

The Male Perspective on the Underrepresentation of Women in Senior Management Positions of Hotels

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ABSTRACT

Even though women represent the largest number of workers in the global hotel industry, few are found in top managerial positions. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness on the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions of hotels, by taking a male perspective on the subject. A qualitative research approach was used to explore personal perceptions on organisational culture, work-life balance, gender equality and competences and skills. Twelve interviews with male managers working in the Dutch hotel industry were conducted. The findings provide important implications on the individual, organisational and national level.

Keywords

Women, hotel industry, gender equality, male perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality, referred to as the equal opportunities, rights and obligations of women and men at work (United Nations, 2018), is a topic that has been high on the agenda of political parties for quite some time. The heads of government from 189 countries signed the so-called Millennium Development Goals in 2000, in which objective 3; “Promoting gender equality; strengthening the position of women”, takes a prominent place. It was reported that women’s empowerment and gender equality are significant factors for sustainable development and is therefore incorporated as Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the United Nations (2018). In turn, several commitments were made to ensure equal rights for women, to increase opportunities and access for contribution and leadership in the society, economy and political decision-making. Even though the world has accomplished several improvements regarding women’s empowerment and gender equality under the Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2018), females still face violence and discrimination all around the globe. It appears that on average less than 1 in 3 senior and middle management positions are held by women (UN, 2018). As a result, in 2013, a legal target has been introduced in the Netherlands for companies to have a minimum of 30 percent females in top management positions (Lückerath-Rovers, 2018). However, various Dutch stock-listed businesses do not meet this statutory target. Research has shown that out of all 228 directors of the 90 listed companies, only 6 percent is a female (Lückerath-Rovers, 2018). Thus, despite the national and international constitutional guidelines and the scientific indications that team diversity in chief management positions would positively contribute to overall company performance, the gender gap in senior leadership jobs remains significantly high (Masters, 2017).

Hotel industry specific, research has indicated that women represent around 60-79 percent of the total amount of employees (Blayney & Blotnick, 2013). Yet, the jobs that these women occupy are often operational functions, such as HR, housekeeping and sales positions. The higher one

climbs up the corporate ladder, the fewer women are to be found. It is remarkable that women have a very small share in managerial and strategic functions; only 5 percent of the total number of CEOs in the hotel industry is female (The Castel Project, 2017). When looking at several major hotel chains worldwide, we see that Accor with over 46 percent and Hilton with 44 percent represented women in their boards are pursuing their goals for increased gender equality. By contrast, with only 28 and 25 percent female representation in senior management, Marriott and Wyndham can still make progress with regard to gender parity. Looking at the female representation within the largest hotel chains in the Netherlands, it is concluded that Hampshire performs with 50 percent. Unfortunately, such percentages are not reflected in a few remaining top chains such as Fletcher (25 percent), van der Valk (16 percent) and NH (25 percent).

During the climb up the corporate ladder, women frequently encounter the glass ceiling which is an invisible, synthetic barrier that prevents qualified women from career progressing to senior management (Knutson & Schmidgall, 1999). Other obstacles include work-family conflict, a male-dominated industry, gender discrimination and the ‘old boys network’ (Shrestha, 2016). Furthermore, research concluded that the social expectations towards women are often still focused on a traditional division of roles (McKinsey, 2016). In addition, research shows that women often suffer from a lack of self-esteem, which makes them hesitate to function in the tough world of top management (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000). Consequently, a lack of self-esteem can lead to individuals to believe they have a lack of required skills to fulfil particular tasks, which will turn lead to take on of less challenging duties (Bandura, 1997).

In short, it has been found that women still have difficulties in taking on top management positions, especially in the hotel industry. Additionally, little is known about the male perspective on this problem. This is key as males are often the ones in senior management positions that appoint women for jobs (Hamilton, 2012). Therefore, the current study started with the main question: *What is the male perspective on the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions of hotels?* For this study, the representation of women in the top of the hotel industry was reviewed from the perspective of men, by looking at the way they experience gender equality and their personal perspective on this. This study aims to present a unique and alternative lens on the problem of gender inequality within top managerial positions in hospitality. The aim of this research is to raise the awareness on the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions of hotels and to provide multiple solutions to the problem. This research will be used to move the subject up the agenda of executive decision makers and human resources personnel in the hotel industry.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In total, 12 male managers working in the Dutch hotel industry were interviewed. A semi-structured interview strategy was used and participants were asked to take a look at the underrepresentation of women in the highest levels of decision making in the hotel industry. Interviews were conducted in December 2018. Various interview questions were developed on the themes gender equality, organisational culture, work-life balance, and competences and skills. The answers to the questions provided insights into personal opinions and experiences regarding these topics. The interviews were analysed by thematic analysis using the qualitative data software NVivo.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender equality

Gender equality was seen by the participants as the equal treatment of men and women. This is in line with the definitions of the United Nations (2018), which refer to gender equality in the work environment as the equal opportunities, rights and obligations of women and men at work. In addition, a number of interviewees added that it is also about making no difference in race, sex, sexual preference or origin. When zooming into the Dutch hotel industry, most managers concluded that they don't experience underrepresentation of women in any of the jobs, including the managerial positions. The male/female ratio in the hotels of the participants was more or less similar or even higher on the female side, especially in the operational departments. Yet, several interviewees discussed the gender ratio in the top management positions. They concluded that somehow, most executive management jobs were mainly held by men. The interviewees were quite concerned about this issue. *"I know that in the hospitality industry we're not there yet. I feel like there are not enough females in the hospitality, especially in management positions"* (Respondent 7, personal communication, December 12, 2018). Some even questioned whether laws and regulations must be sharpened or even applied to create more gender equality in the hospitality workplace. Doherty (2014) explained that equal opportunity regulations and laws require businesses to criticize their management and to develop an altered approach to leading employees. On the other hand, most interviewees concluded that it is essential to choose the right person for the right job. Gender is a key factor when looking at the composition of a team, however, assessing individuals based on their experience, education and qualities should be leading for equal treatment. The respondents indicated that showing profiles of women who made it to senior management jobs is crucial to increase the female representation in the top. This relates to Roemer (2002), who explained that role models that encourage women to develop further up the corporate ladder are needed, as these women show it is possible to break the glass ceiling. On the other hand, some managers had concerns about specifically drawing attention to gender equality at the workplace, as particularly stressing the matter can be conceived wrongly. *"I make no distinctions, so why should I especially emphasize that?"* (Respondent 12, personal communication, December 24, 2018).

Organisational culture

Research has identified a male dominated organisational culture as a clarification for the glass ceiling metaphor (Shrestha, 2016). The current study concluded that the hotel

industry is in some respects a male-dominated industry. More specifically, more men are represented in executive, decision-making management positions, whereas women represent a larger percentage of the total amount of workers as well as students at hotel schools. Interviewees indicated that brand identity, status and prestige are significant factors influencing this. One manager especially pointed out the 'grey-structure' of the hotel branch, as a lot of elderly men are present. In addition, due to the traditional set-up of some hotel businesses or cultures, sometimes men are preferred over women. Several interviewees indicated that within smaller hotels or hotel chains, more women are represented in top management, as they feel to have more influence on the working environment and the ambiance within these hotels. Consequently, they often feel more comfortable in such environments. For that reason, it is easier for them to reach higher positions in smaller hotels rather than within the larger hotel chains. Especially within the larger hotel chains, a male-dominated, competitive culture is observed. The male managers interviewed indicated that men often choose to work for an organisation like this since it aligns with their values, such as status and power, and they therefore want to be associated with it. In line with this, Catanzaro et al. (2010) also proposed that men are tending to remain working in competitive organisational cultures. Furthermore, many respondents considered the hotel industry as a tough industry that is less suitable for women. Some of those interviewed described that it can be challenging for women to compete against this bias of corporate toughness. Hogue et al. (2002) confirmed this as some individuals hold onto more traditional masculine-oriented beliefs about which features apply to a successful leader. *"I believe that if you want to progress to the top in certain organisations, you have to have a very thick skin"* (Respondent 6, personal communication, December 11, 2018).

Work-life balance

Multiple studies consider the conflict between work and family to be one of the most common causes of the glass ceiling for women, and more specifically balancing the two domains (Knutson & Schmidgall, 1999). Participants concluded that work-life balance is something that is personally perceived, as it is different for everyone. The managers described work pressure, the type of home situation, and happiness as significant factors influencing this. The current study showed that men indeed feel that women have more difficulties in maintaining a work-life balance than men. This is mainly because women are still confronted with the continuous practice of traditional gender roles (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018). A small number of those interviewed disagreed, however, admitted that women have a greater contribution to children as they are the ones being pregnant and therefore have to make choices and set priorities that men do not have to do. *"We still assume that women take on most, even the largest part of the care. So for them, I think it is more difficult to bring that into balance"* (Respondent 9, personal communication, December 17, 2018). In addition, the interpersonal relationship and attachment of children to the mother is the greatest during the early stages. This makes it more difficult for women to combine childcare with full-time work (Mulvaney et al., 2006). However, the various respondents also explained that women often over-associate themselves with all family-related activities and

responsibilities. If they choose to take care of their family and children and because of that decide to work part-time, that is their own choice. Peshave & Gupta (2017) agreed as the slow career progression of women is caused by both the selection process as well as self-choice. Flexibility, communication and time management are considered factors that support a positive work-life balance for working mothers and fathers. Hence, the employer plays a critical role as well. Some respondents suspected that employers are sometimes skeptical of giving promotion to a woman who is around her late 20s and early 30s. This is supported by Posner (2018), as this is often the period during which women become pregnant and therefore do not work for a longer period of time. It is then difficult for women to return to their positions afterwards, due to a lack of experience in comparison to others who continued working. Kleven et al. (2018) described that the gender gap in corporations often starts around this period.

Competences and skills

It was concluded by the interviewed managers that women that are working in top management positions often have a tough and strong personality. Others noted that once people reach executive management functions, it does not matter whether you are a man or a woman, it matters what kind of leadership style is executed and what someone's attitude is. The corporate structure, company policies and action plans within the work environment can be seen as influential on the type of leadership style that is executed. Women are broadly represented within hotel schools, however this type of education is not seen as necessary to work in the hotel industry. In terms of progress, multiple participants outlined that, to the best of their knowledge, men and women have similar career ambitions. This is in contrast to Van Vianen & Fisher (2002) who concluded that women might be less ambitious. For progressing to executive management jobs, ambition is key, and knowledge and experience are seen as additional factors (Peshave & Gupta, 2017). Many interviewees argued that in order to reach top management jobs, it is rather about ambition than knowledge. Additionally, partner-support is crucial when pursuing certain career goals. Moreover, leaders in organisations must be approachable, collaborative and accommodating (Appelbaum et al., 2003). These qualities were often associated with the leadership style of women. Respondents concluded that men and women often do not differ much when it comes to leadership qualities. Most of them outlined that they do not feel that women are missing skills and resources to reach executive leadership jobs. However, differences in specific qualities were discussed. It often depends on whether the qualities and values of an individual match the type of company, or whether that person is a good leader for a specific team of people. Furthermore, Dickerson & Taylor (2000) concluded that women often show self-limiting behaviours due to a lack of self-esteem. A couple interviewees discussed this lack of self-esteem as well. In comparison to men, women often seem to feel that they are not capable enough for particular jobs, that they cannot handle it, or combine the job with their private life. The interviewees mentioned that women usually have to be approached for a new job opportunity and that only then they would take it on, but that they would not be the ones taking the first step. *"They often think: I work very hard and when the time is right they will ask me for the job or I*

will apply" (Respondent 5, personal communication, December 11, 2018). This supports Ryan et al (2016), as they outlined that female leaders are often criticized for not being assertive enough.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, men indicate that the underrepresentation of women in top management is mainly because of women experiencing difficulties in trying to balance work and private life, especially when having children. Women are often seen as the main caregiver for children and are often the ones stepping back to take care of domestic duties and children. On the other hand, women often over-associate themselves with family related activities. Furthermore, certain personal characteristics play a role as well. Women are frequently lacking confidence or experience low self-esteem and are therefore hindered in their development. Moreover, the flexibility of the employer is another factor that limit women from progressing. In addition, hiring the right person for the right job is of major importance and should be directive. Judging individuals on their experience, education and qualities should be the leading factor for equal treatment. Finally, it is the continuous practice of traditional gender roles and the male-dominated top management of the hotel industry that holds women back; the ones that make the decisions in the end are often male.

Strengths and limitations

This study needs to be evaluated in light of some particular strengths and limitations. The main strength of this study was that it takes an alternative perspective by going into depth on the perspective of not the target group in question, the females, but that took a male perspective on the underrepresentation of women in the hotel industry. This has shed new lights on the current pressing topic. Moreover, in the selection process of participants, different hotel sizes were considered. This provided more insight as employees of smaller and larger hotel companies were interviewed to create a wider insight for the total Dutch hotel industry. The first limitation of the current study is that sexual preference of the interviewees has not been considered. While conducting the interviews, it was mentioned that some of the participants had a male partner. For this reason, they might look differently at subjects such as gender roles and the traditional male/female division and might therefore answer accordingly. Secondly, the researcher in the current study was a female herself, asking questions to males about their perception on the underrepresentation of women in top management. Therefore, an important limitation lies in the fact that the men being interviewed might have been biased by the first impression they had of the interviewer. This could have led to socially desirable answers because the male interviewees might not have felt comfortable or confident enough to give fully honest answers. Other limitations included a time constraint of four months and for that reason the sample size was limited. Moreover, as the focus was on men working in a management position in the Dutch hotel industry, other areas were excluded such as operational functions. For further research, it might be of interest to interview women who have made it to executive positions and ask them about their experiences on breaking the glass ceiling, as in this study only males on middle and general management were interviewed. Furthermore, it is recommended to further investigate the self-esteem concept

of women and the possible impact of it and, by doing so, explore ways to enhance it to further progress to top management.

Recommendation and implications

The recommendations of this study include national, organisational and individual level solutions to decrease the underrepresentation of women in top management jobs. It was concluded that the work-family conflict functions as a barrier in this matter. Policies supporting parental leave in the hotel industry can have a significant effect as for example, paid paternity leave discourages mothers to stay at home and take care of the children. Moreover, it includes the need of setting up an educational platform which offers all-women courses and coaching sessions. This will help women to increase their self-esteem and gain support from others. Furthermore, these trainings will support women to recommend each other when opportunities in top management arise. This method might, however, emphasise that men and women belong to different groups. Accordingly, these mistaken practices can also increase in-group harmony among males, leading to more discrimination and antagonism toward out-group colleagues, such as women. These organisational divisions will promote further progression of the 'old boys network', approaches and attitudes among men. Furthermore, courses that emphasise on gender differences could possibly disregard similarities of both genders and support gender stereotyping. Eventually, these courses may create another self-stereotyping insight. Additionally, a minimal amount of role models was indicated as a barrier for progressing. Therefore, female senior managers can provide lectures at hotel schools to encourage young women to increase their self-esteem and show them it is possible to reach the top.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Carlijn Emons was an undergraduate student working independently under the supervision of Yoy Bergs. The topic was proposed and developed by the student and the research was executed by herself. This included the design, analysis and interpretation of the results and conclusions.

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SRC 2019, December 5, 2019, The Netherlands.

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