

## **Hotel General Manager's Perception of the Factors that Affect Women Career Progression in the Hospitality Industry in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

*The entry of women into the professional world has, without a doubt, changed the dynamics of the workplace over the past few decades. Women bring an element of diversity in the workplace that cannot be ignored. However in most organizations there was a tendency for women to be over represented in the lower levels of an industry; but underrepresented at senior levels. When it comes to the hospitality industry and more specifically in the lodging sector in Kenya, records held by the Kenya Association of Hotel keepers and Caterers indicate that out of sixty six (66) hotel general managers for classified hotels at the coast region of Kenya only (3) 4% of women are in top management positions indicating that there are significant gender imbalances in the hospitality industry in Kenya. This is so in spite of a number of measures taken by the government through legislation and policy. This study sought to establish the socio-cultural and organizational factors that affect women career progression in the hospitality industry. The sample for this study was forty men and women general managers, forty three female hotel line managers and supervisors. The study used questionnaire and FGDs to collect data. Qualitative and quantitative data analysis was used. This study found biases in management practices in deference to official policy on gender equality. The industry lacks objective selection and promotion practices and relies on networks for executive search. From the findings of this study it was concluded that although individually the perception of the hotel general managers was influenced by their socio-economic and demographic factors their perception seemed to reflect the hospitality industry organizational culture and as such determine if the hospitality career was regarded as inclusive or exclusive of female employees.*

**Key Words:** Gender Equality, Hospitality Industry, Perception, Career Progression, Hotel General Managers

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background to the Study**

The hospitality industry in Kenya is lagging behind in adopting strong gender equity campaigns, as evidenced by the few women hotel general managers in the industry (K.A.H.C., 2013) which has probably affected women career progression in the industry. Some of the factors which have been suggested as leading to gender inequality include gender discrimination, organizational culture and structure, and job related factors (Ismail & Arokiasamy, 2007; Burke, Burgess & Fallon, 2006; Kirai & Elegwa, 2012) among others.

Brownell (1993), Hicks (1990), and Knutson and Schmidgall (1999) found that at the higher levels of hotel work there are two distinct ways in which women are disadvantaged. First, there are the formal or visible aspects of male exclusionary practice – the way that jobs and working hours are constructed – found in many bureaucratic organizations. Akrivos, Ladkin, and Reklitis (2007) described this as a common attitude among many of the male managers, particularly at senior levels of management. It was referred to as a shared background, a shared history – a mindset with informal networks that are not easily entered by women.

Second, the social activities and visibility expected from the hotel manager may affect the women's work- life balance. Differences between work and social life can become blurred; a phenomenon that Bauman (2007) refers to as 'liquidity' also cited by McCall (2008). Records held by the Kenya Association of Hotel Keepers and Caterers indicate that out of (66) hotel general managers for classified hotels at the coast region of Kenya only (3) 4% women are in top management positions (K.A.H.C., 2013). Men are the majority among hotel managers' top executives, whilst women are still concentrated in the lower categories of managerial positions and operations. The fundamental objective of this study was to determine the GMs perception of the socio-cultural and organizational factors that affect women career progression in the hospitality industry in Kenya. It is anticipated that the study would provide worthy information not only to academic community, but also to practitioners and hotel business owners that would facilitate them to make knowledgeable managerial decisions in the hotel industry in Kenya.

In line with the above objective, this paper looked at theories that relate to women's career progression, socio-cultural and organizational factors affecting women and the methodology adopted. The main findings are presented and discussed and finally conclusions, recommendations and implications of the findings are indicated. Areas for further research are suggested.

## **Literature Review**

This focused on the theories that relate to women's career progression, the role of women managers in the hospitality industry and previous studies on the socio- cultural and organizational factors that affect women career progression. These studies show that irrespective of the research approach or orientation, none of these perspectives has provided adequate answers to this phenomenon. There is limited research done on socio-cultural and organizational factors affecting women career progression in the hospitality industry Kenya. This study therefore addressed this research gap.

**Theories related to women career progression.** To get deep understanding of women and the workplace various theories have been formulated. These theories aim at developing appropriate research frameworks for further studies on this concept. Several theories attempt to explain the different situation of men and women in the labour market. Morrison and VonGlinow (1990), Savickas (2005) and Feyerherm and Vick (2006) observed that theories focusing on women's deficiencies in management roles have been proposed and explored over time.

**The social learning theory.** This theory posits that people learn from observing others. The theory contributes to adult learning by highlighting the importance of social context and explicating the process of modeling and mentoring (Arokiasamy, 2007). The functional theory which states that society tends to maintain its equilibrium and that any change disrupts this equilibrium. It is therefore thought that women joining the hospitality workforce have met a lot of resistance.

**Women managers in the hospitality industry.** Literature argues that women have a better understanding of certain segments of the hospitality industry and this could lend creativity and innovation to the work place. Studies have shown that when women are on board of directors in organizations there is positive impact on firm performance (Feyerherm & Vick 2006). Robbins (2001) suggested that re-examining the hospitality corporate culture could enhance values like openness, mutual respect and continuous learning. The culture change should also include work-life effectiveness programs or flexible work options.

A study by Cornell University in 1999 revealed that stock of companies that went public with more women in top management teams performed better in both short and long run goals than those with no or few women at the helm of affairs (Corporate Board, 1999). The survey further revealed that having more women on top executive teams had positive and significant effect on both stock-price growth and earnings-per-share growth. However, this study assumed that the gender gap still existed in the rate of promotions and that women were still disadvantaged.

**Socio-cultural and organizational factors that affect women career progression in the hospitality industry.** Socio-cultural and organizational factors may impact on women's career progression. Studies by Akrivos, Ladkin and Reklitis (2007) and Williamson (2008) found that there are a number of key socio-cultural and organizational factors affecting women employed in hotels. These authors cited organizational culture, recruitment and selection processes, the traditional gender role and social expectation, mentoring relationships, networking opportunities, necessity for long working hours, work-family conflict and geographical mobility.

**Work and family conflicts.** Research has shown that work-family conflict affects women's career advancement. Walsh and Borkowski (2006) found that the expectation of long hours was a significant barrier to seeking promotions for many women in the hospitality industry. It is assumed that women traditionally would be involved in childcare and housework, which has been viewed as their responsibility and an expectation from the men's world. Women in top management tend to be single or married with few or no children.

The continuing low global share of women in management jobs shows that some employers still have difficulty accepting that policies promoting women in the workplace make good business practice. The main reason for this is because women's family responsibilities, maternity, child rearing and general household tasks and paid work have as a rule been considered mutually exclusive (Ismael & Arakiosamy, 2007). The standard and most cost-effective employee for companies has traditionally been male because men's family or personal lives do not impinge on their work. Clearly, men generally find

it easier than women to combine family and work because they rely heavily on women to shoulder family and domestic responsibilities (Dessiler, 2008).

***The traditional gender role and social expectation.*** The gender role and social expectation is that the woman's place in the society is that of a mother and household keeper and not in the competitive world. The gender socialization is therefore thought to affect women in their pursuit to higher levels of engagements. Burgess (2003) found that the traditional role of women in the society as mother and wife is the situational reason on why they consists lower senior managerial positions. In some instances, their familial responsibilities serve as limitation for their professional growth. Studies by Ng and Pine (2003) and Aswathappa (2005) suggested that as far as hospitality management is concerned, women are relatively better in terms of management regardless of the roles they play but still very difficult for them to reach upper and senior management positions.

***Organizational culture and structure.*** Ng, and Pine (2003) observed that social norms, cultural stereotypes and power and privilege in organizations provide the "invisible foundation" for organizational decisions about which jobs and how much opportunity are suitable for certain types of workers. These decisions determine the ways that complex organizations structure work, creating barriers for women and keeping them from advancing in organizational "pipelines." According to Zhong (2006) and Adfero (2007) hospitality industry's organizational structure restricts women career development and especially the job characteristics that call for irregular work hours and the social attitudes about women capabilities in managing hospitality business. Savage (2002) found that society's expectations of women may be causing or exacerbating this problem.

***Networking opportunities.*** Several authors have stated that networks are important for increasing visibility and career advancement (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Aycan, 2004; Ogden, McTarish, Mckean, 2006). According to Ackah and Heaton (2003) men usually use networks to obtain promotions while Aycan (2004) found that women who had made it to top management in Turkey had access to networks. Aycan (2004) observed that networks provide women with the context where they can learn by observing role models and being mentored. Maxifield (2005) found that women found networking challenging and thus they lacked the important tool of networking. This according to Ackah and Heaton (2003) could be attributed to the fact that most women are usually excluded from the networks through which they could make themselves known and learn about promotion processes. Studies conducted in Tanzania showed that women who do not network remain vulnerable and liable to being rendered invisible and never remembered when promotions were being discussed (Adler & Izraeli, 1994).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study was a descriptive survey and used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The Study was conducted at the coast region of Kenya. There are 140 classified hotels in Kenya of which 66 (47%) are at the coast. Seventy eight percent (78%) of the tourist activities in Kenya are conducted in the coastal region, and 79.5% of Kenya's tourists' investments are also in this region (Ochieng, 2011). Therefore the most important criterion in selecting this area was that it is a good representation of the

tourism and hospitality sector in Kenya. The target population were the 66 classified hotel GMs, all hotel departmental heads and supervisors and all hotel chain owners operating hotel business at the coast. The study employed stratified random sampling technique to select study hotels while the respondents were purposively selected.

A questionnaire was developed based on detailed information gathered from a comprehensive literature review and interviews with academic and hotel industry experts. The questionnaire consisted of a set of Likert-type scales multiple-choice items. To ensure that the questionnaire was complete, clear, and reliable, a convenience sample of 8 hotels that represented 15% of the total classified hotels in the coast region was purposely selected for a pre-test. The Cronbach's alpha was calculated by Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 18.0 software. The result showed the questions was reliable (alpha= 0.76). According to Kothari (2004) an alpha value between 0.65 and 0.95 is considered as satisfactory.

Data collection took a three-pronged approach. First, questionnaires were administered to hotel general managers in the selected hotels, secondly a focus group discussion was held in two separate locations and thirdly personal interviews were held with selected hotel chain owners operating hotel business at the coast. To investigate the perception of hotel general managers in classified hotels in Kenya, four sub- factors were used to define the socio-cultural and organizational factors. They included work and family conflicts; the traditional gender role and social expectation; organizational culture and structure and networking opportunities.

By using the Likert-type scale respondents were requested to respond with —1|| being —a major barrier| and: —5| being —not a major barrier| to women's career progression. The frequencies of each scale, mean as well as standard deviation were calculated to show the level of perception among the hotel general managers. In addition, degree of respondents' rating for each statement was determined by considering the mean value from 1-2.33 as high, mean value between 2.34 -3.67 as medium level of rating and the means over 3.67 as low rating.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This study was a descriptive study that captured perceptions of hotel general managers regarding the Socio-cultural and organizational factors that affect women career progression in the hospitality industry in Kenya.

### **General Characteristics of Respondents**

The first part of survey questionnaire gathered information about demographic information of respondents which included gender, age, marital status, work experience, and academic education. Findings showed that an overwhelming majority of the general managers were males (92.3%), while females only constituted (7.7%). This was an indication that women are under-represented at the managerial level in the hospitality industry in Kenya. Forty one percent of the respondents were 40 years and below while 59 % were 41years and above. Majority of the hotel general managers were aged between 31 to 50 years (97.0%). Age and gender of the respondents were crucial for

determining the general managers' perception on women career progression in the hospitality industry in Kenya.

Although majority of the hotel general managers were married (71.8%) when the marital status is compared on the basis of gender, out of the three female managers, only one was married. This may imply that family responsibilities may be a hindrance to women upward mobility in hotel management. Ng and Pine (2003) also found a similar situation for the hospitality industry in Hong Kong where most of women who get to the top are either single (no family) or divorced.

Of the 39 respondents, results indicate that the highest number of the respondents 76.9% had diploma in hotel management, 7.7% Bachelors in Hospitality management. Over 56 % of the respondents were \_O'-Levels while 31 % had a Bachelors degree. Out of the 31 % of the respondents with a Bachelors degree, only 8 % had Bachelors in hospitality management and 3 % (all male) had a Masters degree in hospitality management. The results of this study therefore indicate that the hospitality industry's top level management in the coast region of Kenya are holders of diploma in hotel management.

### **Socio- Cultural and Organizational Factors Affecting Women's Career Progression in the Hospitality Industry**

The study identified work and family conflicts, the traditional gender role and social expectation, organizational culture and structure and networking opportunities as the socio- cultural and organizational factors affecting women career progression. The said factors were subjected to the hotel GMs perception measurements and results showed distinct variation in perception rankings. The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents seemed to have an influence in the perception ranking of the socio-cultural and organizational factors affecting women career progression in the hospitality industry.

### **Age and the Perception of Hotel GMs on the Socio- Cultural and Organizational Factors Affecting Women's Career Progression in the Hospitality Industry**

Table 1. Age and the perception of hotel GMs on the socio- cultural and organizational factors affecting women's career progression in the hospitality industry

| Age        | N  | S1   | S2   | S3   | S4   | Average rank           |
|------------|----|------|------|------|------|------------------------|
| 21-30      | 1  | 1.80 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 1.50 | 1.82 A major barrier   |
| 31-40      | 15 | 2.25 | 1.07 | 1.07 | 3.02 | 2.09 A major barrier   |
| 41-50      | 15 | 2.17 | 2.07 | 1.80 | 3.60 | 2.42 A barrier         |
| 51-over 60 | 8  | 3.02 | 3.50 | 1.30 | 3.50 | 3.08 Somehow a barrier |
| Average    |    | 2.31 | 2.04 | 1.5  | 2.90 | 2.57 A barrier         |

Findings in table 1 above showed varied perception levels on each of the Socio-cultural and organizational factors depending on age. It is interesting to note that the general managers aged 31- 40 and 41- 50 years (N=30) perceived all the factors as major barriers to women career progression except for networking opportunities (mean 3.02) and (3.60) respectively that was perceived as only a barrier.

The only respondent aged 21-30 years perceived all the Socio- cultural and organizational factors as major barriers to career progression (mean 1.82). The explanation for this kind of perception could be that the managers aged 21-30 years are starting family life, they are also in a different stage in their career and life cycle and so to them every factor could be a barrier. These results are similar to studies by Zhong (2006) that found that women are struggling to reach the top in the hospitality industry because of juggling work and family commitments.

Findings from the interviews showed that networking was a vital component of hospitality work. Men are usually very good at networking. One hotel chain owner said \_.

... *Men's networks may not be convenient for married women.*—*Bwanake huyu bibi atafikiria na kusema vipi?!* hotel chain owner A) (Translated —what will the husband to this lady think and say?). Women were encouraged to form their own networks.

The implication of these findings is that \_the old boys' network' strongly affected hiring/promotion practices within the hospitality organizations. The findings of the current study are similar to Burke and McKeen (1994) who found that female managers were less integrated with important organizational networks that influence promotional decisions within the organization

### **Marital Status and the Perception of the Hotel General Managers Socio-Cultural and Organizational Factors Affecting Women's Career Progression in the Hospitality Industry**

Marital status of any person influences their perception on issues. This study used marital status of the hotel GMs to investigate their perception on socio- cultural and organizational factors. Table 2 presents the finding on marital status and the perception of the hotel general managers on socio- cultural and organizational factors.

Table 2. Marital status and the perception of the hotel general managers on socio-cultural and organizational factors N = 39

| Marital status | N  | S1   | S2   | S3   | S4   | Average rank   |
|----------------|----|------|------|------|------|----------------|
| Married        | 28 | 2.29 | 1.30 | 2.07 | 2.38 | 2.81 A barrier |
| Never married  | 11 | 2.36 | 2.33 | 2.00 | 2.91 | 2.66 A barrier |
| Average        |    | 2.33 | 1.67 | 2.04 | 3.10 | 2.74 A barrier |

Findings from table 2 indicate that the married hotel general managers in this study (N= 28) perceived work and family conflicts (mean 2.29); Organizational structure (mean 1.30) and the traditional gender role and social expectation (mean 2.07) as major barriers to women career progression. These findings are similar to Burgess (2003) who found that the traditional role of women in the society as mother and wife is another situational reason on why they consists lower senior managerial positions.

Results indicate that majority (71.8%) of the hotel general managers in the current study were married and this may imply marriage is not a barrier when it comes to career progression. However, when the marital status is compared on the basis of gender, out of the three female managers, only one hotel GM was married. Maxwell (1997) and Smith,

Smith and Verner (2006) observed that most of the women who get to the top in hospitality career are either single (no family) or divorced. These findings implied that family responsibilities as well as hotel organizational structure are a hindrance to women upward mobility in hotel management.

Findings show that on average the respondents despite their marital status rated the socio-cultural and organizational factors in the order of importance as follows: The traditional gender role and social expectation; organizational structure and work and family conflicts are major barriers to women career progression. These results are in tandem with the results from the FGDs which indicated that the hotel organizational structure and work and family conflicts prevent women from progressing in the hospitality career ladder. This may be interpreted that although the majority of the male GMs perceived marital status not as a barrier, the females thought marital status was a barrier probably because they were the ones who shouldered the family responsibilities.

### **Educational Levels and Professional Qualifications and the Perception of the Hotel General Manager on Socio-Cultural and Organizational Factors**

Educational level and professional qualification are key to influencing how people think and the ability to handle responsibilities at the work place. Table 3 presents the findings on educational level and the perception of the hotel general manager socio-cultural and organizational factors.

Table 3. Educational level and the perception of the hotel GMs on socio-cultural and organizational factors N = 39

| Level of education | N  | S1   | S2   | S3   | S4   | Average rank          |
|--------------------|----|------|------|------|------|-----------------------|
| O' level           | 22 | 3.54 | 2.32 | 2.05 | 1.58 | 2.37 A barrier        |
| A' level           | 1  | 3.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 3.00Somehow a barrier |
| Bachelors degree   | 12 | 3.42 | 2.25 | 1.92 | 3.08 | 2.67 A barrier        |
| Masters degree     | 4  | 3.75 | 2.25 | 2.24 | 3.75 | 3.06Somehow a barrier |
| Average            |    | 3.42 | 2.20 | 2.05 | 3.10 | 2.78 A barrier)       |

Findings show that all the respondents in this study did not perceive work and family conflicts as a major barrier (mean 3.42) but considered the traditional gender role and social expectation (mean 2.20 ) and the Organizational culture and structure (mean 2.05) as major barriers to career progression. Burgess (2003) found that the traditional role of women in the society as mother and wife is the situational reason why most are in the lower senior managerial positions. In some instances, their familial responsibilities serve as limitation for their professional growth.

Findings show that the respondents rated the socio- cultural and organizational factors in order of importance as follows: Organizational culture and structure; the traditional gender role and social expectation as major barriers while networking opportunities and work and family conflicts were perceived as somehow a barrier. The most striking observation to emerge from the interview was the possibility of bias against hiring/promoting women who may not be capable of conforming to the 'image' of a manager who will put the needs of the organization before his/her family. A similar bias

was revealed in a research by Adfero, (2007) who found that on recruitment, most qualified women tend to be placed in jobs that have a lower value in terms of skill requirements and remuneration. They find themselves in what are considered —non-strategicl jobs, rather than in line and management jobs leading to higher positionsl.

One hotel owner commented that *„although the male and female managers have the same management training and competences there are certain characteristics unique to hotel business that call for long hours of work and physical presence of the manager within the facility* (Hotel chain owner C) while another hotel owner said —*....men are available even at odd hours.*l —*Imagine! It's 2 a.m. would you call a married woman who has young children to go and solve a crisis in the hotel?* (Hotel chain owner A).

The results of this study are therefore consistent with a study by Zhong (2006) who found that long working hours is perceived as a significant barrier to seeking promotions for many women in the hospitality industry as this may conflict with family responsibilities.

Table 4 below presents the findings of perception, Socio- Cultural and Organizational factors in relation to the professional qualification of the hotel GMs.

Table 4. Professional qualification and the perception of the hotel GMs on socio-cultural and organizational factors in relation to the professional qualification of the hotel GMs N = 39

| Professional qualifications | N  | S1   | F2   | S3   | F4   | Average rank   |
|-----------------------------|----|------|------|------|------|----------------|
| Master in Hosp./Non Hosp.   | 2  | 2.50 | 3.00 | 1.00 | 4.00 | 2.62 A barrier |
| Bachelors Hosp.             | 4  | 2.50 | 3.25 | 1.75 | 3.75 | 2.81 A barrier |
| Dip Hosp.                   | 30 | 2.23 | 3.27 | 2.10 | 3.40 | 2.75 A barrier |
| Others                      | 3  | 2.67 | 3.37 | 2.33 | 3.00 | 2.84 A barrier |
| Average                     |    | 2.47 | 3.22 | 1.79 | 3.54 | 2.76 A barrier |

Results from Table 4 indicate all the hotel GMs despite their professional qualifications rated organizational culture and structure as a major barrier while the traditional gender role and social expectation was rated by all the respondents in this study as a barrier to women career progression. Majority of the respondents (N=30) rated work and family conflicts and organizational culture and structure as major barriers to career progression.

A female manager (F/B, FGD south coast group) said —*women should learn how to talk sports, play golf, etc)....., that men \_bond‘ during golf, sports, political discussions and may unintentionally exclude women from the bonding experience. Promotions and new assignments may be discussed during these \_bonding‘ times where women may be absent.*

### **Length of Service and the Perception of the Hotel GMs on Socio-Cultural and Organizational Factors**

The length of service was thought to have influenced the perception of the general managers on factors that affect women career progression in the industry. Table 5

presents the findings of length of service and the perception of the hotel GMs on work and family conflict factors.

Table 5. Length of service and the perception of the hotel GMs on socio-cultural and organizational factors N = 39

| Length of service | N  | S1   | S2   | S3   | S4   | Average rank |           |
|-------------------|----|------|------|------|------|--------------|-----------|
| 1-5               | 12 | 2.17 | 3.00 | 2.17 | 3.42 | 2.69         | A barrier |
| 6-10              | 19 | 2.32 | 3.63 | 2.00 | 3.63 | 2.90         | A barrier |
| 11-15             | 4  | 2.23 | 2.50 | 1.75 | 3.25 | 2.44         | A barrier |
| 16-20             | 4  | 2.20 | 3.25 | 2.25 | 3.50 | 2.94         | A barrier |
| Average           |    | 1.76 | 3.09 | 2.04 | 3.45 | 2.74         | A barrier |

From table 5, the managers perceived the socio- cultural and organizational factors as barriers to women career progression. However, depending on each respondent's length of service, varied perception levels was noted. Work and family conflicts and Organizational culture and structure were rated as major barriers by all the respondents while the traditional gender role and social expectation and networking opportunities were rated as somehow a barrier to women career progression.

One interviewee stated that hotel owners, generally male, expected hotel GMs to be male, and this was put forward as another reason why there were few female GMs hence insufficient female role models and mentors in the hospitality field. The findings from the personal interviews implied that social norms, cultural stereotypes and male bias in hotels provide the "invisible foundation" for organizational decisions about which jobs are suitable for certain types of workers. These findings are similar to Arokiasamy (2007) who observed that certain male dominated institutions have developed a male culture and traditions which are exclusive of women and protect against female intrusion.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

This study demonstrates that women in hospitality sector in the coast region of Kenya face specific constraints.

On the basis of these findings the study concludes that the low representation of female hotel GMs in the hotels at the coast region of Kenya is occasioned by factors beyond the women's control. Second, there are stereotyped and biased views of both the hotel GMs and the hotel owners which are based on masculine senior management cultures for hospitality management. It is therefore concluded that the hospitality sector in the coast region of Kenya lacks objective selection and promotion practices and relies on networks for executive search.

### Recommendations

1. Top management vacant posts in hotels should be openly advertised for to give qualified candidates equal chances to apply for them, hotel personnel

- development programs should provide equal opportunities to all employees on gender neutral basis.
2. The hospitality industry should foster the creation of a more equitable organizational culture.

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