female managers.

Personal Aptitudes (a)	Theoretical Framework (a)	Professional Skills (b)	Theoretical Framework (b)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a strong personality – a persuasive capacity – timeliness – lively intelligence – warmth – relationship skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the composition of the individual characteristics determines the system's potential for resilience (Page 2014; Bell 2007) – a significant source of capacity for organizational resilience is contained in the attributes of employees (Van Der Vegt et al. 2015) – relational capabilities, trust, and knowledge play a crucial role in shaping actions to be taken immediately and enabling positive functioning in the face of an unexpected shock (Williams et al. 2017; Colquitt et al. 2011; Gittel 2008) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – precision – expertise – effective communication – relationship skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – possession of unique and rare knowledge as the leading resource for creating business value (Belso-Martinez and Diez-Vial 2018) – the value created by companies is also based on the relationships that the company fosters (relational capital) (Johansson 2007) – firms set up and run by females exhibit a set of distinctive features (Bruni et al. 2004; Paoloni 2021)

This table can be considered a dashboard that summarizes the primary skills and attitudes of female managers that are helpful to overcoming unexpected shocks. The table can be used for further studies and comparisons both nationally and internationally. Its replicability and reliability were determined by the consistency of the results obtained with the conclusions of relevant previous studies.

Our results contribute to the emerging literature on the strategies companies have successfully used to face the crisis, offering an original contribution to the theory and practice on females' contribution to company resilience.

The originality of this work is twofold. On the one hand, its value is represented by the survey that aims to determine how the female management of businesses owned by men can foster the resilience of companies. To the best of our knowledge, previous studies analyzed these abilities only in firms with female direction and ownership. Our results show that even in sectors strongly characterized by a male presence, women can emerge and make a valuable contribution to the company.

On the other hand, this paper investigates the role of women in economic systems from an original perspective that has previously not been dealt with in the literature. Notably, it analyzes how female leadership drives organizational resilience during unexpected shocks, providing an interdisciplinary viewpoint by offering research ideas in other subjects such as sociology, psychology, and neuroscience. Even if the results have been obtained concerning an Italian case study, we believe they are of broad international interest and application because they refer to a general context and the aptitudes and skills of females are not referable to a local context only.

To reach conclusions with general validity, we chose to analyze a single case study with broad and deep proprietary connections with other companies in the area. The choice of the case study was critical since it was an explorative case study. The identified company is a medium-sized company with extensive links to other companies. It operates in a sector severely affected by the pandemic crisis (the wine sector). Our findings offer conclusions

with general validity on the need for companies to develop “real and virtual” relationships with external stakeholders and encourage female management.

To obtain more general results, the future phases of our research include a comparison of the analyzed case study with another case study that is homogeneous in terms of the sector of activity, size, and territorial context characterized by male management.

A further phase of our research could investigate whether companies in which women hold roles of responsibility or direction face the crisis more effectively. This stream of research requires the extension of the sample and the comparison of results obtained in companies in the same sector managed solely by men and operating in different areas of the country to consider the impact that cultural aspects can exert. Comparative studies referring to various countries in Europe and the world would also be of interest.

The scientific value of qualitative analyses lies in investigating aspects that cannot be observed through quantitative studies. When personal and emotional elements must be included to explain the results, it is necessary to interview people and learn about the production realities. Indeed, the crisis prompted by COVID-19 required us to investigate emotional and reactive aspects not identifiable solely by aggregating data.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.C. and P.P.; Data curation, A.C.; Formal analysis, A.C.; Investigation, A.C.; Methodology, P.P.; Supervision, P.P.; Writing—review & editing, A.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Note

- ¹ The O.C.M. is a non-repayable grant for Italian wineries intended for the technological modernization of and investment in the cellar. It represents the primary source of financing for wineries. It is promoted by the Agency for Disbursements in Agriculture (AGEA) and coordinated on a regional basis. The O.C.M. wine calls are announced annually by the Italian Ministry for Agricultural Policies and derive from the distribution of E.U. funds. Companies highly appreciate these forms because they are granted quickly, and advances on accepted loans are paid out just as quickly. They have an annual or two-year duration and provide a non-repayable grant equal to 40% of the investments to be made.

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