

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

# Too many barriers to overcome? Career challenges of women in the UK hospitality industry

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## Abstract

Women face numerous challenges in building a successful career. The hospitality industry exemplifies workplaces where women find progressing careers to senior management very challenging. This paper explores barriers to women's career progression in the hospitality industry in the United Kingdom (UK). The study analyses the views of women in management positions in the UK hospitality industry on challenges they face in career progression. The findings indicate that women face numerous barriers in their career paths, and these include gender bias, microaggressions, work-life balance issues, lack of gender diversity, inflexibility, and mentoring.

## KEYWORDS

career barriers, career disablers, gender equality, hospitality, microaggressions

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender equality has been and continues to be a major goal for almost all modern societies. Civil society, governments and business organisations have been striving to achieve this goal, and gender equality is a central feature of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals number five (Ferguson, 2011). Even though there have been considerable improvements in awareness about gender equality and an increase in the number of women finding employment in professions long held by men, their presence in senior leadership positions is limited (Baum, 2013), and those who reach such roles are considered outliers (Mooney, 2020). Despite achieving considerable progress in advancing women's rights during recent decades, the UK is ranked 11th out of 18 countries in a league table that considered pay, board-level representation and the gap between male and female employment, among other factors (Conley & Page, 2018).

Characterised by a high degree of customer interaction and reliance on customer service, the hospitality industry has been perceived to benefit from employing women and has seen an increase in the number of female employees (WiHTL, 2020). Despite the continuous

growth in the number of women employees, they are underrepresented in management and leadership roles in the hospitality industry, which reflects the prevailing culture of gender inequality in the wider society (Mooney et al., 2017). With more than 3.2 million jobs, the hospitality sector is the third largest employer in the UK (UK Hospitality Workforce, 2018). Even though women represent approximately 60% of the tourism and hospitality workforce, only 11% of the senior management positions in the sector are held by them and they are paid, on average, 3.45% less than men (People 1st, 2017). Despite making considerable overall progress towards gender equality, it is imperative, from a resource and talent perspective, that the UK hospitality industry makes significant efforts to support women in reaching positions and roles of real influence (Moody-McNamara & Higgins, 2020). While these issues are by no means unique to the UK, the current climate represents a perfect storm in that country represented by the confluence of the consequences for hospitality employment of the global COVID-19 pandemic and labour shortages resulting from BREXIT policies. In turn, this context places an imperative on the hospitality industry to maximise its effective use of scarce management capital. This includes facilitating access to senior roles for far more women in the industry.

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The career path of women in the hospitality industry is littered with innumerable barriers that make career advancement a slow and incremental process (Dashper, 2020). As Acker (1990, 1992, 2006) argues organisational processes lead to gendered employment practises, such as role stereotyping leading to a gendered division of labour and differential recruitment, promotion and reward processes and packages, which operate in ways that have consequences for women's opportunities. Organisational logic, inequality regimes, intersectionality and gender subtexts are instrumental in the diversity discrimination applied by organisations (Acker, 1992, 2006, 2012; Carvalho et al., 2019).

This paper aims to provide insight into barriers and career disablers that hinder women's career advancement to senior-level roles in the UK hospitality industry. Based on interviews with women working in senior management positions in the UK hospitality industry, this study explores the barriers they faced in career progression from a gendered organisation perspective. The first part of the paper reviews the literature on gender issues and gendered organisations as well as barriers to women's career progression in the hospitality industry. The research methods employed are described next, followed by a discussion of the findings. Finally, the conclusions and implications of the study are presented.

## 2 | GENDER INEQUALITY

Despite the considerable progress made in developing a gender ideology that helps assess individual perceptions and internalisation of surrounding cultural belief systems (Pritchard & Morgan, 2017), gender tends to be viewed simplistically and straightforwardly (Chambers & Rakic, 2018). Gender is neither homogenous nor binary but is a fluid concept and cannot be clearly defined in terms of 'sex,' 'masculine', 'feminine', 'female' or 'male' (Morgan & Pritchard, 2019). It is performative and socially constructed by daily performances of behaviour consistent with particular notions of gender, which are shaped by social practises, norms, and expectations of others (Mooney, 2020). Gender, thus, represents the social meanings that are attached to sex categories (Ryle & Hasson, 2019), and signifies the roles, behaviours, activities, attributes and opportunities that societies consider appropriate for women and men, which may be the origin of gender inequalities, discrimination and marginalisation (World Health Organization, 2020). These representations of gender are reproduced in workplaces through organisational practises, values and distributions of power (Acker, 1992, 2006).

Gender has been increasingly considered as a mechanism of inequality between women and men, and gender relations are characterised by power and norms that disadvantage women and advantage men (Mooney, 2020). As Ryle and Hasson (2019), p.82 argue, 'gender inequality is the way in which the meanings assigned to sex and gender as social categories create disparities in resources such as income, power and status'. Gender-based inequalities are linked to society, politics, history, culture and the cycle of power relations between men and women, which intersect to produce a complex range of

inequalities and oppression (Morgan & Pritchard, 2019). These inequalities are not limited to society but are replicated in workplaces, where women gain lower rewards than men, have limited opportunities for career advancement and lag behind men on most dimensions of job quality (Budig & England, 2001). Inequality, in an organisational context, reflects systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, outcomes, decision-making, opportunities for promotion and interesting work, job security, benefits, monetary and non-monetary rewards, respect and pleasure in work (Acker, 2006). Gender inequality is also manifest in the segregated nature of labour markets, where women are horizontally segregated into different gendered functional areas and vertically segregated within different levels, often lower, of responsibility in the same organisation (Campos Soria et al., 2011; Carvalho et al., 2018a). Even though workplaces today have a nearly equal number of men and women, men ride what is known as a glass escalator and women are blocked by the glass ceiling in their career development path (Hultin, 2003). Solutions to gender inequalities and segregation, thus, depend on factors that reside not only within the organisation but also in family and society.

## 3 | GENDER AND ORGANISATIONS

Career experiences of men and women tend to vary, and gender strongly influences roles and responsibilities. Organisations that are invariably structured by men and for men play a central role in creating and sustaining these unequal experiences. Kanter (1977) argues that what lies behind gender inequality is not individual differences but the way that organisations are structured, where women have less opportunity, and less power and are found in smaller numbers in important positions compared with men. According to Wahl (2011), a gender structure exists in organisations, which is based on the distribution of men and women, the degree of gender segregation and gender hierarchical segregation. The prevailing gender structure disadvantages women and influences their career progression as women traditionally are underrepresented both vertically and horizontally within organisations (Campos Soria et al., 2011; Carvalho et al., 2018a). Acker (1990, 2006) contends that organisations are inherently gendered, and organisational practises promoting inequalities are institutionalised and seen in hiring, job classification systems, promotions, wages, performance evaluations, job security and sexual harassment. Organisations determine who to recruit and promote, and how to evaluate performance and allocate rewards, and thus are spaces that produce, allocate and sustain inequalities (Stainback et al., 2016). Organisational hierarchies thus reflect these gender power relations, in which men are powerful and women submissive (Dashper, 2020).

Acker (1990) argues that gender inequalities in organisations are in-built and result from gendering processes that are often concealed and may appear to have nothing to do with gender. As Benschop and Doorewaard (2012) note, gender inequality may persist even in spaces that are considered to be gender equal. Acker (1990), in her

pioneering work, identified five processes of organisational gendering: division of labour, cultural symbols, workplace interactions, individual identities and organisational logic. (Acker, 1990, 2012; Carvalho et al., 2019). In her later work, Acker (1992, 2012); Carvalho et al., (2019) removed organisational logic as she found it to overlap with her earlier conceptualisation of the gendered organisational substructure (Acker, 2012). Later research by Acker focused on the invisibility and intersectional nature of gender inequalities and inequality regimes (Acker, 2006; 2012), providing researchers and scholars with new directions of enquiry into the paradoxes and contradictions surrounding gender equality in organisations and wider society.

While Acker's (1990, 1992) framework is considered one of the most influential works on gender and organisations, many scholars have critiqued her theories. Britton (2000) found her work to be essentialist for her suggestion that organisations are essentially gendered and structured around distinctions of masculinity and femininity and noted a lack of theoretical and empirical clarity in the gender labelling of organisations. According to Kantola (2008), Acker gave the impression that organisations are essentially static, which they are not. Dye and Mills (2006) found Acker's framework 'an unfinished tapestry', which requires more clarity on the nature of interdependence of various gendering processes and may underestimate the role of sexuality in determining sex-segregated jobs. Carvalho et al. (2019) note that despite being widely cited by scholars, Acker's model of gendered organisations has not yet been fully applied to remedy gender inequalities in workplaces due to inconsistencies in its interpretation and application (Bates, 2021; Carvalho et al., 2019). However, Acker's work inspired future gender researchers and continues to stimulate research on gender inequality (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012).

As discussed earlier, gender inequality is institutionalised in organisations whilst a perception of equality is maintained (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). These divergences between perception and practise form the basis of the gender subtext that exists in organisations, which Benschop and Doorewaard (2012), p.225 describe as 'the set of often concealed power-based processes (re)producing gender distinctions in social practises through organisational and individual arrangements'. Such subtexts are behind the notions of the 'ideal worker' and 'gender-neutral worker', which may appear to promote gender equality, but are implicitly loaded with masculine undertones (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). The 'ideal worker' valued commitment to work, willingness to work long hours, availability and a lack of outside responsibilities and distractions, all of which are more suited to men (Acker, 1992). The notions of an 'ideal worker' thus is loaded with masculine connotations, favouring male workers as women had the primary responsibility of a homemaker involving domestic labour, childcare and other family responsibilities, which are distractions in an employment context (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). The notion of a gender-neutral worker also formalises and institutionalises the privileged position of men within organisations (Dashper, 2017), where male-type behaviours and attire are considered indicators of managerial ability (Mooney, 2020). Women blame themselves and downplay the significance of gender in their career stagnation, which is

attributed to women's inferior capabilities (Segovia-Perez et al., 2019). The gendered nature of organisations thus continues to be the root cause of inequalities at workplaces that discriminate against women.

## 4 | GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

Though a major creator of employment, the hospitality industry is associated with low-quality and precarious work, strong traditions of nepotism, paternalism and gender inequality (Morgan & Pritchard, 2019). It is low-waged, characterised by part-time and temporary contracts, long working hours, declining work-flexibility and instability (Kokkranikal & Baum, 2002), all of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Baum et al., 2020). Despite employing a large number of women, the hospitality industry is known for widespread gender discrimination that disadvantages female employees (Segovia-Perez et al., 2019). They face discrimination and a host of barriers in all aspects of the above-noted dimensions of their employment (Pritchard & Morgan, 2017). Women's wages are systematically lower than men's for doing similar work in the hospitality sector, where their numerical supremacy is not matched by representation in leadership and management positions (Campos Soria et al., 2011). Gendered inequality in hospitality should also be seen as part of an intersection of inequalities that are to be found in the industry in terms of race and ethnicity, which add another layer to the prevailing inequalities (Chambers, 2022).

Women frequently find the hospitality industry to be one of the most challenging for career progression and meaningful work (Jung & Yoon, 2016). Factors such as long and irregular working hours, role pressure and work overload tend to make the hospitality industry's working environment stressful for women, adversely affecting their job satisfaction and emotional well-being (Kokkranikal & Baum, 2002). Occupational gender segregation, which explains the unequal distribution of men and women among different jobs, is widespread in the hospitality industry, where jobs with less administrative and management responsibility are dominated by women and jobs with higher levels of responsibility by men (Carvalho et al., 2019). Women have traditionally found themselves horizontally and vertically segregated into those roles that require replication of their so-called domestic and feminine skills such as cleaning, housekeeping, and customer service (Campos Soria et al., 2011; Segovia-Perez et al., 2019). A lack of representation of women in roles that involve leading, managing and decision-making at senior levels of the organisational hierarchy is evident in the global hospitality industry, where women are shoe-horned into traditional gender roles (Mooney & Ryan, 2009). Thus, the precarity and occupational gender segregation of hospitality continue to disadvantage and stereotype women into poor quality, low-paid, disempowered, unequal and discriminatory careers in the hospitality industry (Baum, 2013). Inequality regimes in broader society, organisational logic and substructures that favour men intersect to perpetuate gender inequality in the hospitality industry (Acker, 2006).

## 5 | CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S CAREER PROGRESSION IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

The extant literature on gender equality suggests a number of individual, organisational and societal factors that influence women's career advancement, which reinforces Acker's (2012, 2006) notions of intersectionality in gender inequality and inequality regimes. These factors have a stagnating and disabling effect on women's career progression. Most studies identify a range of factors that hinder women's career progression. These include inter alia, background, residential and ambivalent sexism (Charles et al., 2018); gender preconceptions and stereotypes (Dashper, 2017); unconscious and implicit gender bias (Madsen & Andrade, 2018); gender microaggressions (Basford et al., 2014); patriarchy (Patterson et al., 2012); gendered social structure (Risman, 2004); gendered organisational structure and practises; masculine organisational culture; tokenism; organisational networks; lack of mentoring and career guidance (Dashper, 2020; Eissner & Gannon, 2018); the glass ceiling (Carvalho et al., 2019); inflexible working conditions (Costa et al., 2017); and incompatibility between job structures and raising a family (Segovia-Perez et al., 2019). These factors also exert a major influence on women's careers in the hospitality industry. These are the consequences of gendered organisations (Acker, 1990) and social structures (Risman, 2004) that create an invisible obstacle course for working women (Boone et al., 2013). Cultural determinism, which explains default socio-cultural values and their influence on attitudes, perceptions and behaviours (Neculaesei, 2015) is a key factor in determining the extent of gender discrimination in many societies, as the level of inequality varies according to the gender norms of the societies in which women are born, brought up and live. The presence of a glass ceiling illustrates the invisible barriers to women's career progression that exist in the hospitality industry as well (Clevenger & Singh, 2013). However, it has been argued that the glass ceiling may be inappropriate as the entire structure, not just the ceiling, that holds women back (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000), and the rare success stories of women reaching the top despite a myriad of challenges rather points to a labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007). There is an increasing recognition of the influence of intersectionality, which refers to the combined and simultaneous interactions of multiple inequalities of class, race, colour, religion, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality and their discriminatory outcomes, on gender equality in the hospitality sector (Acker, 2012; Chambers, 2022; Mooney, 2018).

This review of the extant literature reveals extensive research on gender inequality within the hospitality sector and factors influencing women's career progression. The inequality regimes (Acker, 2006) created by family, society and organisations create 'career disablers' that inhibit women's career progression in the hospitality industry. The concept of 'career disablers' needs detailed consideration in the context of gender equality as it can be a more precise means to understand factors that need to be addressed to promote women's career progression. Career disablers are those factors in society, family, organisations, and workplaces that dissuade if not deter individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds from securing and progressing a

respectable career. These disablers are the direct consequences of the inequality regimes and a flawed organisational logic that affect the self-confidence and motivation of the individual to the extent that they feel a sense of inadequacy and even like imposters. Limited research has focused on perceptions of women who became successful in their hospitality careers about the career disablers they have experienced, and no study has been carried out focusing on this theme in the context of the UK hospitality industry. This research addresses this gap by analysing career barriers faced by women working within the British hospitality industry in senior management positions.

## 6 | RESEARCH METHODS

As the study seeks to explore the views, experiences, and beliefs about the disablers to women's career progression in the UK hospitality industry, a qualitative approach was deemed more appropriate. Participants were selected by purposive sampling methods from the researchers' professional network and comprised women professionals working in senior management positions in hotels, restaurants, events, and facilities management in the UK. Purposive sampling helps ensure the presence of women hospitality professionals in the sample, whose experiences and views were key to achieving the objectives of the study (Robinson, 2013). Suitable participants were also snowball-recruited through recommendations from interviewees (Hennink et al., 2020). The positions of the participants ranged from Managing Director to Manager (Table 1). Data were collected through 14 semi-structured face-to-face interviews.

Semi-structured interviews help us to learn about the perspective of participants, who convey their subjective experiences in detail about an issue, allowing the interviewer to delve into the issue investigated in-depth within the thematic framework (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Interviews were performed at the interviewees' workplaces or via Skype and recorded on a digital recorder, which enabled a subsequent methodical analysis of the data.

The themes covered in the interviews (Table 2) were developed based on the literature review and determined by the purpose of the study and research gaps identified (Brunt et al., 2017) and focused on the experiences and challenges faced by the participants in their career progression (Acker, 1990; Costa et al., 2017; Dashper, 2017; Mooney et al., 2017; Nadal et al., 2015). Researchers have an important role in designing a qualitative research process to identify and explore knowledge gaps, and their professional experience in hospitality and academia has informed the issue identification, development of the interview instruments and the interview process (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The hospitality background of the researchers helped identify and contextualise the themes and patterns that emerged from the transcripts on career disablers and barriers to women's career progression in the UK hospitality industry.

A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was employed to analyse the interview transcripts to generate themes that addressed the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Following an inductive approach,

**TABLE 1** Participants' profile.

Participant	Position	Type of business
1	Restaurant Manager	Michelin-starred Restaurant
2	Room Operations Manager	A Leading Hotel
3	Director of Human Resources	Luxury Hotel
4	Managing Director	Luxury Hotel
5	Managing Director	Facilities Management Company
6	Director of Finance	Luxury Hotel
7	Head of Events	Facilities Management Company
8	Business Development Director	Facilities Management Company
9	Director of Public Relations	Luxury Hotel
10	Director of Sales and Distribution	A Leading Hotel
11	Operations Manager	A leading Hotel Chain
12	Front Office Manager	A Leading Hotel Chain
13	Manager	A Leading Restaurant
14	Food and Beverage Manager	A Leading Hotel Chain

**TABLE 2** Interview questions.

Key themes	Interview question	Source
Career development experiences	Q1. What was your experience of developing a career in the hospitality sector? Can you describe situations in which you may have felt discriminated against?	Acker (1990, 2012); Nadal et al. (2015)
Career aspirations	Q2. What were your career aspirations?	Acker (1990, 2012)
Challenges to career progression; organisational processes; career disablers	Q3. Have you faced any barriers to progress your career and achieve management or leadership positions?	Acker (1990, 2012)
Family responsibilities: women balancing private and professional life; family-friendly practises	Q4. What do you think of work-life balance in your career?	Acker (1990, 2012); Costa et al. (2017)
Barriers to career progression; mentoring, gender equality; intersectionality; career disablers	Q5. What strategies do you think are necessary to overcome barriers to women's career progression?	Acker (1990, 2012); Dashper (2018)

the RTA provides an easily accessible and theoretically flexible method for qualitative data analysis to identify and analyse themes from the interview data (Bryne, 2022). All transcripts were manually

analysed employing a six-stage process of familiarisation with data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining themes and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The main focus of the inductive analysis was to identify themes that addressed the research objectives (Proudfoot, 2023). Several themes and sub-themes emerged during the analysis and after detailed analysis and reflection, six key themes (Figure 1) were found consistent with the content of the transcripts and relevant to the research objectives (Bryne, 2022). The next section provides a detailed analysis of the six themes identified from the RTA.

## 7 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings relating to the barriers to career progression and career disablers confronted by women leaders and managers in the UK hospitality industry. As discussed earlier, numerous studies have shown that it is difficult for women to achieve managerial positions in the hospitality industry due to a number of structural, cultural, social and personal barriers. However, many of the respondents to this study, assessing the workplace environment from positions of achievement in their careers, were of the view that the situation of women working in the UK hospitality industry has improved in recent years. Despite the numerous challenges they have encountered in their pursuit of career progression, the industry does not appear to present as many barriers as was undoubtedly the case in the past. Many respondents felt that there is more awareness about the need for gender equality and diversity as the following elaborations indicate:

People are more aware of equality and more respectful of women (Respondent 3, Director Human Resources, Luxury Hotel)

There is a lot more awareness around women and minority groups and the politically correct ways of speaking to people, respecting people's religion or gender or sexual orientation. It is really important it has become clearer to society (Director of Finance, Luxury Hotel)

It is suggested, therefore, that the UK hospitality industry has experienced improvements in gender diversity and, possibly, has outperformed other sectors in this regard. According to WiHTL (2020), the percentage of women on Executive Committees and Boards has seen an increase of 43% and 47%, respectively, in hospitality businesses, and a third of employees believe gender diversity has improved at their workplace during the past year. However, the same study reported that 84% of businesses are yet to reach 33% female representation in senior roles, women held less than 10% of chair roles, and 15% of businesses have all-male boards. Women still face a number of barriers and these call for proactive and targeted measures to support them in achieving leadership positions. Despite positive evidence, delving deeper into the data generated by this study suggests that the

FIGURE 1 Finalised thematic map.



progression of women in the UK hospitality industry comes at a personal cost and leaves considerable scope for improvement.

## 8 | GENDER BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION

Organisations that are gendered and built on a masculine culture, organisational logic and gendered subtext are workplaces where women are attributed with inferior capabilities and status (Acker, 2012; Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). Discrimination and bias directed at women in the workplace are a function of embedded and institutionalised sexist attitudes in the society where they work and live, and the effect of the gender norms that shaped the formative years of both men and women, which Charles et al. (2018) describe as residential sexism and background sexism, respectively. Such attitudes manifest in ambivalent sexism, which involves hostile and benevolent forms of sexism that converge in the notion that women are weaker than men and should occupy traditional feminine roles. Unconscious and implicit biases, which occur when individuals unconsciously make evaluations of people based on stereotypes while they consciously reject stereotypes, are common perpetrators of gender discrimination

that prevails in various forms in society and at the workplace (Madsen & Andrade, 2018). The barriers created by direct and indirect gender biases are behind the glass ceiling effect that seems to be ubiquitous in the hospitality industry. Many respondents felt that gender bias does exist, and women experience it at various levels, as expressed by the Managing Director of a Facilities Management firm:

When you work you realise you can work with people and everyone has their own unconscious bias and that comes from many different backgrounds. It can come because you are from an old generation and that is the way you have grown up and your parents worked that way, or it can be you have grown up in a different country and experienced different cultures, I think that is quite significant. And I think in terms of females in business that is still there (Managing Director, Facilities Management Firm)

Gender bias and discrimination seem to be more prevalent in the food production areas of the hospitality industry (Albors-Garrigos et al., 2020), as articulated by a Restaurant Manager:

Chef ladies in general have much more negative experiences because obviously in the kitchen there are just guys and the language in the kitchen is different, it is not just banter sometimes it is sexist and with lots of stereotypes. (Manager, Michelin-starred Restaurant)

Despite numerous societal, legal and organisational initiatives, gender bias and discrimination appear to remain institutionalised in the UK hospitality workplaces, leading to negative employment outcomes for women in terms of recruitment, promotion and pay. Measures such as bias training, awareness programmes, anonymised hiring processes and fostering an organisational culture steeped in the ethos of gender respect, gender diversity and accountability are intended to make hospitality work environments less evidently places of bias and discrimination (Madsen & Andrade, 2018).

## 9 | BALANCING FAMILY AND WORK

The inability of women to place work before family responsibilities is a major source of the inequality regimes (Acker, 2009). Many respondents find balancing family with a career very challenging. They felt that with no or limited family responsibilities, their male colleagues were able to be more flexible, work long hours and manage their careers better.

It is very difficult for a mother because you are the one that has the baby. Even if you have a very supportive partner, the mother still got to sacrifice things I would say. ... It is hard because it is like having a full-time job and a part-time job (Director of Human Resources, Luxury Hotel)

As there is a widespread cultural and social expectation that women take the major responsibility for family care, childcare and domestic work, their career choices are restricted (Costa et al., 2017). The social reproductive gender roles of women limit their ability to be the ideal tourism workers who work flexible hours (Carvalho, 2021). A majority of women, who get to the top of their profession do not seem to have extensive domestic commitments and they choose to pay a career penalty of opting to not have a family (Mooney et al., 2017).

I have other colleagues who have never had children and are General Managers or in higher positions. They chose not to have children for the sake of their career as they found it impossible to balance the demands of having a family and a career. (Food and Beverage Manager, A Leading Hotel Chain)

Those who have tried to balance their family life and career seem to experience inner conflicts, which are often referred to as 'mother's guilt' (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015). Many respondents admitted that they experienced such inner conflict and guilt:

It is something called 'guilty mother syndrome' so it is sort of guilty feeling. You have to be very organised at work as well as at home. You have to make sure that your priorities are in place before you get back to work. And your children don't suffer because the time with your children absolutely has to be 100% quality time. It is tough, demanding and it is horrible at most times (Manager, A Leading Restaurant)

Women, who have dependent children pay a motherhood penalty (Carvalho, 2021). Motherhood leads to loss of job opportunities, less productivity at work, low-paid mother-friendly jobs and discrimination from employers (Budig & England, 2001). As Hochschild (2003) states, balancing domestic responsibilities with demanding jobs is akin to women working a 'second shift'. Faced with the challenge of balancing work with family life, women are forced to choose between developing a career or having a family (Costa et al., 2017).

## 10 | INFLEXIBLE WORKING CONDITIONS

Work flexibility could be employer-friendly or employee-friendly (Costa et al., 2017). While employee-friendly flexibility affords more work-life balance, employer-friendly flexibility is about increasing profitability through unspecified working hours and working time. However, with most hospitality businesses operating 24 h a day, 7 days a week, employer-friendly flexibility is very common in the sector (Costa et al., 2017). The participants revealed that hospitality does not offer a workplace that is employee-flexible and appreciative of the multiple demands from family and work:

We are driven by holiday season, we are usually busy when other people are off, so in that case it is less flexible to take holidays, that is this industry. You always work, you take time off whenever business allows. You don't have this traditional Monday to Friday feeling. If you are not a flexible person, do not work in hospitality. If you are someone who wants to see your kid, be with them in the morning, in the evening, be home at lunch then it is not the right job for you (Manager, Michelin-starred Restaurant)

Inflexible work environments and a 'long hours' culture force employees to choose between their family and professional responsibilities and more often than not they sacrifice their careers for the sake of the family (Mooney & Ryan, 2009). Eventually, women may opt for part-time positions or take a career break. By the time, they return to normal working patterns, especially after maternity leave and childcare, a significant amount of time and career progression opportunities would have been lost.

This is my fifth job in the hotel industry. I left many jobs when my work time clashed with family needs.

Even when I returned after maternity leave, I could not get a rota, which helped me with childcare. If I did not change jobs often, I would be in a much higher position. A bit of understanding from my managers could have helped me to have a better career. (Front Office Manager, A leading hotel chain)

Employee-friendly flexibility helps improve work-life balance, especially during parenthood and allows control over when and where they work (Costa et al., 2017). As the respondents in this study stress, the provision of flexible work is necessary for women to ensure career continuity and career progression.

## 11 | LACK OF GENDER DIVERSITY

A diverse work environment with a healthy gender balance can help improve businesses' economic performance and be a major source of creativity and innovation (Baum, 2013). As 'critical mass' theory postulates, organisational culture can be influenced by organisational minorities such as women when their numbers equal or exceed one-third of the group, which may result in a gradual dissolution of a dominant masculine culture (Chesterman et al., 2005). The gender structure in an organisation does influence women's choice of working in that organisation and their career progression within it (Acker, 1990; Wahl, 2011). The findings back up this argument and emphasise the importance of gender diversity in supporting women's career progression:

Working in a more gender balanced team is more inspirational. A more diverse team around you I think supports people to be able to get the right networks, see and look up to role models that they can relate to. It has helped me seeing people that I naturally look up to and work with. It gives me confidence (Business Development Director, Facilities Management)

I think companies have to have a certain number of women in their boardrooms and make a real commitment... I think that helps to set the tone you know, and I wish more organisations will be so progressive. Because young people will look for organisations that embrace diversity. If I look around and someone offers me a role, the first thing I do is google the organisation and if I see the boardroom is all men, then I am not interested. (Managing Director, Facilities Management)

Where gender distribution and power relations are skewed in favour of men and women are in a minority, there will be limited opportunities for women to achieve senior positions (Carvalho et al., 2018b). Women's underrepresentation at the board and director level is likely to have an adverse impact on the overall gender distribution and career progression opportunities for women (WiHTL, 2020). In

organisations that lack gender diversity, women may be stereotyped as lacking in leadership qualities, leading to an organisational culture that is unsupportive of their career progression (Carvalho et al., 2018a, 2018b).

## 12 | LACK OF MENTORING SUPPORT

In gendered organisations, where women experience gender subordination (Acker, 1990), an effective mentoring support system can be very important in helping women's career growth (Dashper, 2020). Mentors can help aspiring professionals acquire skills and knowledge, and provide career guidance. Sharing their own career experience with junior staff, mentors can assist in career mobility, managing career expectations and networking (Eissner & Gannon, 2018). However, it has been noted that there is a lack of mentoring opportunities for women within hospitality companies, which slows their career progression (Dashper, 2020). Respondents did stress the importance of mentors in supporting women's career progression.

I think what is super important is to get someone a coach or a mentor to develop my emotional skills and self-confidence. How do I get better? If it is time management that you need to improve, that you are not good at meeting deadlines, how do I keep my deadlines? If you are getting scared being in front of customers, if you are shy, some people say women are more shy than men, how can you improve. A mentor could have really help me. (Rooms Operations Manager, Hotel).

I think it is about finding a good mentor to work with and following other strong women so that they actually have the opportunity to learn while they are growing in their career, evaluate the leadership and development so that they can promote and build up their own careers. (Managing Director, Luxury Hotel)

Mentoring is crucial in the hospitality industry as mentors can be excellent role models for young and junior-level employees (Dashper, 2017). Women-focused mentoring programmes are important for their career progression as women employees underachieve compared with their male counterparts in the hospitality industry (Dashper, 2020). As the respondents noted, mentoring helps improve employees' capabilities to do their jobs better and progress in their careers. Women in senior and leadership positions can be inspirational and transformational role models to emulate and may be more effective in supporting women in progressing their careers up the ranks (Clevenger & Singh, 2013). Hospitality organisations, with limited female representation at the top and inbuilt gender inequalities, have a real shortage of women role models and mentors. The findings of this research point to the need for women to find and take advantage of mentoring opportunities to develop their careers.



## 13 | MICROAGGRESSIONS

Workplace aggression that is intended to harm and subordinate co-workers is part of the prevailing inequality regimes in organisations (Nadal et al., 2015). Gender microaggression at the workplace is the “intentional or unintentional actions or behaviours that exclude, demean, insult, oppress or otherwise express hostility or indifference towards women” (Basford et al., 2014, p.314). It takes the form of sexual objectification, use of sexist language, treatment as a second-class citizen, attributions of inferiority and traditional gender roles, individual sexism, environmental microaggressions and obstructionism (Nadal et al., 2015). As a form of covert sexist discrimination, gender microaggressions result in women questioning their judgement and expertise and being viewed in a stereotypical and derogatory manner (Johnson et al., 2018). It is often the fact that incidents of microaggressions are either unreported or ignored leaving women to suffer its effects silently. Microaggressions can harm women's self-confidence and produce negative long-term emotional, behavioural, physiological, and social issues and create a hostile environment of harassment that forces women employees to consider leaving their jobs or moving to other careers (Johnson et al., 2018). Many of the respondents have experienced microaggression at the workplace:

I am aware that other managers do not like me. They talk to me only when it is absolutely necessary...they can be indifferent.... I know they call me all sort of names behind my back. I can sometimes see their dislike the way they talk to me and their body language. It is depressing and insulting. It really affects my self-confidence (Operations Manager, Hotel Chain)

We get asked to do chores and administrative tasks such as sending emails or helping set up events, which have nothing to do with my job as a front office manager. They do not ask my male colleagues to do these things.... it is just me. It is humiliating. (Front Office Manager, Hotel Chain).

The microaggressions that women employees face are not limited to their work colleagues alone. Female employees, especially those who are in guest-facing roles, encounter aggressive behaviour from their guests as well.

Guests are worse...they tend to react better to a ‘no’ from a male colleague. They are less likely to be aggressive and stubborn when a male member of the staff tells them something. They seem to feel more comfortable yelling at female staff. Some of them touch my hair, call me ‘babe’...‘honey’...(Restaurant Manager).

The concept of gender microaggressions helps appreciate the spectrum of gender discrimination that women experience at work that has a devastating effect not only on their work outcomes and

emotional well-being but also on organisational engagement and effectiveness (Basford et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2018). Training, development, awareness programmes, and a zero-tolerance approach to aggression can be important measures to reduce gender-related microaggressions and promote gender equality.

## 14 | CONCLUSION

Gendered organisations and gendered social structures create many visible and invisible barriers to women's career advancement (Acker, 1990). Women continue to encounter numerous challenges in the hospitality industry in the UK, which remains highly gendered and places women at a disadvantage (Acker, 1990). The individual, organisational and societal factors that hinder women's career advancement can have a stagnating and disabling impact on their ability to reach senior management and leadership positions. Issues such as sexism, gender stereotyping, gender bias, patriarchy, gendered social and organisation structure, masculine organisational culture, organisational networks, lack of mentoring, glass ceiling, lack of work-life balance, and gender microaggressions intersect to form career disablers that affect women's career in the hospitality industry.

The purpose of this research was to gain insight into the barriers and career disablers hindering women's career progression in the UK hospitality industry. These include gender bias, balancing work and family commitments, gender diversity, inflexibility, mentoring and gender microaggressions. The findings provide useful insights into the social, individual and institutional barriers women face in their career progression, and show how the hospitality industry exemplifies the gendered workplace conceptualised by Acker (1990). The respondents portray a sector that exhibits structural and operational bias towards women employees at the lower, middle and higher levels of their hospitality careers as noted by Carvalho et al. (2018a). Those respondents who have achieved success in their careers point to a working life of struggles, sacrifices and guilt (Carvalho et al., 2018b). The study also reinforces the detrimental effects of the primacy of women's domestic commitments to their career advancement (Mooney, 2020).

The study reveals the social, individual and institutional barriers women face in their career progression, and how hospitality employers can help overcome these career disablers and advance their careers. It is encouraging to find that there was increased awareness about the importance of gender equality and a relatively less discriminatory work environment in the UK hospitality industry. Gender-sensitive recruitment, selection and promotion practises are required to ensure gender diversity, especially at the top echelons of the hospitality organisations. Human resource policies and practises that focus on creating a women-friendly organisational culture can help women develop self-confidence and resilience. A family-supportive workplace that is flexible and sensitive to employee needs is crucial for women to sustain a disruption-free career. A healthy organisation culture can instil friendly and collegiate behaviour instead of the subtle forms of hostility that many respondents reported. Having mentors, who can inspire and support career management is vital

for women to have a meaningful career in the hospitality industry. Providing a workplace where women feel confident, safe and supported is key for hospitality organisations to benefit from a high quality and unique talent pool that women employees represent.

Gender research has received increasing recognition as an issue that has a significant bearing on the career experience and aspirations of an important source of human capital and talent. Gender diversity can be a major source of innovation, creativity, and increased service quality and this study seeks to highlight factors that affect women's careers in the hospitality industry and on ways to ameliorate the individual, organisational and social impediments and career disablers thwarting women's attempts to develop a successful career. The study represents a useful addition to the growing literature on gender and gender equality research in the hospitality sector, which has been seeing increasing participation of women in its workforce all over the world. This research is also of relevance to hospitality employees and society in general as it creates awareness about the issues affecting women's career experience and satisfaction.

The focus of this study is limited to women managers in the UK hospitality industry and could pave the way for larger studies spanning regional, and international settings to produce more generalisable conclusions. The sub-sectors of the tourism industry such as travel, events, airlines, tours and visitor attractions also employ female workers in significant numbers, where similar research can reveal issues confronting women in managing and progressing their careers. Given the intersectionality of gender discrimination, research into the career development experiences of ethnic minorities, religious groups and social groups working in the hospitality industry will help understand the career challenges they experience. This study highlighted a number of themes such as career disablers, microaggressions, female penalty, gender structure of organisations and inflexible working conditions that help understand the sources of gender discrimination and dissatisfaction in organisations. Finally, the study leads to the conclusion that achieving gender equality and creating a level playing field for women employees in the hospitality industry is a work in progress and supports Acker's (2009, 2012) view of gendered organisations being the source of career disablers hindering women's career progression. This study, while conducted before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, raises issues for employers and wider society in the UK that have strong resonance in a post-pandemic world where organisations and work, in all sectors including hospitality, are likely to emerge as very different to their pre-pandemic forms. Understanding the roles and opportunities that this changed environment offers to women in hospitality should be a key requirement for talent management in the future.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors acknowledge no conflict of interest in relation to this manuscript.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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**How to cite this article:** Kokkranikal, J., Calinaud, V., & Baum, T. (2024). Too many barriers to overcome? Career challenges of women in the UK hospitality industry. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 26(4), e2726. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2726>