Female Managers in Asian Hotels: Profile and Career Challenges

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Abstract

The number of female managers in the hotel industry is clearly increasing worldwide. However, given the barriers to advancement that women have faced, the curious person might ask how these female managers reach their positions. To address this question, this paper studies the general profile of female hotel managers in Singapore and examines the barriers that prevent middle-level female managers from moving up to the executive positions. The findings suggest that female managers in Singapore hotels seem to have "given up" some family life in order to get ahead. Whereas appreciate credentials and skills have proven important in advancing women into middle level management, they have not helped them to attain executive positions. A finding of interest is that the barriers of advancement for female managers are neither due to corporate practices nor policies, but rather a function of cultural and societal sanctions.

Key words: female managers, barriers of career advancement, Singapore, Asia

Introduction

The hospitality industry has experienced tremendous growth within the past decade, which is expected to continue beyond the year 2000. In spite of the substantial numbers of female managers in the industry, there are still many barriers that prevent them from reaching senior position in management. Problems female managers facing are well documented in the hospitality research (Brownell, 1998, 1994 and 1993; Clayton, Odera, Emenheiser and Raynolds, 1998; Woods and Kavanaugh, 1994). Concerns include pay and title discrimination, sex-role stereotypes, barrier to promotion, and the existence of the "glass ceiling" (Brownell, 1993).

Despite the evidence of women career development is an issue of much interest in the hospitality research of Europe and North America, less research has been conducted in the Asian countries. Do Asian female managers confront a "glass ceiling" similar to that encountered by their sisters in other parts of the world? How do Asian female managers reach their positions? Do they have unique characteristics? Do they have to sacrifice family life to get ahead? Do they face different set of barriers between entry into management and upward mobility within management? To answer these questions, this paper uses Singapore as a case and studies the general profile of female hotel managers and examines the barriers that prevent middle-level female managers from moving up to the executive positions.

Literature Review

Flanders (1994) stated "the phrase 'glass ceiling' sums
up all the frustrations of working women at every level who could see where they want to get to but who found themselves blocked by an invisible barrier. The glass ceiling is a transparent barrier that applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher positions because they are women. Researchers have suggested a number of variables that appear to contribute to the existence of the glass ceiling. Those variables can be grouped into internal and external factors.

Nieva and Gutck (1981) proposed a set of internal factors: personal characteristics (age, educational background and personality variables); attitudinal factors (attitudes toward work); and situational factors (spouse variables, children variables, and mobility, and previous work experiences). Patnick (1998) surveyed a group of restaurant executives in US and results showed that very few women had reached executive status in the industry and those who did had high educational attainments.

Brownell (1995) studied gender differences in personality and career development among hotel general managers. The finding suggested that a profile characterised by determination, ambitiousness, and positive attitude, interpersonal skills and hard work contributed to the career advancement of female managers.

Reitman (1998) compared the internal factors between men and women executives in corporate America. The findings indicated that whereas their years of work experiences, hours worked, work commitment and educational background were similar, women executives were older than their men counterparts; and less likely married and had fewer children. They also rarely had a nonemployed spouse, when almost half of the male executives in the study were in this "traditional" family structure.

External factors also play an important part in women's career development. They refer to barriers that are not due to a person's characteristics background, attitudes or personality. The literature suggests that external barriers originate mainly from work-related and family-related constraints (Chi-Ching, 1992). Various work-related constraints have been identified in the literature as gender stereotyping, work discrimination, lack of mentors and networks (Brownell, 1993; Shinew and Arnold).

Gender stereotyping is one of the most prominent career barriers that prevent women from competing equally with men for management positions. Stereotyping notion implies the assumption of different management ability between genders. While men were described as "leaders and decision makers", women were "loyal supporters and followers" (Still, 1993). One direct consequence of gender stereotyping is work discrimination in forms of wage, promotion and training opportunities, allocation of responsibility and performance appraisal. Baret, Nagy and Maize (1992) studied the salary discrepancies between male and female foodservice directors in hospitals and the findings revealed that male directors earned a mean of $10,000 more per year than did female directors. Kimberly et al. (1998) examined the gender inequity in public leisure service agencies and results suggested that women middle managers were given fewer opportunities be promoted to upper management.

Another often-cited barrier involves women's limited access to organisational and professional network and to mentors. Because men occupied most senior management positions, female managers lose out due to the lack of opportunities to socialise with and to develop mentoring relationship with them (Chi-Ching, 1992). These male senior managers otherwise might be able to help groom female managers for upper positions, provide continued guidance, and encourage their access to opportunities for career development (Nieva and Gutck, 1981; Van Maanin, 1976).

The family constraints can be perceived as a function of a woman's commitment to and 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). Brownell (1998) indicates that the nature of hospitality industry demands long hours and requires a great deal of crisis management and problem solving. These factors combine to create a dynamic but often stressful and exhausting work experience for managers. However, when female managers return home to their children and spouses who also anticipate their full support and attention the balance of work and life may be difficult to achieve (Brownell, 1988). Thus, literature suggested that family conflict and spouse family supports were the primary family constraints affecting women's pursuit to management positions (Lobel, 1991; Lobel and Clair, 1992).

The earlier work on career development failed to distinguish the barriers between women's entry into management and upward mobility within management. Researchers implicitly assumed that the movement of women managers into the executive level involved similar dynamics to those of women's initial entry into management (Israel and Adler, 1994). The reality, however, is that the executive suite has remained highly resistant to women's entry (Israel and Adler, 1994).

Whereas more research, especially in North America has started to focus on barriers that prevent middle-level female managers from moving up, far fewer studies have conducted in different national, social and cultural contexts. Although some Asian countries have been at the forefront in passing labour equality laws, women executives are still underrepresented in the region. By June 1996, only three of seventy-two Hong Kong hotels had female general managers (1977). In Singapore, only two females made to the position of general managers among 77 hotels registered under Singapore Tourism Promotion Board.