

## Women's Position in Today's Hotel Industry: An Overview

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### Abstract

This study aims to shed light on the gender inequity in the hotel industry by reviewing the related literature and drawing a comprehensive picture of this phenomenon. A review of the literature on hotel industry and hospitality industry was conducted. The review was based on four main questions that aimed to collect information on indicators of gender inequity, the actual representation of women and the reasons and justification for this phenomenon. The results of the study revealed that there are several indicators of gender inequity in the hotel industry. Women are not fairly represented in the hotel industry and struggle in their career progression. Moreover, gender inequity in this industry is further supported by social and cultural values, corporate culture, and men's domination in the industry. This happens even though women are outperforming their male counterparts in several circumstances. The study suggests a research agenda for further clarifying this phenomenon and suggests solutions to address this phenomenon globally.

**Keywords:** Women, Gender Equity, Hotel Industry, Hospitality Industry.

### Introduction

Gender equity is one of the main issues that concern different communities around the world. Despite the progress in fighting against this phenomenon, some of its effects and implications are still latent in many practices, particularly, business practices (Abdul Rahman et al., 2019; Blayney and Blotnick, 2017).

This study aimed to shed light on this gender inequity phenomenon in the hotel industry. More specifically it aimed to draw a comprehensive picture of the issue and improve its

understanding. The study was based on an in-depth review of related literature. The questions that guided the review were based on questions that have arisen from previous studies in this field and were grouped in four main categories: Are there any indicators of gender inequity in the hotel industry? Are women fairly and significantly represented in the industry? Is gender inequity in the industry justified and acceptable? What are the main reasons for the gender inequity in the hotel industry? The study also aimed to identify new themes for additional research that will further explore and identify solutions to this phenomenon globally.

### **Are there any Indicators of Gender Inequity in the Hotel Industry?**

Gender discrimination has become an increasingly serious workforce issue in all types of jobs, regardless of the level of skills (Abdul Rahman et al., 2019). The existence of the Glass ceiling and its effect on women's career development has been widely confirmed in many countries, irrespective of legal frameworks of equal opportunities (Kumara, 2018). The results of recent research on this topic reveal the continued segregation of women across the economies (Hutchings et al., 2020).

In the hotel industry, there are significant indicators of gender inequity. These include the number of jobs occupied by women (Masadeh et al., 2019, Masadeh, 2013a; Magablih, 2006; Jones, 1992), the role of women in the industry (e.g. Blayney and Blotnick, 2017), career development opportunities (Masadeh, 2013b, Pine, 1997; Li and Leung, 2001; Kattara, 2005) and the spread of the phenomenon (Timo and Davidson, 2005; Woods and Viehland, 2000). Female employees cannot be excluded from the hotel industry because of gender roles in the organization. However, there are past studies that showed some hotel companies as somewhat gendered and discriminatory (Masadeh, 2013c; Biswas and Cassell, 1996). For example, when considering women in Arab countries, in Egypt, only 153 (13.2 percent) of hotel managers were female out of a total of 1,161, and only three females in 71 hotels were able to break the 'glass ceiling' and climb the hierarchical structure up to management administrative positions (general manager, executive assistant general manager and resident manager) (Kattara, 2005).

Women are less likely to be considered for hiring in the industry compared to their male counterparts (Magablih, 2006; Jones, 1992) and women's representation in the hotel industry is generally low (Masadeh et al., 2019; Blayney and Blotnick, 2017). A visitor to Jordan will rarely see females working in a predominantly male environment, even though women are equally as experienced, talented, and skilled as men (Masadeh, 2013; Magablih, 2006).

Despite the importance of the tourism sector in Jordan, women make up only 4 percent of middle and senior managers, 1 percent of upper management (Jones, 1992) and 10 percent of middle management (2013c). Research findings from a study on middle managers in international hotel chains in Jordan, reported that the hotel industry is male dominated at the middle management level, with 33 females (16 percent) and 174 males (84 percent) (Masadeh, 2010). On the other hand, the percentage of women working in tourism overall in Jordan (including catering, restaurant, and hotel industries) varied greatly from region to region, ranging from 2 percent to over 80 percent (Jones, 1992).

Female career advancement is another indicator of gender inequity in the hotel industry and female career development is a neglected area of research in the Middle East (Masadeh, 2013c; Kattara, 2005). It has been reported that female career advancement in the hotel industry is too complicated in Asian and Middle Eastern countries (e.g. Pine, 1997; Li and Leung, 2001; Kattara, 2005). In the Middle East culture, it is still difficult to accept that females

are holding a 'general manager' position (Masadeh, 2013c; Kattara, 2005). However, this is also the case in other countries. Li and Leung (2001) reported that only two females had broken through the invisible barrier and achieved a general manager position in the 77 hotels in Singapore. In Hong Kong, Pine (1997) found that only three females reached general management positions out of 72 Hong Kong hotels.

Although there are some pieces of evidence on the spread of the gender inequity phenomenon in the hotel industry worldwide, some studies report different statistics around the intensity of this phenomenon (Timo and Davidson, 2005; Woods and Viehland, 2000). Timo and Davidson (2005) who conducted a study on Australian multinational corporations (MNCs) and domestic luxury hotels, reported that 34.5 percent of hotel industry managers were female, compared to 65.5 percent male. In the U.S.A., on the other hand, Woods and Viehland (2000) found that 46 percent of managers in the country's 11 hotel chains were female. However, these data still show that even in developed countries, there are pieces of evidence on gender inequity despite the reduced severity of this phenomenon.

Although there are a number of studies investigating the role of women in various industries, there is presently little research devoted specifically to the woman hospitality sector in the Middle East. Data on female workers in the hotel industry in most countries, and in the Middle East in particular, is difficult to come by (Masadeh, 2013a; Masadeh, 2010). According to the available studies, women play an insignificant role in the tourism and hotel industry (Magablih, 2000), and still tend to take a back seat to men for related jobs. It is reported that women do not actively participate in the hospitality industry due to social, cultural and traditional reasons (Baum, Moah & Spivack, 1997; Li & Leung, 2001; Wong & Chung, 2003). In Jordan, very few women are employed in the hotel industry despite male and female employees' equal levels of competence, something that is attributed to the entrenched local tradition and religious laws relegating women to weak and submissive social roles (Würth, 2004).

### **Are Women well-represented in the Hotel Industry?**

Blayney and Blotnick (2017) updated their 2012 study and found that women's representation in the hotel industry is still low. In some areas, such as in the Middle East, it is often not easy to discuss the role of women in the hotel industry. Moreover, data on female workers in the hotel industry is difficult to come by. For example, in Jordan, this kind of data was and is still almost entirely non-existent (Masadeh, 2010). The available limited literature revealed that women's role in the hotel industry is limited to semi- or unskilled, low-paid, gendered, operative, and non-managerial jobs (Biswas & Cassell, 1996; Davies, Taylor & Savery, 2001).

The cultural values and beliefs regarding attitudes towards women which vary among different societies may play a significant role in this phenomenon. For instance, in some cultures working in the hotel industry is considered inappropriate for women, therefore, women are not recruited for some hotel jobs such as being bell-boys, night watch, or night porters (Biswas & Cassell, 1996).

The literature identified several female stereotypical roles that women may occupy in organizational life (Biswas & Cassell, 1996; Kattara, 2005). For example, it is believed that women tend to be more attractive to customers (i.e. male customers), better at handling customers, and more accepted than their male counterparts in people-oriented positions such as room division and marketing departments (Kattara, 2005). Furthermore, Kattara stated that women are preferred in some jobs to provide the impression of being at home.

For example, an older waitress for serving breakfast is highly recommended. In some other cases, women are perceived as playing seductress roles or are even viewed as sex objects (Biswas & Cassell, 1996).

When it comes to managerial positions, the hotel industry is still dominated by men (Wong & Chung, 2003; Timo & Davidson, 2005). Interestingly, however, the literature identified variation in women representation in the managerial positions among different hotel star ratings. For example, the jobs in 4-and 5-star international hotel chains are shared almost equally between female and male counterparts (Timo and Davidson, 2005).

Overall, existing research shows that women are not fairly represented in the hotel industry, however, there are indications of differences in representation among different environments and circumstances. This finding leads to the important question of whether there is any justification for gender inequity in this industry? This question is discussed in the next section.

### **Do Women Deserve their Current Position in the Hotel Industry?**

None of the previous studies that attempted to explore differences between female and their male counterparts' performance in the hotel industry, have referred to any superiority of men's performance or skills. On the contrary, researchers have found that women are preferred for some jobs (Biswas and Cassell, 1996), or that women are more productive and committed compared to men (e.g. by Maxwell, 1997; Liu and Wilson, 2001; Menicucci et al 2019; Alhammad, 2020).

In a case study of an international hotel chain in England, Biswas and Cassell (1996) found that hotels prefer some jobs to be occupied by women, such as reception and the sales and marketing department, because of their appearance and their display of sexuality. While this could be considered as evidence for a significant role of women in this industry, this also can be considered as a stereotypical perception of women' role as housewives doing the cooking and cleaning.

The argument that women cannot play some roles because of the biological and social role differences between women and men is not well justified. Liu & Wilson (2001) studied the perceptions of women as managers and they found that women are adept at juggling work and family life, and they have gained various valuable job-transferable skills such as interpersonal, communication, organization and 'fire-fighting' ability. Additionally, women are ideally and naturally suited to roles of the hotel industry such as in human resource positions (Kattara, 2005)

Despite the fact that women have been found to be more productive and committed than their male counterparts in some cases (e.g. Smith & Smits, 1994; Shirley, 1995; Maxwell, 1997; Liu and Wilson, 2001; Alhammad, 2020), one of the main gender inequity issues as identified in the previous sections is the insufficient female career advancement.

Women have been found to have higher motivation for tourism and hospitality entrepreneurship than men. Moreover, women are more focused on reducing expenses rather than the income inducing activities preferred by their male counterparts which are more long-term oriented (Alhammad, 2020). Women can make a difference when they get an actual chance. Maxwell (1997) has found that senior managers have started to recognize and acknowledge that women, when fully committed, achieve better results than men do. Moreover, Liu and Wilson (2001) have argued that females are far more determined than their male counterparts and tend to be more democratic in management, which encourages staff commitment. Furthermore, Maxwell (1997: 233) has found that the approach used by

female senior managers in their staff management styles such as 'good communication, flexibility and adaptability, and teamwork' provides better outcomes than male senior managers.

It has been found that recruiting women in key positions is associated with long term company success and creates a competitive advantage as it employs women's distinctive set of skills that contributes to a culture of inclusion through a diverse workforce (Gupta, 2019). It has also been reported that women are more loyal employees. According to Patwardhan et al., (2018) women managers may adjust their feelings of satisfaction to reduce dissonance and remain committed to employment

These findings indicate that there is no superiority of men's performance or skills over their female counterparts. On the contrary, women are suitable for some roles, and more productive and committed than their male counterparts. Therefore, gender inequity in the hotel industry is not justified. Since women can be at least equal with men in the hotel industry, the question raised by this discussion is: why is this happening? This question is discussed in the next section.

### **Why Women do not Get Enough Chances?**

The previous sections discussed the presence of gender inequity in the hotel industry., It has been shown that women are not fairly represented in the hotel industry, and this situation is not justified since there is no evidence of superiority of men's performance or skills over their female counterparts. The current section attempts to identify the reasons behind this phenomenon.

It has been found that overall, gender inequity is caused by cultural values and beliefs regarding attitudes towards women (Li and Leung, 2001; Treven, 2003; Blayney and Blotnicky, 2017; Masadeh et al., 2019; Yasin et al., 2019), corporate culture policies and procedures (Biswas and Cassell, 1996; Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Gupta, 2019), and male dominance (Kattara, 2005; Gonzales-Serrano et al., 2018) which vary among different societies.

Li and Leung (2001) in their research have identified the main obstacles restricting female managers from moving up the hierarchical structure as cultural and social barriers. These wider cultural and social considerations have consequences for the prospects for female employees within the industry (Yasin et al., 2019). Treven (2003) found a clear distinction between women and men in terms of occupation in high masculinity cultures. Blayney and Blotnicky (2017) identified certain practices that may be impeding women from reaching the upper echelons. They mentioned balancing work and personal life and facing stereotypes. Another study has found that men are not the only ones unconvinced that women should be working in the hotel industry; some women do not support other women working in the hotel industry (Masadeh et al., 2019).

Corporate culture policies and procedures pose great obstacles for women in this industry since the 'old boy' network still dominates in the vast majority of organizations (Linehan & Scullion, 2001). For example, Linehan & Scullion (2001) found that women held low-skilled jobs and low-paid positions due to the selection and recruitment processes as well as the informal and formal policies and processes. Furthermore, Biswas and Cassell (1996) stated that the main barrier preventing women from reaching senior managerial positions was the instilled negative perception in the organization environment towards women. Biswas and Cassell believe that the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender that are embedded deeply within established organizational discourses serve to create organizational environments where it is difficult for women to succeed. Because the majority of hotels are



not adopting proactive policies that encourage the representation and empowerment of women, female employees tend to be concentrated at the lower positions and their presence is lower at senior positions (Gupta, 2019).

There is a common impression that the hotel industry is generally a men's world, not to mention that precedence in management must be prevailed by males. Therefore, it is an extremely rigid road for females to find an easy chance to reach such managerial positions (Kattara, 2005: 246). Because of male dominance of management and the stereotyping of certain positions women face a glass ceiling, a barrier to advancement in women's profession in the hotel industry (Gonzales-Serrano et al 2018).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The current study aims to explore gender inequity in the hotel industry. The study identified and answered four main questions related to this research topic. These questions were: 1) are there any indicators of gender inequity in the hotel industry? 2) Are women well-represented in the hotel industry? 3) Do women deserve their current position in the hotel industry? And 4) why women do not get enough chances?

This review concluded that there is a gender inequity phenomenon in the hotel industry with strong indicators of the differences in representations, favouring men over women in the industry. Moreover, there are differences in career advancement opportunities and types of jobs occupied by each gender. Therefore, it is not just women constitute only a small percentage of the workforce in the hotel industry, they are also less likely to hold management positions compared to men. They occupy semi-or unskilled, low-paid, gendered, operative, an non- managerial jobs (Biswas & Cassell,1996; Davies, Taylor & Savery, 2001) and they also struggle to achieve career advancement in this industry compared to their female counterparts in other industries.

The review also identified indicators of the differences in the severity of the phenomenon between different countries and companies. For example, Gender inequity is more popular in the Middle East and Asia, however, it is less prevalent in countries with advanced tourism hospitality industries, and it is also less prevalent in hotels with higher star ratings (e.g. 4-stars and 5-stars hotels).

Findings from this review support women deserve better representation in the hotel industry. It has been proven that women have skills, knowledge, and capabilities to occupy more and higher positions in the industry. There is no superiority of men over women in this industry, on the contrary, on some occasions, it was found that women are suitable for some roles in the industry as well as more productive and committed than their male counterparts.

Three main reasons were identified as contributing to the gender inequity phenomenon in the hotel industry. These include cultural values and beliefs that form certain attitudes toward women and their employment but also corporate culture policies and procedures that often favour men and pose great obstacles for women in this industry. Finally, the hotel industry is generally dominated by men which impedes women from reaching significant representation.

It is unfortunate that women still receive unfair treatment and are prevented from reaching job opportunities. Since it has been proved that women are as capable as men and in some cases can even outperform their male counterparts, firms need to recruit, retain, develop, and promote their most talented staff regardless of their gender (Gupta, 2019).

The gender gap in the hotel industry must be identified in order to overcome it (Gonzales-Serrano et al., 2018). This review provides a foundation for developing further studies on

effective methods for identifying and addressing this gender inequity phenomenon in this industry.

For example, Koburtay and Syed (2018) argued that gender equity practices, including leadership development programs for women, significantly enhance the emergence and effectiveness of women leaders

The authors of this paper recommend that a systematic review of the literature would be able to capture effectively information on best practices for human resources management to address gender inequity. The main focus of the systematic review would be to identify and summarize empirical pieces of evidence in this topic area using objective and unbiased review procedures (Torraco, 2005). The finding of the systematic review could support human resources management programs and decisions that are informed by evidence-based approaches. This work could facilitate a change in corporate culture that recognize the value of women in the hotel industry and would support change in hiring policies that would focus on recruiting, developing and promoting eligible employees regardless of their gender.

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