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(2025) Beyond the “Broken Rung”: a multi-level analysis of gender bias in male-dominated hotel management roles. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 17 (5). pp. 642-652. ISSN 1755-4217

<https://doi.org/10.1108/WHATT-03-2025-0103>

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Beyond the “broken rung”: a multi-level analysis of gender bias in Male-dominated hotel management roles

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores how gender role expectations lead to bias in hotel management roles that are mainly taken by men (male-dominated), how these biases operate on different levels and how they can be addressed.

Design/methodology/approach – Seventeen female senior managers who worked in male-dominated roles in international hotels were interviewed via Microsoft Teams, with responses analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings – Gender biases exist at the societal, organisational, interpersonal and individual levels. The findings include the effect of menopause on women’s careers, the barrier of female jealousy and the unintended effects of gender-specific initiatives.

Research limitations/implications – The qualitative design and small sample size limit generalisability. Future work should explore other cultural contexts and conduct longitudinal studies.

Practical implications – Hotels should implement targeted policies to address gendered career barriers, including mentorship programmes, transparent promotion pathways and work-family balance considerations.

Social implications – The findings of the study have implications for increasing gender equity and leadership diversity in the hospitality industry.

Originality/value – The research presents a multi-level model explaining how gender role expectations perpetuate in male-dominated hotel management roles and offers practical insights for industry practitioners.

Keywords Gender bias, Male-dominated managerial roles, Hotel management, Gender role expectations, Social role theory, Female leadership, Hospitality industry, Career barriers

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Gender bias and inequality in the workplace significantly hinder women’s advancement and impact diversity and inclusivity across various industries (Casad *et al.*, 2020). Despite some progress towards gender equality in the hotel industry, certain roles remain divided by gender and continue to exhibit ongoing bias. Women face various forms of gender inequality, including unequal pay, limited access to leadership positions, gender stereotyping, sexual harassment, and work-family challenges (Dashper, 2020). These issues are particularly evident in traditionally male-dominated management roles such as general manager, chief engineer, chief security officer, and executive chef. Long-standing cultural and structural barriers persistently exclude women from these senior positions.

The literature highlights various forms of gender bias across industries, including the underrepresentation of women in upper management and entrenched masculine organisational cultures (Morgan and Pritchard, 2019). A prominent example of bias is the gender pay gap, which reflects an implicit devaluation of women’s leadership capabilities (Sampson, 2022).



Similarly, incidents of sexual harassment are prevalent, especially within hierarchical organisational systems that enable such behaviours through enforced masculine norms and a culture of tolerance toward retaliation against those who report them (Hersch, 2015). Such biases reflect and reinforce traditional power dynamics that position women as subordinate.

Although several studies have examined gender inequality in the workplace (Barkhuizen *et al.*, 2022; Moagi, 2023), gaps remain in understanding how socially constructed gender role expectations create and maintain bias within male-dominated managerial roles in hotels. In order to foster genuine inclusivity and equality within the hospitality sector, these gaps need to be addressed. Using Social Role Theory and the Social Construction of Gender as frameworks, this study examines how socially constructed gender role expectations create and maintain bias within male-dominated hotel management roles. The research questions are:

- RQ1. How do gender role expectations create distinct forms of bias in male-dominated hotel management roles, despite broader industry progress on gender equality?
- RQ2. In what ways do societal gender role expectations influence organisational, interpersonal, and individual dynamics to maintain male dominance in certain hotel management roles?
- RQ3. Which structural and practical interventions might effectively challenge gender role expectations in traditionally male-dominated hotel management roles?

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding and practical improvement of gender equality in hotel management by exploring women's experiences in male-dominated roles, showing how gender role expectations create and sustain barriers to advancement, and proposing potential pathways for meaningful organisational change.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social Construction of gender

The Social Construction of Gender (SCG) offers a fundamental framework for understanding gender-based inequalities within organisational hierarchies. This perspective examines how societies shape and reinforce gendered role expectations through cultural norms and institutional practices moving beyond biological differences (Mooney, 2020).

In organisational contexts, job roles become “inherently gendered”, with positions defined by masculine and feminine distinctions that create systemic inequalities in status and opportunities (Miller *et al.*, 2009). Metcalfe (2007) showed how socially constructed gender roles establish patriarchal power structures, often positioning men in authority while relegating women to subordinate roles.

Within the hotel industry, leadership traits such as assertiveness are frequently associated with masculinity, whereas caring roles are viewed as naturally feminine (Silva and Couto, 2023; Xiong *et al.*, 2022). This constructivist perspective reveals how the hospitality sector reflects broader societal norms by framing leadership roles as primarily masculine and therefore maintains systemic barriers to women's advancement.

The reversal of these social constructs and practices can help separate workers' gender from role expectations, potentially creating opportunities for both men and women to succeed without traditional gender limitations (Mastracci and Bowman, 2015).

2.2 Social role theory

The Social Role Theory (SRT) offers a framework for understanding how societal expectations shape behaviours and outcomes at various organisational levels. Eagly and Wood (2012) argue that historical labour divisions have established expectations for men and women, rooted in

traditional breadwinner and caregiver roles. These expectations are embedded in institutional norms and practices and influence career progression.

At the organisational level, societal norms impact structures and practices, such as recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluations. [McInerney and Koenig \(2011\)](#) show how organisational systems reinforce these expectations, while [Mooney \(2020\)](#) identifies distinct barriers in male-dominated roles within hospitality management, including general management and operations.

Interpersonally, SRT shows how gender expectations cause people in the workplace to interpret identical behaviours differently based on the performer's gender. Violating these expectations often leads to social consequences and reinforces adherence to gender norms.

At the individual level, societal expectations become internalised and shape personal ambitions and behaviours. [Eagly and Karau \(2002\)](#) explain how this internalisation leads to self-limiting behaviours, with individuals adjusting their aspirations to align with societal norms, thus contributing to women's underrepresentation in certain leadership roles.

SRT is particularly useful for analysing gender inequalities in hotel management, where role expectations function at societal, organisational, interpersonal, and individual levels. Its focus on the cascading nature of these expectations helps explain the persistence of why gender inequalities remain, even with organisational measures aimed at achieving equality.

2.3 Gender bias in organisations

Gender bias in the workplace appears in various interconnected ways. The ongoing gender pay gap remains a significant issue, with recent UK data revealing a 10.4% difference in earnings between men and women that cannot be fully attributed to career choices ([Timmins, 2021](#)). This financial disparity is accompanied by barriers to leadership advancement with McKinsey revealing the “broken rung” phenomenon, where for every 100 men promoted to management, only 86 women are promoted, creating a growing disadvantage at higher career levels. Consequently, women hold just 25.1% of executive roles in the S&P 500 companies ([Erkal et al., 2022](#)).

Sexual harassment represents another significant form of workplace bias, with research indicating that at least half of working women experience some form of harassment during their careers ([Cortina and Areguin, 2021](#)). This corresponds with broader systemic barriers created by “old boys network” cultures, where [Norberg and Johansson \(2021\)](#) demonstrate how women face exclusion ranging from derogatory remarks to professional marginalisation, particularly following maternity leave.

2.4 The hotel industry context

The unique characteristics and challenges of the hotel industry create an appropriate context for exploring how SRT and SCG are reflected in practice. [Peshave and Gupta \(2017\)](#) demonstrate how socially constructed gender roles become embedded within hospitality organisational structures through diverse expectations and assumptions.

The industry's paradoxical nature—perceived as inclusive to women yet maintaining strong gender segregation—demonstrates how gender roles become institutionalised. [Dashper \(2020\)](#) reveals how this institutionalisation varies across functions, with traditionally masculine-coded areas such as culinary management having stronger gender barriers. [Gebbs et al. \(2020\)](#) demonstrate how stereotyping reflects the cognitive processes through which these roles are constructed and maintained in hospitality.

Women's ongoing underrepresentation in senior management, despite their predominance at lower levels, is in line with sector-specific barriers identified by [Chun et al. \(2024\)](#) as impeding women's career progression. [Ali et al. \(2022\)](#) show how these constructed roles create specific barriers in administrative positions, while [Russen et al. \(2021\)](#) demonstrate how women disproportionately face stereotypes confining them to familial caretaking roles and creating work-life balance challenges.

Consistent with SRT's emphasis on historical labour divisions shaping workplace dynamics, [Fan et al. \(2021\)](#) note how women are denied opportunities based on gender rather than abilities. [Bishu and Headley \(2020\)](#) reveal how organisational norms and power dynamics in male-dominated environments continue to shape women's opportunities, demonstrating the enduring influence of socially constructed gender roles despite formal equality initiatives.

3. Methodology

The study employed an inductive approach to examine how gender role expectations create and maintain bias within male-dominated hotel management positions. The sample comprised 17 female senior managers across four operational domains: general management ($n = 4$), chief engineering ($n = 5$), chief security ($n = 5$), and executive chef roles ($n = 3$). The inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of two years' experience in their current management role and three years in prior non-management positions ([Table 1](#)).

Semi-structured interviews were used with an interview protocol informed by Social Role Theory and Social Construction of Gender. The protocol explored the participants' lived experiences and biases shaped by socially constructed gender roles and expectations across these particular male-dominated hotel organisational hierarchies.

The interviews were conducted between January and October 2024 via the Microsoft Teams videoconferencing platform, lasted between 45–60 min each, and were professionally transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

A thematic analysis approach was adopted following [Braun et al. \(2016\)](#) six-phase framework, moving from familiarisation through to theme refinement. Reliability and validity measures included independent coding by two researchers to establish intercoder reliability (Cohen's Kappa: 0.81), member checking of interpretive findings with participants, and maintaining a clear audit trail of analytical decisions.

4. Findings

The analysis of participants' experiences revealed persistent gender biases in male-dominated hotel management roles. These biases manifested through four key themes: subtle and covert,

Table 1. 17 female senior managers with position

Participant	Position	Workplace	Work length (current Position)
P1	Director of Operations (GMs)	UK	18 Years
P2	Head of Hospitality (GMs)	Malaysia	8 Years
P3	Managing Director (GMs)	UK	4 Years
P4	Executive Director F&B (GMs)	Singapore	3 Years
P5	SVP Global Luxe/Design and Technical Services (Chief Engineer)	France	6 Years
P6	Cluster Chief Engineer (Chief Engineer)	Doha	8 Years
P7	Chief Engineer	India	3 Years
P8	Chief Engineer	Dubai	3 Years
P9	Certified Energy Manager (Chief Engineer)	UK	13 years
P10	Safety and Security Manager (Chief Security)	UK	47 Years
P11	Director of Security (Chief Security)	France	3 Years
P12	Risk Management Manager (Chief Security)	India	6 Years
P13	Security Manager (Chief Security)	UK	16 Years
P14	Security Manager (Chief Security)	UK	46 Years
P15	Managing Director (Executive Pastry Chef)	UK	17 Years
P16	Executive Pastry Chef	UK	5 Years
P17	Executive Chef	UK	10 Years

Source(s): Table by authors

overt and direct, societal and organisational influences on gender role expectations, and individual internalisation of these expectations. It also uncovered instances of non-biased experiences, highlighting the potential for positive change.

4.1 Subtle and covert forms of bias

A prominent theme of subtle discriminatory practices was **biased evaluative practices**. Many participants reported being assessed through subjective personality-based criteria rather than objective performance measures. P11 noted, *“Women are often too much something and when it comes to men you don’t have that many comments on the way they behave . . .”*. This bias extends to assumptions about women’s career priorities, particularly regarding family responsibilities *“The attitude is always with ladies . . . they’ll meet a boy and want to get married and have kids . . . there’s always this business that they’re not going to stick it out.”* (P10).

The responses revealed persistent discriminatory practices linked to women’s **reproductive and age-related biology**. Participants described assumptions about childbearing affecting career progression, with career breaks for motherhood and childcare often conflicting with the masculine ideal of an always-available worker. Menopause emerged as a significant yet overlooked challenge for women in leadership roles. P3 highlighted this gap, stating, *“If you bring a woman in, it’s a journey . . . what happens when those women hit menopause?”* Similarly, P16 noted that menopause adds pressure for women in senior positions. These biological factors were seen to compound existing biases, with P3 observing, *“We are investing so much effort and resource and finance into bringing women up to leadership teams . . . if you really want to do it properly, we have to have a podcast or something challenging the menopause.”*

The **exclusion from informal professional networks** further compounds career barriers. Participants described systematic exclusion from crucial decision-making spaces, such as social gatherings: *“Decisions are made in these settings . . . and unfortunately, women are not included in these whiskey sessions and golf games.”* (P4). Such exclusion significantly impacts career progression opportunities, as noted by P11: *“When it comes to having a woman inside the network, it does not work. So, you’re not part of the whole system”*.

Stereotyping of women as **better suited for support roles** was another recurring theme. *“Go, go, organise the staff party. But just because I’m a girl . . . whereas the guy gets to do a new project”* (P4). Administrative tasks were disproportionately assigned to women, with one participant recalling, *“I was very upset that we were in a meeting . . . and guess who they asked to take the minutes”* (P4).

4.2 Overt and direct forms of bias

Explicit bias frequently manifests as direct **challenges to women’s authority and competence**. Participants reported explicit questioning of their technical abilities, with one engineer noting, *“I have often faced scepticism about my abilities, especially when it comes to handling complex mechanical systems or managing large teams”* (P7). Many women (P7, P12, P13, P17) described needing to prove their competence repeatedly, facing questioning from male colleagues during meetings.

Sexual harassment emerged as a persistent issue, with participants describing it as an unfortunately normalised experience. P15 highlighted the pervasive nature of gender-based harassment: *“Male chefs can be a bit sexual at times . . .”*. Participants (P4, P6, P12, P15) noted that harassment could originate from various sources, including customers, managers, and employees, and occurred across hierarchical levels (P6). The intimidating macho culture in kitchens created additional challenges, with women forced to endure aggressive communication that impeded professional relationship-building and integration (P15, P17).

Direct **discrimination in hiring processes** emerged as another significant form of overt bias. In smaller companies, explicit preferences for male candidates were evident, with open

concerns about women's family plans during recruitment. P15 candidly admitted, *"If I'm to be completely truthful with you, I would tend to want to employ somebody who is over the age of childbearing age ... I haven't got a consistent worker that I need in order to get my work done"*. The analysis further revealed instances where women's professional contributions were systematically undermined, with their ideas only gaining credibility when repeated by male colleagues (P10).

4.3 Societal and organisational influences on gender role expectations

The analysis then moved to examine how societal gender role expectations influence organisational, interpersonal, and individual dynamics to maintain male dominance in hotel management roles, addressing the second research question concerning the multi-level manifestation of gender-based constraints.

4.3.1 Structural and systemic manifestations. Societal expectations embedded within organisational structures present significant barriers to women's career advancement, particularly due to the **scarcity of female leadership representation**. As P14 noted, *"Throughout my career, there haven't been women in leadership positions within hotel security. This made it difficult to find guidance, support, and inspiration."* The lack of female role models reinforces gendered career trajectories and contributes to wage disparities of 15–20% (P4, P10, P11, P13). One respondent stated, *"We don't see any role models up there. Hence, we say, OK, it's impossible if there's no role model"* (P4).

These structural inequalities reflect broader societal assumptions about women's work value and are compounded by **limited institutional support for family responsibilities**, further hindering career progression. One participant highlighted, *"Policy makes it very difficult for women because of the childcare issues ... we haven't yet overcome"* (P3).

Organisational norms reinforce gender segregation by **channelling women into "feminine" roles** while limiting their access to leadership positions. P4 noted, *"Women should go to HR or front office, housekeeping or sales and marketing ... more girly kinda roles."* These practices are perpetuated through benchmarking standards that align leadership traits with traditionally masculine characteristics. *"Our industry just assumes that a security chief needs to have a commanding presence—code for being a man"* (P13).

Participants expressed **resistance to organisational narratives** about women needing to be "more daring". P11 articulated this frustration: *"I'm getting mad with people wanting to give incentive to women and I'm getting really fed up now into all these women support meetings saying you should dare ... I think we've been daring for millions of years"*. Such initiatives were viewed as patronising and ultimately reinforcing the gender stereotypes they are supposed to challenge, indicating that the fundamental issue lies in structural barriers rather than women's risk-taking capabilities.

4.3.2 Interpersonal dynamics. The **"old boys' network"** emerged as a powerful mechanism for maintaining male dominance through informal relationships and limiting women's access to opportunities. *"It's quite straightforward between men to work as a network and to help themselves ... they're giving them each other some advice"* (P11). This exclusionary culture leaves women feeling isolated and uncertain about their professional standing. Interestingly, **territorial behaviour** extended beyond male colleagues, with female leaders also displaying complex interpersonal dynamics. P15 observed, *"I would say the women were more unkind than the men ... it always seemed more personal"*, noting that in male-dominated management roles, established female leaders sometimes exhibited hostility towards emerging talent. *"It's almost like for the females, it's like you don't step on my toes. This is kind of my domain"* (P15).

Some participants experienced persistent **pressure to conform to traditional gender roles**, requiring a delicate balance between assertiveness and avoiding being labelled "difficult". As P7 noted, *"I have had to navigate a fine line between being assertive enough to be taken seriously and not being labelled as 'difficult' - a challenge my male colleagues rarely face."*

Subtle microaggressions and gendered power dynamics were prevalent, with women experiencing systematic undermining through dismissive comments, meeting interruptions, and strategic exclusion from critical decisions. P14 highlighted this experience: *“There were a few individuals who seemed resistant to my presence and my ideas, and who made it clear that they didn’t see me as an equal partner at the table.”*

Interpersonal resistance manifested through **direct challenges to women’s authority**, with male contractors and team members frequently bypassing female managers to communicate with male subordinates. P7 described this challenge: *“I was overseeing a team of mostly male contractors, and I realised many were bypassing me to talk to my male deputy. I had to confront this head-on in a project meeting.”*

4.3.3 *Individual internalisation of gender role expectations.* Women internalise societal expectations, influencing their career behaviours through **self-doubt and hesitancy**. *“Maybe this is a very feminine characteristic—that you don’t trust yourself enough, that you ask for the under level”* (P5). Women’s **reluctance to pursue promotions** emerges as a key manifestation of these internalised gender role expectations, with one participant noting, *“Women don’t really ask for promotion usually, it just happens, at least in my case”* (P5). Women tend to put more pressure on themselves to prove their abilities, often doubting their capacity to handle higher positions. **Salary negotiations** further reveal these internalised barriers, as P4 observed: *“200 years for us to bridge that gap and it is because we do not ask . . . if we ask for salary, what if I am being difficult?”* This reluctance contributes to persistent pay disparities across organisations (P4, P11).

Balancing work and family responsibilities is another challenge women face, reinforcing career hesitancy. *“Women have two jobs, right? They finish their job here, they go home and they have another job waiting for them, be it children or elderly parents”* (P4). The fear of being perceived as less committed discourages women from discussing work-family conflicts, leading to further career stagnation (P2, P3, P17).

4.4 Non-biased experiences

Despite these challenges, several participants (P1, P2, P5, P6) reported positive experiences where gender did not influence their career progression. *“I don’t believe my gender has ever had anything to do with whether I got a job or I didn’t”* (P1). **Fair treatment and equitable compensation practices** were also highlighted, with participants noting, *“Everybody is paid the same regardless of gender”* (P1).

Supportive organisational cultures can mitigate gender biases by promoting inclusivity and equal opportunities. *“Every time I work with one of the managers who will be the supportive, supportive point of view, he will not look at it like you are a lady”* (P6). Companies that actively foster inclusivity have seen greater female participation in traditionally male-dominated areas such as engineering. *“The industry is full of men, engineers, and again because we’re trying to be so much more inclusive, I think now there are larger opportunities”* (P5).

Progressive policies supporting **work-life balance without gender bias** were also identified. *“If a male member of the team also came and asked for response time for children, we would absolutely treat that in the same way as we would do for females”* (P1). These examples suggest that targeted organisational interventions can challenge entrenched gender role expectations.

This analysis shows that societal gender role expectations cascade through organisational structures and interpersonal relationships to shape women’s experiences and behaviours in male-dominated hotel management roles. Although many challenges still exist, progressive organisational cultures disrupt traditional biases and create pathways for greater gender inclusivity and equity.

5. Discussion

These findings illustrate the complex processes through which gender role expectations create and maintain bias in traditionally male-dominated hotel management roles, as framed by

Eagly and Wood's (2012) social role theory (RQ1). As shown in Figure 1, a “cascading effect” is revealed across societal, organisational, interpersonal, and individual levels. Societal-level biases continue to shape perceptions of women's suitability for leadership in certain roles, associating positions such as hotel general manager, chief engineer, chief security officer and executive chef with traditionally masculine traits (Morgan and Pritchard, 2019; Dashper, 2020). This expectation perpetuates barriers to entry and progression for women, as organisational structures align with these entrenched norms through recruitment and promotion processes (Peshave and Gupta, 2017). The study's findings demonstrate that while explicit barriers may have diminished, subtle evaluative biases and informal networking practices continue to sustain male dominance in these roles.

In addressing RQ2, the cascading effect of bias is seen through the stages of role expectations, role enactment, and role internalisation. Societal norms establish leadership as masculine, which are enacted within organisational structures through biased recruitment and promotion processes. Individuals internalise these roles, shaping their self-perception and career aspirations, further entrenching male dominance in leadership positions.

At the organisational level, recruitment and promotion mechanisms often reflect implicit biases favouring men, reinforcing the findings of Mooney (2020) and Silva and Couto (2023). Informal practices, such as exclusion from key decision-making networks and the persistence of the “old boys’ network” (Norberg and Johansson, 2021), further disadvantage women.

At the interpersonal level, the study identified both overt and covert biases, including microaggressions and exclusion from influential social settings, confirming broader literature on workplace bias (Cortina and Arguin, 2021). The findings also show the internalisation of gender norms at the individual level, with women often experiencing self-doubt and hesitancy in pursuing promotions (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

Structural and practical interventions can effectively challenge gender role expectations in male-dominated hotel management roles (RQ3). Participants in organisations with mentorship programmes, transparent promotion criteria, and leadership training for women reported more equitable experiences. Visible female role models and sponsorship initiatives can help challenge internalised gender stereotypes and provide aspiring female leaders with critical guidance and support. Policy reforms supporting work-life balance can help reduce the negative effects of role expectations and enactment. The effectiveness of these interventions, however, depends on managing deeper cultural norms and sustained commitment at all levels of the organisation (Mastracci and Bowman, 2015).

The findings underscore the need for multi-level interventions addressing both formal and informal barriers to gender equality in male-dominated hotel management roles.

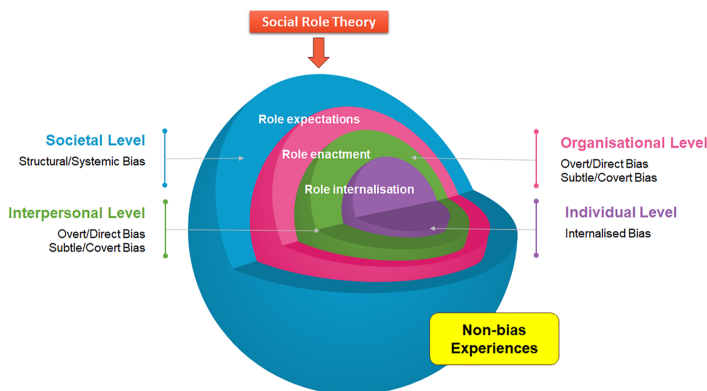


Figure 1. A multi-level framework of gender role bias in male-dominated hotel management roles (Figure by Authors)

These interventions can be guided by a framework that highlights the cascading nature of gender bias, demonstrating the interaction between structural barriers, cultural norms, and individual perceptions through role expectation, enactment, and internalisation processes. Targeted interventions can be developed to address bias at all levels—societal, organisational, interpersonal, and individual—to foster genuine gender equity in hotel management.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how socially constructed gender role expectations create and sustain bias in male-dominated hotel management roles. It revealed that gender biases manifest through subtle and overt forms, influenced by societal norms and organisational practices (RQ1). These biases are maintained by societal expectations, exclusion from key networks, and internalised gender roles (RQ2). Structural interventions, such as mentorship, transparent promotion paths, and work-life balance policies, are needed to address these biases and foster true gender equality (RQ3).

The study also proposes a multi-level model illustrating the cascading effect of gender role expectations across organisational hierarchies and the interaction between societal norms and workplace practices shaping women's career trajectories in male-dominated hotel management roles. This model can guide interventions to reduce gender bias at societal, organisational, interpersonal, and individual levels.

The findings highlight the overlooked impact of menopause on career advancement, with participants noting that organisational structures and workplace cultures fail to address the physiological and psychological challenges of this life stage. The study also revealed that female jealousy and territoriality serve as barriers to advancement, challenging the belief that exclusionary practices in leadership are solely driven by men. Moreover, it uncovered the negative effect of organisational narratives encouraging women to “dare” and engage in “women's support” initiatives, which were seen by female leaders as reinforcing gender stereotypes rather than empowering them.

The study highlights the need for practitioners to address both structural and cultural barriers to gender equality through targeted interventions, such as mentorship programmes, transparent promotion pathways, and workplace policies that consider life-course challenges like menopause. However, the study's qualitative nature and small sample size limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should explore these dynamics in broader geographical contexts and assess the long-term effectiveness of interventions promoting gender-inclusive leadership in the hospitality sector.

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