Incorporating a gender approach in the hospitality industry: Female executives’ perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing presence of women in the hospitality labour market, empirical evidence shows persistent horizontal and vertical segregation, as well as a pay gap – a situation that perpetuates lost opportunities for the industry. Based on Barbara Risman’s model “Gender as a Social Structure” as a leading reference, the paper provides a gender based approach for the hospitality industry. Risman’s three levels of analysis (Individual, Interactional and Institutional) are completed with an Intersectional level, conforming the “Gender as a Social Structure in the Hospitality Industry” model. This model aims at identifying factors that cause discrimination among female executives. The methodology is based on thirty semi-structured in-depth interviews with female executives in the Spanish hospitality industry. The results show that the influence of self-imposed barriers, gender roles, problems associated with work-life conciliation and issues related to gendered organizations are the main factors that hinder achieving gender equality.

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1. Introduction

Although the number of women on boards of directors and in top management positions in organisations all around the world (e.g. Arfken et al., 2004; Pinar et al., 2011) is increasing, it remains low, and is growing at a very slow pace (e.g. Castano et al., 2010; Bjorkhaug and Sorensen, 2012; Bugeja et al., 2012).

There have been numerous articles analysing women’s representation in employment positions all over the world and focusing on gender discrimination, i.e. treating people differently on the basis of their sex (Cleveland et al., 2005). Research into the reasons for the lack of female representation in higher management positions has attributed it to workplace barriers, insufficient numbers of qualified women further down the career ladder, discriminatory stereotyping of leadership attributes as male attributes, incompatibility between job structures and the demands of raising a family, and self-imposed barriers (e.g. Emslie and Hunt, 2009; Roper and Scott, 2009; Boone et al., 2013). There is evidence of both vertical and horizontal segregation (e.g. Santos and Varejão, 2007; Campos-Soria et al., 2011) and the consequence of gender discrimination include the gender pay gap (e.g. Thrane, 2008; Campos-Soria et al., 2009; Muñoz-Bullón, 2009; Casado-Díaz and Simon, 2016; Baum, 2013; Fleming, 2015; Geiler and Renneboog, 2015; Livingstone et al., 2016).

Although there is a considerable body of empirical and theoretical research on gender issues in the work environment, there is a lack of research applying feminist theories to vertical segregation of women in the tourism sector and hospitality industry (Brandth and Haugen, 2005; Lacher and Oh, 2012; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2014; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015; Pritchard, 2018). The literature on women’s under-representation in leadership positions in the private tourism sector (Mooney and Ryan, 2009; Boone et al., 2013; Costa et al., 2017), or in universities and Academia is sparse (Munar et al., 2015; Pritchard and Morgan, 2017; Pritchard, 2018; Chambers et al., 2017). These gaps are more significant because of the economic importance of tourism and the idiosyncratic features it has as an industrial sector. Employment in the hospitality and tourism industry is associated with notoriously poor wages, low job security, long working hours and shift work (Back et al., 2011) and with lower quality employment opportunities than in other industries (García-Pozo et al., 2012; Lacher and Oh, 2012; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015). In addition, although women make up 55.9% of the tourism workforce in OECD member countries (Stacey, 2015), their working conditions are worse than those of their male counterparts. All this adds up to vertical and horizontal segregation that help to maintain the leadership gap (Kogovsek and Kogovsek, 2015; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015).

This article tackles women’s position in the hospitality labour market, specifically their progression up the career ladder. It responds to calls for a broader perspective on the ‘glass ceiling’ (Pizam, 2017),
starting with the double-bind factor that addresses discrimination at a
gendered socio-cultural level (Pizam, 2017; Boone et al., 2013).

The objective of this article is to understand women’s career de-
development from a gender approach, by examining the perceptions of
female managers in the hospitality industry and identifying the various
factors that hinder or facilitate the promotion of women to manage-
ment positions. This critical analysis will be based on the development
of a specific social gender model for the hospitality industry and will
lead to recommendations for strategies and actions to empower women
in the hospitality industry.

The Research Questions (RQs) arising from this objective are:

- RQ1. How does a gender approach improve our understanding of
women’s position in the hospitality industry?
- RQ2. Which individual and social factors influence women’s career
progression in the hospitality industry?
- RQ3. Which industry-specific factors influence women’s career
progression in the hospitality industry?

In order to achieve this objective and answer the research questions
a qualitative analysis was carried out between 2014 and 2016 from
thirty successful women in decision-making positions in the hospitality
industry throughout Spain. Spain was chosen as the research subject
because it is the third most visited country in the world and the second
in terms of revenue from tourism (United Nations World Tourism
Organisation, UNWTO, 2017). According to the Spanish Tourism Sat-
teU account,1 in 2015 tourism contributed 11.2% of gross domestic
product (GDP) and j 11.9% of the workforce in Spain was employed in
tourism (11.2% of salaried workers and 16.7% of non-salaried
workers). Furthermore, women make up 55.5% of the hospitality in-
dustry workforce in Spain (Segovia-Perez and Figueroa-Domecq, 2016)
a very similar proportion to the Organization for Economic Cooperation
and Development (OECD) average (Stacey, 2015).

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. First, we review the
literature on gender as a social system and discuss the factors that de-
terminate gender discrimination, then the methodology is described.
After that we present the results of the investigation, followed discus-
sion of the results and then by our conclusions. Lastly, the research
and managerial implications are presented.

2. A gender-aware literature review: women in decision-making
positions

Gender is a system of beliefs and practices that refers to, deals with,
or creates a sense of difference between females and males (Thompson
& Armato, 2012:10) and is used to define social roles and coerce men
and women down specific individual paths. Consequently, gender is
manifested in personality, cultural rules and institutions' management
culture. It becomes the basis for strati-

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1 The most recent data available from the Tourism Satellite Account in 2016 were from
2012 as the complexity of the calculations and evaluations leads to substantial delays in
publication.

in-group and out-group membership influence behaviour. Finally, at
the institutional level, differentiation is reflected in how rarely women
and men are given identical positions. A wide variety of organisational
structures reproduce and develop gender differences through labour
division, role hierarchies and power structures. The components of the
institutional level are related to the maintenance of power and re-
sources mainly by men, which implies the appearance of the wage gap,
gender segregation by sectors and occupations, contractual differences,
glass ceiling, among other aspects.

Considering the main objective of this article and the demand of
approaching this reality from a holistic perspective, Rismans’ model –
which is explained in more detail in the following section – is used as
the basis for the development of a theoretical model that describes and
explains women’s participation in leading positions in the hospitality
industry at the individual, interactional and institutional levels.

There are two main gender theoretical reasons to use Risman’s
model. In first place, gender as a social structure is complex and mul-
tificated. The discrimination faced by women in work environments
and its causes are complex and analysis requires consideration of a wide
range of variables (Albrecht et al., 2001; Cohen and Huffman, 2003;
Kiaye and Singh, 2013). Other theoretical traditions have focused on
individual sex differences, the importance of social structure or on so-
cial interaction and accountability expectations (Sinclair, 1997;
Wharton, 2009). Risman’s model offers an integrative approach that
treats gender as a socially constructed stratification system, operating at
the three levels mentioned above. The dimensions of the model are
independent and change is fluid and reverberates throughout the
structure dynamically (Risman, 2004: 435). The model integrates pre-
vious gender theoretical traditions giving due weight to the web of
interconnection linking gendered selves, the cultural expectations that
help explain interaction and institutional regulations. Thus, it offers a
multidimensional perspective where each research tradition explores
the growth of its own trees while remaining cognisant of the forest
(Risman, 2004: 433). A second reason to choose this model is the depth
and breadth of its applications to economic and social activities; it has
been applied to students’ teaching ratings (MacNell et al., 2015);
migration (Parrado and Flippen, 2014); social change (Budgeon, 2014)
and high-tech firms (Ridgeway, 2009), amongst others.

2.1. Individual level

The individual level deals with the development of individuals’ self-
conception of belonging to one gender or another and the way in which
we configure ourselves as women or men: gender shapes our personal-
ity, our internalised masculinity or femininity and defines our beha-
viours, values, beliefs and preferences.

In this sense gender roles or gender stereotypes are cultural re-
presentations of what is expected of a woman or a man (Bravo
and Moreno, 2007). People construct their own existence on the basis
of them, internalising culturally constructed and agreed codes and signs of
identity (Bravo and Moreno, 2007) that are maintained through the
admiration or reprobation of others (Eagly et al., 2004). The allocation
of domestic and family tasks to women is based on their presumed
greater capacity for care, kindness and sensitivity, whilst men are as-
signed the role of family provider because it is associated with au-
tonomy, domination and power.

Women’s devotion to family or housework often goes hand in hand
with more limited participation in professional work and women tend
to choose occupations or roles where level of education and human
capital investment are less important (Hultin, 2003; Reid et al., 2004;
Dambrin and Lambert, 2008; Fernandez-Palacin et al., 2010). This
tendency is what Boone et al. (2013) identified as a self-imposed barrier
to female achievement. Other self-imposed barriers include perceptions
of one’s capacities, cognitive factors and types of shared understanding
among individuals that depend on a shared language, codes and culture
(Farr-Wharton and Brunetto, 2007). Thus women tend to have less
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