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Mistress of the Mantle: Hoteliering and Beyond

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Abstract:

Women have gained immense recognition in myriad of fields across the globe, in recent times. Engaging themselves with a career is not a question of encashment, rather sequels a sense of satisfaction, progresses the prowess and above all establishes a statement of their life. It is apt to accost here that a certain degree of empowerment is an essential ingredient that marches alongside to help attain success. One such area which is less explored by women where endless empowerments exist is hotels. Like any other business house, star hotels have emerged to be the much sought after place of happening and also for taking up a career as a hotelier. This research attempts to answer a few questions like what place do women occupy in hotels? Is carrier progression for women a promising one? What it means to be empowered? Is gender diaspora a common phenomenon in hotels? To answer these research questions, select star hotels of Chennai are identified where women managers are engaged to offer their valuable inputs which will be the primary source of the paper. The study aims to present the nuances of women as hoteliers.

Keywords: Women, hoteliers, empowerment

1. Introduction

Next to Silver screen, an Industry which is embellished with glamour, charm, aura and energy is the hotel industry. Hotels – a place to avail shelter, food and entertainment is certainly a happening place where the need for women is quintessential (Hicks 349). The paradox is not about the presence of women as an entertainer, rather being the index of the hotel conveying warmth to the guests. Women playing her role in a hotel are seldom a recent culture but dates back to early centuries where the lady of the house along with her children prepared the house for the travellers and offered food for a price, as recorded in the history (Woods, Viehland 51). Women's role in a hotel is an expanse of her daily domestic routine. Though women in the West had hotels as their favourite choice of place to work, Indian women never saw a rosy picture and a welcome sign especially from her house. Things evolved and now women come forward to opt for working in hotels, crossing barriers. Those few women evenly exercise the spirit of empowerment without any pride or prejudice and stay successful in their career (Li, Leung 190)

2. Need for Women in Hotels

A hotel without a woman is like a home without a mother. Like how a child rushes home to see the mother after school, so is the eagerness of the guest to see a lady welcoming him/her at the time of arrival. The aesthetic acumen associated with women is an important factor that fathoms the need for women gender in hotels (Okumus, Sariisik and Naipaul 78). Women play a variety of role ranging from associates, supervisors to executives and managers in departments like Front Office, Housekeeping, Restaurants, Kitchen, Human Resources, Sales and Marketing, Security and allied departments. It is also mandatory that the lady staff should be in proportionate to the male staff to strike a balance (Mooney 151).

An interesting fact to appreciate is, hotels witness a significant growth in having Single lady businesswomen staying with them. Businesswomen travellers are on frequent moves which constitute an important business aspect for a hotel (Lutz and Ryan 350). Augmenting lady guests' interests, lady staff's presence to deal with guests calls for recruiting more number of lady staff. This feature very clearly shows that women occupy key positions in various industries across the globe. Their movement signifies the degree of freedom, independency, autonomy and audacity.

3. Businesswomen Amenities – a Portray of Empowerment

Businesswomen are an important traveller segment and special emphasis and endeavour is pumped in to create better amenities for this segment (Knox 154). ITC Grand Chola, ITC Sheraton Park and My Fortune in Chennai have a special floor only for women called 'Eva Floors' (Raina). A few other hotels in Chennai are coming up with special packages on yoga, spa, beauty treatments and culinary classes crafted for women travellers.

- "Travel packages for women have been there for years and it's the same everywhere. But those can't work anymore as the female travellers have evolved and their needs are changing"(Paul)

The luxury hotels in Chennai has crafted a new package for single lady travellers, which includes an array of services such as dedicated female housekeepers, butlers, concierges and personal shopping assistants and tour guides along with access to a personal chef who curates personalized menus during their stay.

- "We spent months to refine our offerings and came up with the new one, which includes preferences of women travellers from across the globe"(Anand)

With business from women travellers growing by 50% every year, hotels say this segment cannot be ignored. Once a single lady traveller stays at the hotel and is happy and satisfied with the personalization and environment, then she is a 100% repeat guest to the hotel (Gable and Sipkoff 128). Some hotels are designing areas specifically for women travellers. For instance, the Hyatt Regency in Chennai has started a women-only bar in its lobby called 'Escape Bar'. Movenpick Hotel & Spa Bangalore is planning a women-centric area in its 'Club Lounge' on the executive floor, which will offer wines, juices, health food and magazines preferred by women. Women like to connect with other women and they look for a special place — that's the reason behind opening a women-only bar. Hotels are becoming more dependent on this segment as women travellers are more liberal with their purse strings and indulge in quality lifestyle amenities including spas, beauty, health and wellness (The economic times). Hence, we see that hotels in Chennai are preparing themselves to welcome businesswomen on board by offering exclusive services. Thus, women staff is equally important to cater this segment.

4. Women – Employment

Chennai hotels rely on the Institutes and Colleges offering Hotel Management to recruit fresher. Career prospects are prosperous for the girl candidates as the demand are huge. As compared to the male candidates, the enrolment of girl candidates to this course is seen to be less. This may be the outcome of lack of awareness about the course or the stigma of seeing their ward working in a 'hotel'. But those who had pursued after it have made it to the fullest. Long working hours, competition or routine difficulties were never a distraction to their career. It is also noted that recruiters look for more female candidates than the males for all the areas of the hotel. There are at least 338 star rated hotels in Chennai. Most of the hotels have 40% of lady staff at various levels. The career path is likely to be in this pattern as given below;

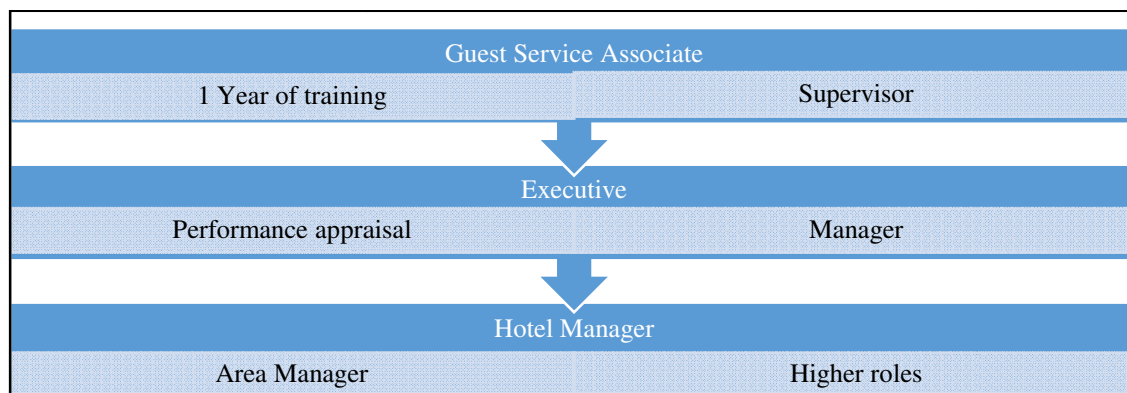


Figure 1: Career path in Hotel Industry

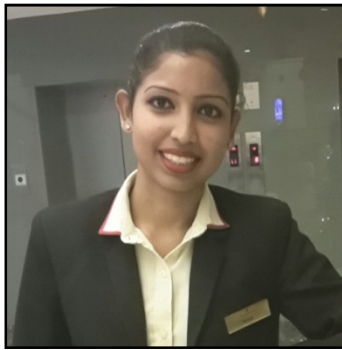
Source: Author

5. Testimonial Illustration

The success stories of a few women hoteliers would be apt to accost here. The career progression and empowerment could be well understood if an example is well examined.

5.1. Puja Chowdhary

Puja pursued the 3-year Degree in Hospitality and Hotel Administration from Institute of Hotel Management Catering Technology & Applied Nutrition, Taramani, Chennai. She graduated in the year 2013. Though she had plenty of offers in various hospitality firms through campus recruitment, she decided to join Ramada Chennai Egmore as Management Trainee. Recently she was promoted as Front Office Duty Manager in just 2 years of duration. She comments that she always had the support from her General Manager and the Front Office Manager while making choices and decisions. Male colleagues were never a stumbling block but a ladder. She felt safe and secured working in a hotel. She felt so committed with the organization as she was empowered to take any step that would improve the image of the property. She also encourages the other girls to opt for hotel management as their career (Chowdhary).



*Figure 2: Puja Chowdhary, Front office
Duty Manager, Ramada Chennai
Source: Author*

5.2. Maria Verghese

Maria graduated from Shevaroy's College of Hotel Management, Yercaud in the year 2001. Her specialization was Front Office and was placed as Front Office Associate in Le Royal Meridien Chennai. After gaining experience for a year she moved to Le Meridien Dubai. In pursuit of knowledge, she joined a college in London where she pursued Masters in Tourism Management. She also taught Tourism where she studied. After returning back to India in 2012, she joined Hyatt Regency Chennai as the Training Manager. She strongly feels that hard work, dedication and sharp mind clubbed with empowerment will make a lady manager excel in her career. She comments that she loves working in hotels where she enjoys best of the comforts. She is empowered and judiciously exercises her rights for the betterment of the organization (Verghese).

5.3. Uma Maheswari

Uma studied the 3-year B. Sc Hotel Management and Catering Science from Sri Bathavachalam College for women, Chennai. Her potential and caliber is profusely seen in her constant elevation in her career. Her 13 years of assignment with the GRT hotels is highly commendable. From a Housekeeping associate, she rose to the level of Operation Director of Radisson GRT Chennai. Recently she was promoted as General Manager for the GRT Kakinada property. Uma comments that stability and consistency is the key for success in hotel industry. She feels that hotel has lot of male employees but from them came the support and encouragement. Though long working hour creeps into her everyday routine, appreciation from the boss and guests keeps her get going further. She also feels that sky is the limit for a woman to explore heights in hotels and one is always empowered to put things right (Maheswari).



*Figure 3: Uma Maheswari,
General Manager, GRT Kakinada
Source: Author*

Apart from the above there are many such examples of Lady Managers who have made a remarkable achievement and growth in the career. While discussing with them the hardships faced in the work life, they all have agreed that working beyond the scheduled time is a big challenge. Bigger roles demand bigger responsibilities and so is the time too. Maintaining their families especially after marriage is another challenge. Keeping up a good physique is equally essential and one should be conscious about this, as this glamorous Industry demands from a lady.

It is to be borne in mind that it is not a cakewalk for a lady to fight the stigma the society poses. In a conservative and an orthodox society like India, while womenfolk are encouraged to opt for any course of study as per their choice at the degree level or are motivated to join any sector for a job or to make up their career, there always exists a dilemma when it comes to opting Hotel Management as a degree course or taking up a job in a hotel in spite of its reputation. The issue is all about the well-being of the genre

and future settlement. Upon several compromises, the course or the career is pursued where the new challenge that erupts would be the stigma thrown by the society.

It is very important for a woman to be accepted by the society especially like the Indians who are keen in knowing the movements of the women. Right from the birth of a female child till death the society imposes strong don'ts and no's. When it comes to education, especially Hotel Management, many mark a full stop. It is basically the level of awareness and superfluous notion that the society develops with regards to the Hotel related education or jobs. Hotels are business houses which offer Shelter and food to the travelers, tourists and so on. It is quiet imperative for any hotel to entertain its guests by offering better amenities like swimming pool, a bar, a discothèque and so forth. It is of course necessary to keep the guests of the hotel happy and satisfied as they spend money only for food and shelter. Here comes the need for employing women where the ratio is balanced and it makes a difference in the business.

As the nature of this business is quiet different involving rooms, bar and like, the society has always equated it as a taboo. The media has even more played its part in conveying a wrong message to the society citing unwanted scenes happening in guest rooms, bars or in a discotheque. This visual impact varies from person to person. Though the Indian society is heterogeneous, the severity is very much felt with the economically weaker section of the society, which is because of the awareness and exposure. This leads the genre to opt out from pursuing the course or taking up job in the hotel, thereby missing a golden opportunity to serve the cream of the society which would in turn reward them with an identity and dignity.

6. Conclusion

No doubt, hotel industry is an equal opportunity employer. In fact, ladies are preferred than men. This paper divulges that success for a lady is not merely through empowerment but through holistic patterns. A lady staff whose services are required to serve a lady guest reveals the deeper sense of vitality and empowerment. It is not the official empowerment that suffices the leadership role of a lady but the power of empowerment from within which makes her bold and beautiful. An eye for detail, keenness to keep the guest happy, proactive nature and sense of belonging churns her to cherish hospitality holistically.

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