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## WOMEN CHEFS IN INDIAN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at investigating the challenges preventing women chefs from reaching the top positions in the kitchen of a hotel and identifying measures in overcoming them. In recent years, the increased number of women in the hospitality industry and their under representation in top positions has made women's status in the industry a great concern. Majority of women chefs are not in situations that would lead them to the positions of Executive Chefs. There are several factors preventing women chefs from reaching the glass ceiling. The study identifies such factors and suggests measures to prepare women for leadership positions in the hospitality industry and find ways to overcome the barriers that may exist to women's career advancement. However, there are many factors which are hampering the rate at which the industry could be growing. Some, the hotels can control and some need inputs from the government in the form of policies and programmes for the young women chefs who join afresh.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the main challenges faced by the women chefs in the hospitality industry, envision a change and explore solutions for sustainability in the ever-changing market scenario. Studies show that hotel organizations keep up to their words and give women employees their dues like promotions, incentives, etc, but still women chefs unduly are unable to reach the top positions. It is important for patrons of hotel industry to deliberate these challenges in a professional way and support them in their ventures. Many studies need to be carried out to enable the organizations to learn more about the importance of growth of women chefs in their organizations.

**Keywords:** Hospitality Industry, Women Chefs and Leadership.

### INTRODUCTION

Today, India is a force in the global economy, with a high demand for talent and the key source being educated Indian women. The hospitality industry is experiencing tremendous growth in India and increasing opportunities await women to grow and succeed. Though the industry has tremendous scope for women, this talent pool has not been fully exploited. Moreover we do not have enough representation at the managerial level in hospitality industry and due to many barriers they are prevented from reaching senior positions in management. Historically, India has been a male-dominated society. Yet, in the past decade or so, social change has opened the possibility for women to attain managerial/executive roles in hospitality industry.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The history of women in the position of Chef (Executive Chef) is a long and complicated one. Women have had a long and hard road to being recognized as chefs or even allowed to work in the Culinary Industry. Traditionally, women have been responsible for making simple meals at home, but no often was "cuisine" applied to women cookery. This has been the issue since hunter gatherer period. (<http://www.squidoo.com/womenchefs>).

Compared to fifty or even twenty years ago, the success of women chefs today is staggering. However, there are still obstacles for aspiring young women even now. According to a recent poll, 91% of all Executive chefs worldwide are men. (<http://www.squidoo.com/womenchefs>).

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The professional work of Chefs, for which they are paid, recognised and publicly acclaimed, has long been dominated by men. However, few women have managed to break through the barriers of custom and tradition and deviated from the usual professions that women are engaged in. Internationally, we have the first women Executive Chef Iyanthi Gunewardene (1998) at Grand Oriental Hotel in Australia, Susan Wolfla at Mandalay Bay (2005) in Las Vegas, Cristeta Comerford at White House (2005) in Washington, and Suzanne Storms (2006) the first women Executive Chef in the Middle East Region. If Executive Chefs from all over the world are considered, it is found that the majority of them are males and women make up a very small proportion. Some of these women have, however, contributed greatly to cuisine that they have proved themselves to be legendary in this field. (<http://www.articlesbase.com/food-and-beverage-articles/culinary-arts-and-the-famous>). Zimbabwe's hospitality industry has gone through many phases, where it requires more employees. Again, due to the National Gender Policy, women are now flocking to the position of junior chefs. Unfortunately for women, males continue to dominate in the positions of Executive chef. A renowned author Wagen (1995), supported male domination due to gendered labour force.

Reley (1997), observes that there was low women participation in the top management in the hospitality industry whereas they are enrolled in large numbers in institutions internationally. Most of the institutions above offer hospitality courses, including culinary arts at managerial level with the assumption that these graduates will be easily be absorbed in the hospitality industry but, the problem of gender disparity remains. Again, it is surprising that 90% of the lecturers who teach professional cookery, bakery studies, catering studies, are women. The situation becomes opposite when it comes to employment, where we have males dominating the Executive Chef Position. Women are natured to be kitchen managers for the whole of their life at home; they have vast experience in handling and preparing food and are enrolled in large numbers in culinary courses.

### CHALLENGES OF WOMEN CHEFS IN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

Challenges of women chefs are well documented in the hospitality research literature (Brownell, 1998; 1994; 1993; Clayton et al., 1998; Woods and Kavanaugh, 1994). Concerns include compensation and job discrimination, barriers to promotion, existence of the 'glass ceiling,' considerable stress, burnout, gender stereotypes, sexual discrimination, network access, work-family conflict, mentor and family support and health problems which are key challenges that have alarming implications in the rise of women as top executives in the hospitality industry which must be mitigated.

#### LONG WORKING HOURS AND EMOTIONAL STRESS

Brownell (1998) indicated that the nature of the hospitality industry demands long hours and requires a great deal of crisis management and problem solving which create a dynamic but often stressful and exhausting work experience for women chefs. Prolonged and unconventional work hours and emotional stress are two important elements that are perceived by women chefs as the most prevalent stressors. The length and unpredictability of hours are believed to contribute to physical and mental exhaustion, marital disruptions, and decrease in positive family interactions.

Thoughts of the physical toll of work, burnout and long-term physical health problems are worrisome factors. Stress related to the expectations of the management of being available on call even when not on duty and during nonscheduled work hours are a cause of concern. Women chefs in hotel industry feel that interactions with arrogant and argumentative guests, requirement of mental restraint and emotional control are also tremendous stress factors as these days Chefs are to participate in the conversation of the guests. Unpredictable and weekend or holiday work is also considered to be very stressful for the family. The lack of a structured schedule prohibits scheduled weekend activities and thus a de motivating factor.

#### WORK PLACE SUPPORT

Restrictions are not only at the entry point, but there are many barriers blocking women from moving up in the ladder of the organizational hierarchy. Retention of women chefs, women trainees and women employees, in the hotel or hospitality industry is a critical issue. Plugging the attrition of women professionals is a key factor to meet the expected shortfall of talents in this dynamic industry. Absence of women at senior roles creates a vacuum of role models to the more junior ranks.

Factors such as the general manager, women chefs, coworker support and friendship networks, and opportunities for flexibility are many a times lacking in the hospitality industry. Disgruntled top most executive chefs refuse to understand the need of a woman and the compulsions she is in thereby being a source of stress.

### **Unfriendly Work Culture**

The work culture of hospitality industry poses impediments to achieve a good work-life balance for women chefs. 'Night shifts and 24x7' module of operations put an additional pressure on all employees in the hospitality sector. For women, it becomes even more challenging and hence the burnout is much higher. Women are stressed and forced to quit night shift operations while their domestic responsibilities become higher. The social culture of women working in hospitality industry is another added barrier.

### **Dual Role**

Managing their conventional and traditional role of house wife and their career are key challenges for women chefs. Family constraints can be perceived as a function of a women's commitment to actual involvement in duties associated with parental, marital and homemaker roles on one hand and the amount of support she receives from her spouse and other relatives on the other (Chi-Ching, 1992). Furthermore, when working women return home to their children and spouses who are also anticipating their full support and attention, the balance of work and life may then become difficult to achieve (Brownell, 1998). The impact of work-family conflict, family

support on career development, health problems, joint family issues, balance between work and life, time spent with family and sacrifices of family life in career advancements are some of the key emotional factors that act as barriers in the progress of women in their career.

### **Differential Treatment**

Women experience great pressure to work hard to prove themselves in the workplace, and one of the greatest obstacles is how women chefs are treated by men in the kitchen. Abusive languages, nasty remarks, ripping looks, tormenting comments and many more are the main challenges in the kitchen faced by many women chefs in the hotel industry. They often receive differential treatment, reinforcing the stereotypical view of being inferior and less important than men, resulting in not being offered challenging jobs and not being part of important organizational issues. Often women are compelled to make choices and limit their sphere of impact (that is, perform below their capacity) in order to optimize their life and career.

### **Glass Ceiling**

Working women at every level see where they want to progress to, but found themselves blocked by an invisible barrier. These barriers or frustrations have been well documented by Flanders (1994) as 'glass ceiling' which is a transparent barrier that applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing to higher positions simply because they are women. Women easily get tired and disillusioned trying to break through this glass ceiling and for not being used to their full potential.

### **Mentors**

Women Chefs argued that, in comparison with their male counterparts, they did not receive equal support from their mentors. Furthermore they considered mentor support as one of the challenges that they confronted in their career advancements. It is evident that limited opportunities in the hospitality industry is offered to women.

### **Health**

Under the present day environment when concern for health and exercise are increasing, the impact of working long and untimely hours without time for exercise and food at the right time on women's health is over bearing. Women are concerned about their health and the toll it may take on their future life with such unfriendly and demanding working conditions.

## **STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES**

### **Career Advancement**

Despite the long and unpredictable hours, it is strongly felt that as women chefs achieved position and status in the hospitality industry, the hours became somewhat more manageable. However a profile characterized by determination, ambition, positive attitude, interpersonal skills and hard work integrated with continuous learning, skill up gradation and networking contributed to the success and career advancement of women chefs in the hotel/hospitality industry.

### **Positive Work Place Climate**

Opportunities for flexibility in work scheduling will help women chefs to manage their work and family and contribute to the family friendliness of their hotels. Executive Chef whose position is at par with a General Manager in a hotel play a critical role in shaping the family-friendly organizational climate in a given hotel and it is his/her responsibility to create a positive work place environment and culture in the hotel which would facilitate overcoming family challenges, talent retention and cost of recruitment. Apart from the executive chef and general manager, supportive coworkers play a major role in diffusing work place stress. People must be allowed to talk about their families and the employees in a hotel should live like a family by knowing each other well and help each other by sharing their concerns. It is the responsibility of every coworker to strive and create a positive work place climate which would create better understanding, family bonding, work output and high morale. Freedom of flexibility in working hours will not only provide happiness and satisfaction to the individual but will also enhance their contribution and motivate them for working longer hours without inhibitions and mental stress. Having a general manager who encourages flexible scheduling and innovative problem solving are a great source of motivation and encouragement for women to work hard and attain higher positions. Better understanding of the women can mitigate their problems and help them grow in the industry.

### **Positive Organizational Structure**

Hotels must recognize that women do the same as men work but they have different needs that require to be addressed and accommodated at the workplace. They must not only accommodate women chefs, but recognize that women bring with them a difference in approach and attitude to the workplace. Hence, an endeavor must be made to recognize them appropriately so that their skills and interactive style of leadership brings gains to the organisation.

### **Discrimination**

Women chefs should not be discriminated against male chefs in promotional opportunities. Discrimination in pay, promotion and other aspects which are frequently noticed should be dispensed within the hospitality industry.

### **Family Support**

“A supportive family, both before and after marriage, is a key factor for Indian professional women to succeed.” The criticality of family support and education for career success of women are unquestionable factors. Women with family support are much better positioned to do well in hospitality industry.

### **Success Factors**

- (a) Attitude. A number of factors contribute to success for the modern Indian women managers in the hospitality industry. Good education, effective communication skills (both written and oral), as well as a very professional attitude towards work and co-workers are the key to attain managerial roles.
- (b) Mentors. Mentoring is important, and they play a key role in the success of women chefs. A mentoring relationship would be an added benefit to a women chef and the ideal person would be someone whom she can connect with, who is supportive, nurturing, assertive and can provide an honest feedback.
- (c) Networking. They must develop both internal and external network access, e.g. governmental, business, professional and social.
- (d) Self Appraisal. As a woman chef one should carry out self appraisal to know what one wants. If family and balancing her life is important at any stage, then one should decide and enjoy it. Making the choice without guilt is a liberating experience that can strengthen the women chefs.
- (e) Glass Ceiling. Women should not get worn down or disillusioned trying to break through the glass ceiling or not being used to their full potential. Instead one should elevate themselves by continuous learning and building relationships.
- (f) Leadership Style. Women chefs develop a more interactive style than their male counterparts. With respect to power, however, many women executives are beginning to imitate their male colleagues, a strategy that threatens to undermine their connective leadership advantage and hence this syndrome should be curbed. They must develop skills in giving directives, running meetings and challenging views. Getting others around to realize their full potential is one sure way to measure leadership capabilities of women managers. There is convincing evidence that women excel in collaborative, contributory, and mentoring behavior, all important aspects of connective leadership and this feature must be exploited by women chefs.

## CONCLUSION

There is tremendous upward shift in the level of motivation of the current generation girls as compared to the older generation. The current generation of women workers are smarter, mentally robust and possess a strong will to succeed and rise up the ladder. We are seeing an emerging pattern of women leaders stepping forward in restaurants, hotels, catering, resorts, and spas over the last few years. They should be able to maintain a balance between work and family through good time management, have the ability to positively counter spouse egos, and work hard to prove their worth and counter the competition from their male counterparts. The demand for hospitality professionals is growing and definitely there is a strong hope that the current generation of women will continue to be represented strongly in leadership positions in the hospitality industry.

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