WOMEN CAREER ADVANCEMENT IN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN SRI LANKA: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FIVE STAR HOTELS IN GALLE DISTRICT

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Abstract

The hospitality industry in Sri Lanka is becoming important, although its development is hindered by numerous constraints, notably a critical deficiency of skilled people resources. The continuing underrepresentation of women in management positions poses a significant challenge to the global hospitality and tourism industry, with women representing less than twenty percent of managerial roles. The challenges to women career advancement in hospitality are documented, however their influence varies between different hotels and economic and socio-cultural environments. Using quantitative research approaches, this study intended to investigate the impact of potential challenges to women career advancement in hospitality industry Sri Lanka with reference to Galle district five-star hotels. Primary data were collected from fifty-one female executives in five-star hotels in Sri Lanka's Galle district using a structured questionnaire. The sample was selected through convenience sampling, and data were analysed using SPSS. The findings emphasize the prevalence of professionals in the executive and above level of their careers, underscoring the importance of advanced educational qualifications and pertinent experience as crucial elements for career advancement and indicate that work-life balance is the most significant challenge impacting women's career advancement in the hospitality industry, whereas economic benefits represent the least impactful component. Social and cultural norms, and working conditions were identified as factors influencing women's career advancement in the hospitality industry in Sri Lanka. Notably, the study found that the traditional perceived masculinity currently exerts minimal influence on women's career advancement in the hospitality industry.

The study advocates for equitable employment practices, the establishment of childcare and family support services, including onsite childcare and enhanced parental leave policies, can significantly improve work-life balance and increased female representation in strategic leadership roles. Finally, setting measurable gender diversity goals and regularly evaluating progress ensures accountability and continuous improvement across all organizational levels. It also recommends future research using qualitative methods in different national contexts to deepen understanding of the identified challenges in women career advancement in hospitality industry.

Keywords: *Women Employment, Work life balance, Women Career Advancement, Women in Hospitality, Gender Equality*

1.0 Introduction

The tourism industry in Sri Lanka is becoming more and more important, although its development is hindered with numerous constraints, notably a critical deficiency of skilled people resources. It is projected that an additional 25,000-30,000 jobs will be required annually to meet the anticipated increase in visitor arrivals to the region (Silva & Silva, 2021). However, the industry has faced various challenges, including concerns about the status and empowerment of women within the workforce. (Umasuthan & Park, 2018). Unexpectedly, there is a marked under representation of women in senior positions, with women holding less than 20 percent of management roles, and between 5-8 percent of board positions. In the tourism and hospitality industry, women make up nearly 70 percent of the workforce and perform over 70 percent of all work in the informal hospitality sector (Baum, 2015). Despite these advancements, women remain disproportionately disadvantaged in recruitment, promotion, and compensation. Unskilled or semi-skilled women often occupy the most precarious positions, where they are more susceptible to adverse working circumstances, discriminatory opportunities and treatment, violence, exploitation, stress, and sexual harassment (Baum, 2015). "The glass ceiling" as a typically refers to women in the workplace who get disproportionately low compensation and encounter obstacles that hinder their access to senior positions. The glass ceiling is regarded as gender-based discrimination that confines women to a status of inferiority and subjects them to societal harassment (Clevenger & Singh, 2013).

Despite comprehensive global research on women's career advancement in the hospitality sector, there is a significant deficiency of targeted studies addressing the specific issues and obstacles encountered by women in Sri Lanka's hotel industry. Most current research generalizes across the entire tourism and hospitality sector and fails to account the distinct cultural, social, and economic elements affecting women's

career advancement in Sri Lanka. Women are markedly under-represented in Sri Lanka's tourist sector, comprising fewer than 10 percent of the formal workforce, in contrast to 54 percent globally. This strong discrepancy underscores the disparity, since nations such as Mexico, South Korea, and South Africa have elevated female employment rates in tourism relative to other industries (Karunarathna, 2015). The issue is exacerbated by the low female enrolment in Sri Lankan hotel schools and a female labor force participation rate of merely 33.6 percent, in contrast to 73 percent for males (Ramalu & Janadari, 2020). In Sri Lanka, the majority of five-star hotels are deficient in women holding executive and managerial positions. This study has been performed to address the identified theoretical and practical gaps and empower women in the hotel industry in Sri Lanka and ultimately helping to solve the critical human resource shortage in the hotel sector. Therefore this research focus to analyse the impact of potential challenges for women career advancement in hospitality industry in Sri Lanka and to identify the most influential challenge for women career advancement in hospitality industry in Sri Lanka

2.0 Literature Review

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Self-efficacy significantly impacts career persistence, with women often underestimating their capabilities in male dominated areas (Bandura, 1997). Societal expectations and workplace biases may lead women to anticipate lower rewards despite their qualifications (Lent & Brown, 2019). This can discourage career advancement in hospitality, where long hours and work-life balance challenges exist. Gender biases, lack of mentorship, and organizational culture can restrict women's career growth (Mooney & Ryan, 2009).

Glass Ceiling Theory

Glass ceiling theory is the invisible barrier that prevent the women from career advancement into higher leadership position despite being possessing required skills and experience. This glass ceiling is found in 1980s and it highlights the best discrimination, establishment culture, and social and cultural norms that limit the career advancement of the woman (Morrison, 1987). In tourism and hospitality industry, the woman faces challenges to achieve to executive management role due to the patriarchal structure, lack of mentorship, improper career guidance, and limited opportunities for women in industries (Cotter, 2001).

Equity Theory

The Equity theory is developed by Adams (1965) means the necessity of equal rewards and the career opportunities. According to the equity theory, the individuals face job dissatisfaction, less motivation, job stagnation. This inequality in the rewards and the opportunities are faced by majorly by female employees in the tourism and the hospitality industry (Ng, 2010). The women have reported cases where that they don't receive equal wages compared to the male coworkers which create a disinterest in them about the job. (Kandampully, 2014). Some researches the female employees are totally dissatisfied due lack of promotions, hiring issues and leadership roles (Wickramasinghe, 2021).

Challenges for Women Career Advancement

Researchers have discovered numerous challenges to women's empowerment. These encompassed extended work hours, work-life balance, geographical mobility, sexual harassment, the old boys' network, lacking role models, mentoring, organizational culture, gender bias, vertical segregation, and the glass ceiling (Boone et al., 2013; Brownell, 1994; Okumus et al., 2010; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008).

Social and Cultural norms

Psychological empowerment pertains to the attitudes and ideas of community regarding their society and organization, which facilitates a sense of control over their work. (Ramos & Prideaux, 2014) stated that psychological aspect of empowerment emphasizes tourism development's ability to enhance inhabitants' confidence and self-esteem, as well as to acknowledge the distinct natural and cultural attributes of their town. Enhancing pride and self-esteem linked to psychological empowerment is considered a significant non-economic advantage of tourism (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008).

Working Conditions

Human resource regulations are the predominant barrier to women's empowerment. Selection and promotion rules are human resource practices that hinder women's career progression in the hospitality sector. Researcher identified five primary obstacles hindering women's career advancement: recruitment and selection policies; absence of mentors and role models; evaluation systems; career development and promotion policies; and institutional male dominance alongside the roles of women (Park, 1992). Lajara and Garcia (2013), demonstrated that women are confined to roles in floor maintenance and dining due to selective human resource practices. The established policy of recruiting women for specific departments and positions complicates career advancement.

Work Life Balance

Prior research indicates that work-family conflict is a significant obstacle to women empowerment. (Brownell, 1994) stated that although the number of women who are academically equipped and interested in pursuing careers in hospitality management is rising, they seem to exit the industry at a significantly higher rate than their male counterparts due to obstacles such as the absence of female mentors, unofficial information networks, and the influence of unique job characteristics. (Okumus et al., 2010) believe that women employed in five-star hotels in Turkey encounter insufficient time for social interactions, inadequate remuneration, and challenges in obtaining promotions, which are among the obstacles in the hospitality sector.
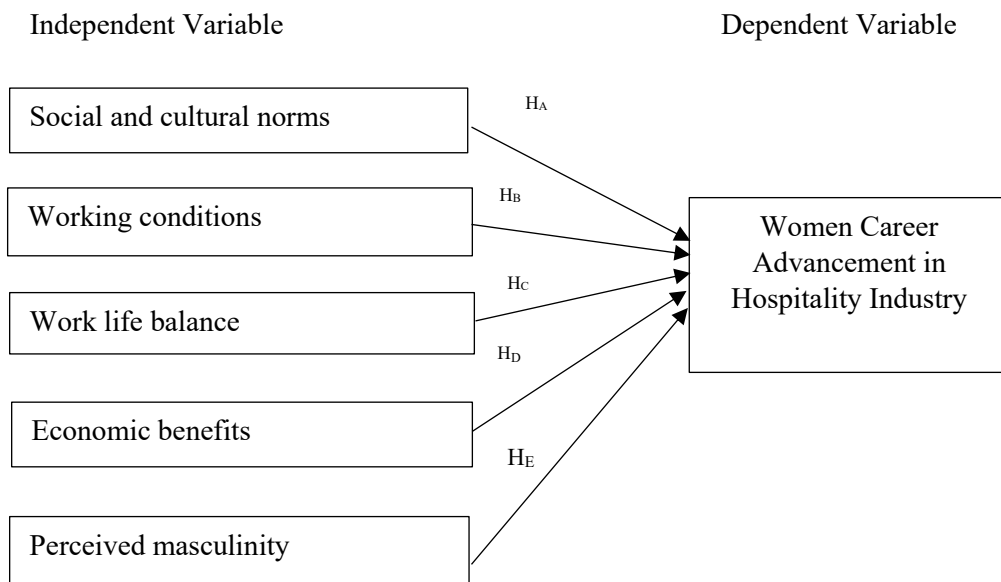
Economic Benefits

The remuneration package for employees of hotels in the hospitality sector Sri Lanka begins at 6000.00 LKR as an intern allowance. In esteemed hotel chains, the salary after six months will be approximately 10,000.00 LKR, although certain hotels offer up to 15,000.00 LKR on an individual basis. This compensation level is unlikely to attract many young individuals who are currently enticed by a consumerist culture (Abeywardana & Priyadarshani, 2017). Thrane (2008) argues that in Norway, male hospitality employees earn wages that are 20 percent greater than those of their female counterparts. The gender salary gap in tourism is exacerbated by the fact that female CEOs are predominantly employed in smaller enterprises compared to those in the manufacturing sector (Skalpe, 2007). The earnings of women in tourism are influenced by the overall demand for labor. Wage disparities between males and females are apparent in Tijuana and Torreón, Mexico. In Tijuana, adjacent to the United States border.

Perceived Masculinity

Prior research indicated gender inequalities in characteristics that promote and hinder women's career advancement. A researcher conduct survey with 97 female and 318 male general managers. The study identified eight challenges to women's career advancement, revealing gender disparities between female and male general managers, as well as issues related to the old boys' network, family responsibilities, compensation and promotions, workplace conflict, job characteristics, absence of mentors, lack of credibility, and sexual harassment. For instance, over 54 percent of males regarded compensation and advancement as a minimal issue, whereas only 11 percent of ladies concurred. Almost fifty percent of males regarded the old boys' network as a minor obstacle, whereas more than fifty percent of females viewed it as a significant barrier (Brownell, 1994).

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative methodology with a deductive approach, utilizing primary data collected through a standardized questionnaire to explore women's career advancement in Sri Lanka's hospitality industry. The study's target audience comprises executive level personnel and higher within the hospitality sector, specifically in five-star hotels located in the Galle District. The SLTDA (2023) reports that there are five star rated hotels in this region. Including, Araliya Beach Resort and Spa, Unawatuna, Cinnamon Bentota Beach, Heritance Ahungalle, RIU Hotel, Taj Bentota Resort and Spa. The study intends to encompass all five-star hotels to guarantee a thorough representation of the 74 executive and above level female workforces in considering the relatively small population size. Samples size was taken as 51 executive and above level women employees in five-star hotels in Galle district calculated as per the Morgan calculations. Convenience sampling method was selected as it facilitates data collection from accessible and allowing participants within this particular sample of executive level and above women employees in five-star hotels in Galle. In the hospitality industry, especially among executive and above female staff with rigorous schedules, convenience sampling enables the researcher to collect data from the most readily available participants. The SPSS software will be utilized for processing and analysing the data gathered in this study.

Independent Variable   Dependent Variable

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┌─────────────────────────────┐        H_A
│ Social and cultural norms   │ ──────────┐
└─────────────────────────────┘           │
                                          │
┌─────────────────────────────┐  H_B      │    ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Working conditions          │ ──────────┤    │  Women Career        │
└─────────────────────────────┘           ├──▶ │  Advancement in      │
                                  H_C      │    │  Hospitality Industry│
┌─────────────────────────────┐           │    └──────────────────────┘
│ Work life balance           │ ──────────┤
└─────────────────────────────┘  H_D      │
                                          │
┌─────────────────────────────┐           │
│ Economic benefits           │ ──────────┤
└─────────────────────────────┘           │
                                  H_E      │
┌─────────────────────────────┐           │
│ Perceived masculinity       │ ──────────┘
└─────────────────────────────┘
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Source: (Brownell, 1994; Clevenger & Singh, 2013; Narayanan, 2017)

Variables	Indicators	Measurement
Independent Variables		
Social and cultural norms	Perception of societal support	Five-point Likert Scale
	Family pressure	
	Community attitude	1 = Strongly Agree
	Gender role expectation	2 = Agree
Working conditions	Safety and security of workplace	3 = Neutral
	Job stability	4 = Disagree
	Workplace inclusivity	5 = Strongly Disagree
	Access to training and development	
Work life balance	Flexible working arrangements	
	Support for family responsibilities	
	Time demands of job	
	Emotional and mental well being	
Economic benefits	Access to incentives and bonuses	
	Job security	
	Financial independence	
	Income growth opportunities	
Perceived masculinity	Gender bias in Selection and hiring	
	Male dominated roles	
	Dominance of male leadership	
	Attitude toward female leadership	
Dependent Variable		
Women career advancement	Income Level	
	Empowered to make decisions	
	Promotional Opportunities	
	Job Satisfaction	

Table 01: Operationalization of variables

Source: (Developed by author based on literature, 2024)

4.0 Findings

The study sample primarily consists of women aged 25–44 years, who make up 80.4% of respondents, indicating a predominantly younger to middle-aged workforce. In terms of education, the majority hold at least a diploma or certificate (39.2%), with a significant portion having a bachelor's degree (37.3%), reflecting a well-educated group. Department-wise, the front office is the most represented area (47.1%), followed by administration (31.4%), and food and beverage (15.7%), with housekeeping being the least represented (5.9%). This suggests a strong presence in guest-facing and administrative roles. Regarding industry experience, the sample is evenly distributed: 33.3% each have 4–6 years, 7–10 years, and over 10 years of experience, indicating a balanced mix of early, mid, and senior-level professionals. However, 49.0% have only 1–3 years in their current position, suggesting many are relatively new to their current roles, while 33.3% have 4–6 years, and 17.6% have less than a year in their current role.

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha Value	N of Items
Social and cultural norms	0.793	4
Working conditions	0.758	4
Work life balance	0.795	4
Economic benefits	0.867	4
Perceived masculinity	0.75	4
Women career advancement	0.745	4

Table 02: Reliability Analysis Results

Source: (Developed by Researcher, 2024)

The internal consistency of the scales used in this study was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. Following Nunnally's (1978) guideline, values above 0.70 were considered acceptable for research purposes. Table 2 presents the reliability coefficients for each construct. All variables achieved alpha values ranging from 0.745 to 0.867, indicating acceptable to very good reliability. Specifically, economic benefits ($\alpha = 0.867$) demonstrated the highest internal consistency, while women career advancement ($\alpha = 0.745$) recorded the lowest, though still above the recommended threshold.

Social and Cultural Norms (SC): SC showed a statistically significant positive impact on WE (B=0.214, β=0.225, p=0.004). This confirms that progressive social and cultural attitudes enhance women's empowerment. The rejection of the null hypothesis supports findings by Narayanan (2017), who emphasized that traditional norms and family related challenges such as marriage, single parenting, and childcare hinder women's career advancement.

Working Conditions (WC): WC had a slightly stronger influence than SC (B=0.229, β=0.248, p=0.025), highlighting the importance of fair and supportive work environments. This aligns with Karunarathne (2015), who identified organizational culture barriers, including management attitudes and lack of training, as key obstacles to women's career growth in hospitality.

Coefficientsª								
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.138	.106		1.304	.000		
	SC	.214	.078	.225	2.753	.004	.108	1.296
	WC	.229	.078	.248	2.941	.025	.102	0.834
	WL	.261	.097	.264	2.702	.027	.076	1.214
	EB	.086	.071	.090	1.205	.014	.130	1.692
	PM	.182	.077	.199	2.378	.012	.103	0.679
a. Dependent Variable: WE								

Table 03: Coefficient results
Source: (Developed by the researcher, 2024)

Work-Life Balance (WL): WL emerged as the most influential factor (B=0.261, β=0.264, p=0.027), underscoring the critical role of balancing professional and personal responsibilities. This finding is consistent with earlier studies by Brownell (1994), Okumus et al. (2010), and Tam et al. (2022), which emphasized work-life

balance as essential for women's success in tourism and hospitality.

Economic Benefits (EB): EB had the lowest standardized impact (B=0.086, β=0.090, p=0.014), yet remained statistically significant. Financial independence and access to economic opportunities are fundamental to empowerment. This supports findings by Park (1992) and Seyfi et al. (2022), who highlighted the role of economic factors in enabling women's career advancement.

Perceived Masculinity (PM): PM also showed a significant positive effect (B=0.182, β=0.199, p=0.012), indicating that addressing gendered assumptions and promoting inclusive leadership can enhance empowerment. This aligns with Narayanan (2017), who found that credibility and male-dominated networks significantly influence women's career progression in hospitality industry.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the demographic, professional, and socioeconomic attributes of women in executive and senior roles within Sri Lanka's hospitality industry, particularly at five-star hotels located in the Galle District. The findings emphasize the prevalence of professionals in the executive and above level of their careers, underscoring the importance of advanced educational qualifications and pertinent experience as crucial elements for career progression. The study reveals a significant association between educational attainment, professional experience, and income levels, emphasizing the essential need of continuous education and skill development in attaining leadership positions. The investigation elucidates the detailed influence of social and cultural norms, working conditions, work life balance, and conceptions of gender roles on women's career advancement. The study's reliability in assessing dimensions like empowerment, perceived masculinity, and economic advantages enhances its rigorous methodology. These findings collectively highlight the ongoing issues encountered by women in the hospitality sector, especially regarding gender inequalities and systemic obstacles.

To advance women career advancement in the hospitality industry, it is essential to implement unbiased recruitment and promotion practices through structured interviews, clearly defined criteria, and diverse selection panels. Recognition and advocacy initiatives, such as awards, mentorship, and storytelling, are vital for empowering women and fostering inclusive organizational cultures. Tailored leadership development programs, supported by financial aid and corporate sponsorships, and should address the unique challenges women face in leadership roles. Creating an equitable work environment requires regular training on diversity and unconscious bias, flexible work arrangements, and supportive internal networks.

Establishing childcare and family support services, including onsite childcare and enhanced parental leave policies, can significantly improve work-life balance. Finally, setting measurable gender diversity goals and regularly evaluating progress ensures accountability and continuous improvement across all organizational levels.

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