

WOMEN IN HOTEL MANAGEMENT IN ZIMBABWE: CAREER AMBITIONS, PROGRESSION TACTICS, AND CAREER CHALLENGES

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Research investigates career ambitions, progression tactics and challenges among female hotel managers in Zimbabwean hotels. Data was gathered through a questionnaire survey of 84 female hotel managers in Zimbabwe. Most female hotel managers in Zimbabwe aspire to attain top management positions. However, they face several challenges in their attempts to achieve their career goals. To enhance their career progression prospects, there is a clear need to adopt more aggressive tactics, especially with regard to undertaking further study. For the industry there is need to institutionalise policies and structures that are more “woman-friendly”. However, cultural norms and values pose a major challenge for the change process. Further, women should take responsibility for their own careers. They could strengthen their promotion chances by undertaking postgraduate business leadership courses at esteemed institutions, and by being more assertive of their capabilities. The research focuses on Zimbabwean female hotel managers, whose career ambitions, progression tactics and challenges have not yet been documented.

Keywords: *women, management careers, hotels, gender discrimination, Zimbabwe.*

JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

INTRODUCTION

Senior management positions in hotels have traditionally been dominated by **men** with women forming the majority of operative staff. Typically, a woman will perform those roles which are perceived as feminine, such as welcoming the guests, cleaning the rooms and serving

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the food and drink, while a man will do the repair work and manage the hotel (Mullins, 1998). With the championing of women's rights and equal opportunities, this observation becomes a popular topic of concern. As expected, remedies have been suggested, but it would appear, however, that it will take time before the disparity in the representation of women in key managerial roles in the hotel industry is evened out, assuming that this will happen at all.

Although a lot of research has been conducted on the challenges faced by female managers in the corporate environment, little is known about the situation in African countries. Research has also tended to focus on female managers' career progression challenges, without first finding out what their career ambitions are. To try and cover a section of this gap, this research investigates career ambitions, progression tactics and challenges among female hotel managers in Zimbabwean hotels.

Background

Much has been written about the under-representation of women in top positions in the hotel industry worldwide (Altman et al, 2005; Bartram, 2005; Biswas and Cassell, 1996, Brownwell, 1994; Cassell, 1996; Cattaneo et al, 1994; Gordon, 1993; Hicks, 1990; Maxwell, 1997; Mooney and Ryan, 2009; Purcell, 1993; Shirley, 1995; Soehanovic et al, 2000; among others). Women tend to occupy lower levels of hotel hierarchies (Adib abd Guerrier, 2003; Ng and Pine, 2003; Woods and Viehland, 2000). Women managers are also concentrated in supervisory, first line management positions, while top management positions are still dominated by men. Guerrier (1986) observes that women's limited progression can be explained to a large extent by the traditional career route to top management, characterised by a prolonged apprenticeship, advancement through informal contacts, and high geographical mobility (also Ladkin, 2000).

Wentling (2003) also found similar results in the United States. Women were "plateauing" at middle management positions, at which level they could only act as implementers of strategy, rather than as formulators of strategy. Burke et al (2007) observe that there is widespread agreement that women continue to face difficulty in reaching top ranks in management, despite having appropriate education, increasing years of service, the passage of time, and generally similar levels of job performance. In the same line of argument, Schein (2007)

asserts that to the extent that managerial work is viewed as “male”, the characteristics required for success are also viewed as being possessed by men rather than women. Schein argues that all other factors being constant, a male is seen as better qualified, by virtue of his gender alone, than does a female to gain entry into and advance in management. Schein found in a United States study that women were perceived by both male and female managers as less likely to possess the traits, attitudes, and temperaments required to succeed as a manager, and argues that this kind of “think male, think manager” stereotype promotes prejudices against the advancement of women in management.

Career ambitions

Guerrier (1986) argues that if women do not aspire to attain senior management posts in hotels this is a response to the way such positions are portrayed and the lack of opportunities they may perceive. However, research which has documented the issue of female management careers in the hotel industry has tended to focus on female managers' career challenges while giving little attention to their career ambitions and progression tactics (for example Maxwell, 1997; Mooney and Ryan, 2009; Purcell, 1993; Soehanovic et al, 2000; Woods R and Viehland D, 2000). Thus the subject of career ambitions has not been explicitly covered in data collection in the majority of such studies, perhaps with researchers assuming that they already know what female managers aspire to in their careers.

Career progression challenges

Gender divisions of labour in the hotel industry are undeniable. For example, Biswas and Cassell (1996) conducted a case study on the gender divisions of labour in an English hotel and found that men occupied higher status roles than women. Women on the other hand were concentrated in “mothering” and in “glamorous” roles. Women felt that they were viewed as maternal home-makers (for example chambermaids, breakfast waitresses), or as sex objects (for example receptionists, and sales and marketing staff). Interestingly, women actively cooperated with the men in reinforcing stereotypes. For example, chambermaids believed that it was not “nice” for men to clean. Women also accepted

discriminatory recruitment practices in order to maintain the sexual division of labour within the hotel.

Another topical issue which deserves mention within this background is the issue of disparities in salaries between male and female managers. Burgess (2009) analyses salaries in hotel financial management and concludes that women and men appear in general to hold different types of jobs within the hospitality industry financial management function. Typically, men undertake higher status and therefore higher pay jobs than women. Burgess argues that occupational segregation and educational qualification are major reasons behind the disparities in salaries. Burgess adds that social attitudes towards women's employment have compromised their advancement. Other authors have reported that compared to men, women are more willing to work for less money (Omar and Davidson, 2001).

The metaphor of the "glass ceiling" has been widely discussed in relation to the obstacles faced by female managers in their desire to get to the top. The glass ceiling has been described as hidden societal and attitudinal barriers that hinder the career progression of women (Bird et al, 2002). Mooney and Ryan (2009) argue that when analysing barriers to the advancement of women in hotel management, it is important to appreciate the intersections between gender, other diversity characteristics and the glass ceiling. Li and Leung (2001) argue that an important predictor of the existence of the glass ceiling is female managers' lack of connection to professional and old boy networks. Mooney and Ryan identified four glass ceiling barriers to women's advancement in the hotel industry, namely:

- The long hours culture in the industry: their interviewees revealed that they sensed disapproval from co-managers if they attempted to reduce their working hours. The long working hours are a major challenge for women because many have significantly more domestic responsibilities than their male counterparts. The researchers found that this was particularly a challenge for women in their late 20s and early 30s, who are more likely to be married and with children. Some of their respondents commented that in their experience, most women who progressed to the top were either single or lesbian, signalling to young women that if they wanted career progressing, they had to sacrifice a partner or children.

- The “old boy’s network” or the “ old boy club”, defined in the study as a shared history and background- a mindset expressed as informal networks in the workplace that women difficult to penetrate.
- Hiring practices that favour men based on the perception that men are less likely to leave the job or the industry due to reasons associated with marriage and childbearing, as compared with women.
- Geographical mobility: the researchers observed that geographical mobility improves the chances of progressing up the corporate ladder. Their interviewees felt that men had greater liberty for mobility than women because men’s mobility is less restricted by their children’s needs (if they have any), a responsibility which generally falls on, and is perceived as belonging to the wife, if he has one.

In an investigation of the profile and career challenges of female managers in Singapore hotels, Li and Leung (2001) found that the women had “given up” some family life in order to get ahead. Their research context bears close resemblance in cultural terms, as will be explained later, to the Zimbabwean case, thus their findings and discussion will be discussed in some detail.

Some researchers have also found that women in middle management are not strategically positioned for progression towards the post of general manager, attainment of which we could consider as the ultimate goal of hotel management careers. Typically, a manager must go through the post of Food and Beverage Manager or perhaps Rooms Division Manager in order to increase his or her chances of being promoted to the post of general manager, when the post becomes vacant. Kattara (2005) for example found that the majority of female hotel managers in Egyptian hotels were not in positions which favoured their ascent to the position of general manager. The major barriers to women's advancement in this case were very similar to other identified in other researches described above: gender discrimination, relationships at work, mentor support, and a lack of networks.

The role played by cultural values in influencing the career progression of women in management jobs is well documented. For example, Li and Leung argue that cultural values in Singapore play a role in restricting women's access to professional and old boy networks by

restraining them from entertaining their business associates in private clubs or on the golf course, places well acknowledged in Singapore culture as congenial for developing these networks and “learning through the grapevine”. Because of such exclusion, female managers have limited opportunity to socialise with powerful executives (usually male) who could help their career development. Li and Leung suggest that female managers should establish their own networks to overcome the isolation in a male dominated corporate culture. Their networks could serve as informal communication, support and mentorship systems that effectively counterbalance men's groups.

Progression tactics

Li and Leung also note that whereas strong credentials and skills have proven to be important in the advancement of women to middle management positions, they have not been sufficient to elevate them to executive positions. They also found that the barriers to their advancement were not due to corporate practices and policies, but rather were a function of cultural and societal sanctions. The managers mentioned seven factors that had contributed to their success at their level, namely:

- interpersonal skills;
- leadership skills;
- educational qualifications;
- industry experience;
- hard work;
- job knowledge; and
- strength of determination.

The respondents reported that they had to deal with the egos of their spouses who felt threatened by their career advancement. According to Li and Leung, in-laws and husbands exert psychological pressure on women to perform their traditional family roles. Women in Singapore are expected to contribute to the family's income and simultaneously fulfil their duties as wife, mother and daughter. Further, they believed that they had to work harder than their male counterpart to prove their capability.

It has become clear that women need to enhance their career advancement chances by acquiring higher qualifications such as an Masters of Business Administration (MBA). The question however is, is

this sufficient? Does it enhance women's advancement in the corporate environment? Heaton and McWhinney (1999) studied the impact of an MBA on male and female managers. They found that women had not done as well as men after the MBA. However, most felt that the MBA had helped them to overcome some of the barriers that they faced in their careers.

It has to be acknowledged however that some women do in fact make it to the top, and this raises curiosity as to how such women have done it. Maxwell (1997) conducted a research to investigate a few success stories of women who had made it to the position of hotel general manager, and to analyse these women's motivation to succeed, factors that had enabled them to rise to the top in the hotel, as well as the consequences of their career achievements. Maxwell found that the four interviewees were highly career-motivated, ambitious and committed. The research identified equal opportunity and mentoring support as key enabling factors. The female managers in this study had had to "throw themselves completely into work", change companies to gain wide experience, work very long hours, engage in business socialising, and "put on an extra 30%" as ways of "proving" themselves. A career focus that brought serious work-life balance challenges was however cited as a major consequence of their achievement.

There is however limited hospitality specific research which provides insight on women's career progression tactics. As stated earlier, researchers have tended to diagnose the problems faced by women, without establishing in detail how women are attempting to deal with such problems.

Research questions

The research sought to answer the following questions:

- What career ambitions do female hospitality managers in Zimbabwe have?
- What career advancement challenges do female hospitality managers in Zimbabwe face?
- What career progression tactics have they adopted?

METHODOLOGY

The research is documented through a survey conducted with a sample of 84 female hotel managers in Zimbabwe. An interpretivist approach was opted for given the perception-based nature of the inquiry, which meant that the researcher took the ontological standpoint that there were multiple subjective realities related to experience and knowledge. Such data could only be captured through a descriptive, qualitative process.

Questionnaires were distributed to all available managers during their managerial lunch breaks at 27 hotels. The managerial lunches, a long standing tradition in Zimbabwean hotels, where hotel managers enjoy their lunches together, provided a convenient opportunity for data collection. The researcher inquired about any managers who might have remained in their offices and took the questionnaires to their offices for completion.

Managers were asked to state their ages as either “above 35” or “35 or below” (72%). In the researcher's previous research, it was observed that Zimbabwean women were reluctant to state their ages explicitly. One respondent had previously jokingly stated that she always understates her age “to appear younger.” Thus, allowing them to state a range rather than a figure was likely to be received more positively and perhaps deter some from misrepresenting their ages deliberately.

The hotels were selected judgementally from a list provide by the Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe.

The questionnaire was designed so that large spaces were available to provide detailed answers. Respondents were asked to recount their experiences and anecdotes freely. The questionnaire was designed to seek the following on the following areas:

- career ambitions;
- career progression tactics; and
- career challenges.

Sample characteristics

The current positions held were as follows: 2 assistant general managers; 7 food and beverage managers and 6 rooms division managers,

13 front office managers, 11 marketing managers, 8 reservations managers, 13 restaurant managers, 7 human resources managers, 10 functions managers, and 7 guest relations managers. The majority (72%) of managers were aged above 35.

FINDINGS

Career ambitions

72% of the managers reported that they intended to stay in the hotel industry and advance up the corporate ladder, while 58% indicated that they were aiming at rising to the post of General Manager eventually. They were however uncertain about the chances of realising this dream, an observation which is consistent with Guerrier's (1986) argument that women's perceptions of career progression opportunities. 28% stated that they intended to quit the industry at some point to work in other industries (11%) or to start families (17%).

These findings reveal that female managers in Zimbabwean hotels are quite ambitious but slightly apprehensive of their career advancement prospects. Due to the limited research on the area, comparisons with female managers elsewhere are not possible at this point. It would be hoped that in future other researchers would address this gap to enable meaningful comparisons to be made.

Career challenges

The following career challenges were identified most frequently:

- Poor work-life balance (88%): respondents alluded to the challenges of balancing work with household responsibilities such as childcare and home keeping
"Sometimes you are at work up to midnight. And you have a household to run and kids to take care of. It gets to a point when it feels crazy and the pressure can really crack you up . You are supposed to act like you are twenty people in one".
- Vertical segregation (64%): respondents felt that women were considered second-best in the hospitality industry; that a woman would only be appointed to a senior management position if a suitable male could not be found.

- The “old boy club”(34%): for example, one respondent wrote *“the men have their clique, and sometimes you just don’t fit into it, no matter how hard you try”*
- Unfavourable perceptions of female hotel managers (4%).
“there is a stigma attached to every woman who works in a hotel. Many people think women who work in hotels are promiscuous, because the hotel is perceived as a leisure centre, and the perception that we sleep with every male manager, and with guests. And many people believe that you have to sleep your way up the ladder to get on in the hotel business”.

As such, the progression challenges identified by the respondents mirror very closely those identified in similar researches, elsewhere (for example Hicks, 1990). It is interesting that that this should be the case despite the differences that exist in the macro-social environments between Zimbabwe and other countries, such as the relatively lower priority status accorded to gender issues in developing countries when compared with the developed world. It appears then that the challenges faced by women are largely similar; that this virtual homogeneity is indifferent to subtle differences in social and cultural environments in different countries.

The majority of respondents complained that their organisations were not woman-friendly; that there were not enough interventions in policy and structure to make it easier for women to balance their work and family lives. However, in a few of the cases, they acknowledged some organisational practices which were helping, such as “breastfeeding hour” and dinners where spouses were invited. But the general perception was one of the inadequacy of these practices and the need for much more. In particular, they felt that they needed to have the latitude to renegotiate their work schedules to take account of family responsibility. These concerns can be related to what has been termed overt discrimination practices, such as the lack of child care facilities, role models and mentors for women, for example, (Bird et al, 2002).

Career progression tactics

14% of the managers stated that they were at that time furthering their formal education, while 78% indicated that they intended to do so in future. Of the former, 7% were undertaking a Master of Business Administration program, while the remainder were undertaking an

undergraduate degree program. The majority, most of whom were over 35 years of age, however emphasised that they had realised that for progression in the hospitality industry, experience and hard work were the most important “qualifications”. They thus indicated that they often “went the extra mile”, working overtime, performing beyond their job obligations, making personal sacrifices for company benefit, and being innovative and creative in the discharge of their duties. This compares well with the findings made by Maxwell (1997), although Zimbabwean women appear to focus more on “going the extra mile” than on any other tactic.

Given the limited research on career progression tactics adopted by women in hotel management, these findings provide only an exploratory background for future researchers who might want to explore the topic in more detail.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We need to ask whether the women in the study are correctly positioned, in terms of their current positions, to ascend to the ultimate post. If only two of the respondents out of 84 were assistant general managers, then the prospects for most female managers of eventually assuming the role of general manager are not very good. Further, very few of the respondents were occupying key positions of food and beverage manager and rooms division managers, offices which are typically most favoured in promotion to the general manager post.

There is also the question of ambition. The majority of respondents expressed the ambition to go up the corporate ladder, although they were uncertain as to whether this dream would be realised. One needs to consider what happens in the event that such a dream is not realised. Frustration will be inevitable. Obviously, different individuals will react differently to the thwarting of a career. Some may remain in the organisation, while others may decide to quit. While the former may be more likely, the latter is not rare. This however requires empirical investigation in future research: what becomes of female managers whose dreams of going up the corporate ladder do not come true?

The issue of work life balance is indeed a critical one in hospitality workplaces, at whatever level, and for both males and females, as stated earlier. Perhaps the work-life challenge in this context is somewhat heightened because custom dictates that women carry virtually all of the

domestic responsibility. Most respondents cited this as a major hindrance towards their career advancement. This issue, along with vertical segregation and the “old boy club”, all corroborate the findings of previous research, demonstrating that women in Zimbabwe, face very similar challenges as those faced by female hotel managers elsewhere.

In a very competitive labour marketplace, a first degree is no longer a source of competitive advantage in terms of promotion chances, because many managers now possess an undergraduate qualification. The awarding educational institution can however make a huge difference. Female hotel managers in Zimbabwe should therefore boost their promotion chances by undertaking postgraduate study at credible business schools.

Wildes (2005) discussed the issue of a social stigma attached to working in hospitality. This is the stereotype attached to the job of serving others, supported by the colonial history and the history of tipping. For some, hospitality work is analogous to the servant -master relationships in colonial times. However, the stigma highlighted in this study is quite different. It relates to the stereotype that people who work in the hospitality industry are promiscuous, immoral, or “loose”. There is also a belief that women who progress in the hospitality industry do so through illegitimate means, commonly referred to as “sleeping your way up the ladder”. To deal with this challenge, there is need for public awareness initiatives to build a positive image of women working in the industry, thereby undermining the stigma.

To reduce turnover among female managers, and to reap maximum benefit from their skills, hospitality companies need to change their human resource management approaches so that they are more friendly towards women. This could entail:

- allowing employees to take career breaks if they need to for purposes such as childcare without forfeiting their jobs
- openness in career progression paths that are based on merit and are equally accessible to both males and females; that is, not communicated within the framework of an “old boy club”
- cultivating gender sensitivity through regular focus group discussions in order to challenge gender-based discrimination, especially those forms which operate at a subconscious level because they have become a “culture”
- mentor support for both men and women

- home-working, where this is possible
- more flexible work schedules which take into account work-life balance issues.

Organisations need therefore to adopt a holistic approach to the challenges faced by women which addresses all forms of gender based discrimination: overt discrimination (for example a lack of child care facilities at work), covert discrimination (such as prejudiced attitudes, beliefs and male defined exclusionary behaviour), and unconscious discrimination, as in the psychological impact of a patriarchal organisational culture (Bird et al, 2002).

It is interesting to note the similarities in the cultural norms and values between Singapore, or Asia in general and Zimbabwe, in terms of society's expectations of the women's place in the workplace and in the family. Zimbabwean women, particularly black women are also expected to be subservient to their partner. Men are expected to dominate in the home, and this expectation spills into the workplace. The man must indeed dominate financially and professionally. The wife would normally pursue career progression if it does not compromise this balance. Marriages where the women becomes more prominent than the man in terms of career (and financial) success frequently in divorce. Women are also expected to perform domestic chores even when their career consumes most of their energy and time. Even when they have domestic workers, some chores such as preparing dinner and making the marital bed are perceived to be the job of the wife.

Regarding professional and old boy networks, Zimbabwean women also face the same predicament as Asian women. Cultural norms and values restrict the degree of interaction that women can build with male industry executives. There is a cultural stereotype that women who entertain men who are in powerful executive positions are in fact trying to "sleep their way up the ranks". Husbands will also object to their wives entertaining other men in their absence because they are either suspicious of their wives or because they worry about what other observers might infer. To be the subject of society's pity over the perceived "infidelity" of a wife is a situation which most black Zimbabwean men will not want to deal with, even when they believe the intentions of their wives to be strictly professional., because it would be a sign of weakness on their part. These cultural norms have to be challenged first before women can succeed in their quest for gender balance in the corporate world.

The career progression tactics mentioned by the respondents perhaps highlight a very significant weakness in women's career advancement approach. It is clear that most women do not strengthen their career progression prospects by undertaking further study. While experience and diligence and work are important, exceptionally good formal qualifications are increasingly becoming prerequisites for top management positions in the hospitality industry. With most universities in Zimbabwe, including the Midlands State University, the University of Zimbabwe, and the National University of Science and Technology offering postgraduate business leadership and management courses on part-time, block release, and visiting school bases, Zimbabwean hotel managers, whatever their gender, have flexible and convenient options for further study. Women have to take full responsibility for their own progression in the hospitality industry. They need to become more assertive in their workplaces. Given the daunting challenges that women continue to face, it may be that women have to work a little harder than their male counterparts to "get on"; to break through the glass ceiling.

Limitations of the research

The major limitation of this research one of scale. Future researches could use larger samples to make the findings more generalisable. It would also be interesting to carry out a similar research with male managers and then draw comparisons. For example, comparisons of their educational qualifications, industry experience, perceptions of career progression challenges, and career intentions, with those found among women would shed light on why women seem to lag behind. This research has done the exploratory work. Future research should build on this base to conduct closer analyses of individual issues identified here.

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SUBMITTED: FEB 2011

REVISION SUBMITTED: OCT 2011

2nd REVISION SUBMITTED: JAN 2012

ACCEPTED: MAR 2012
REFEREED ANONYMOUSLY

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