

Women managers in the tourism sector and the glass ceiling: Attitudes and expectations

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The academic research on women as managers in the tourism sector has been traditionally focused on the hotel industry and most of it draws conclusions on women's underrepresentation on boards. The purpose of the present paper is to analyse success cases of women managers in the tourism sector in order to know their attitudes and expectations about the general position of women in the sector and their perception about the existence of the phenomenon known as 'glass ceiling'.

Previous research shows a much lower percentage of board seats held by women than by men in hotel companies. Ramos, Rey-Maqueira and Turgores (2002) in their work, based on the human capital theories (Becker, 1975; Mincer, 1974; Mincer & Polacheck, 1974; Spence 1973), conclude that the gender wage differentials cannot be explained just on the basis of the individual and labour characteristics, but there is gender discrimination.

The research conducted by Marco (2012) confirms, as the research carried out previously, that work in the hospitality industry is mostly carried out by women since it is mainly considered domestic work (Bolles, 1997; Faulkenberry, Coggeshall, Backman & Backman, 2000; Lindsay & McQuaid, 2004). Thus, the hotel industry has traditionally been accused of perpetuating the traditional roles associated with women, since women in hotels have occupied the lowest and most manual positions within the organization (Sinclair, 1997; Hunter & Watson, 2006). However, in recent years women have come to exercise more executive positions (Marco, 2012). Despite this increase, the percentage of women in management positions is still lower than the percentage of men. Companies should take advantage of the different skills and abilities of men and women, which can result in overall benefits (Kochan et al., 2003; Merilainen, Tienari, Katila & Benschop, 2009). In line with the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative methodology was adopted. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with women managers at the tourism sector. In order to enrich and validate the data, interviews were conducted with practitioners involved with the tourism sector and with the gender field. These in-depth open interviews

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included hotel directors (n=4), hotel chains directors (n=4), entrepreneurs (n=5) and managers at other tourism organizations and academic institutions (n=2). For the optimal organization and follow-up of the interviews, an initial script was proposed considering the open nature of the interviews. In order to unify the criteria between the interviewers, several working meeting were executed.

The phase following the interviews was the transcription. The evaluation of the results was carried out by two types of analyses:

- i) Firstly, the method of content analysis was applied by thematic grouping (analysis 1): from this analysis, it was possible to evaluate the proposed objective including specific paragraphs of the discussion boards and literature review;
- ii) Secondly, the basic questions that were identified at the beginning were grouped in order to carry out a specific analysis of each question (analysis 2).

The analysis revealed several findings, some of which relate to the main factors that limit the promotion of women to management positions, while others help to understand the situation of women in the tourism sector and their perception about the existence of the glass ceiling. The perception of women about the existence of the glass ceiling is contradictory. Most of the women interviewed confirmed that they have not experienced this 'glass ceiling', but they know that it exists. Nonetheless, many recognize that at peak times they have faced problems that have not been raised to their male colleagues. The causes of this 'glass ceiling' are many numerous and varied; the family roles and the patriarchal structures have an important influence because they involve a cultural and anthropological issue with a direct effect on the way on how societies and professional roles are structured for women.

On the other hand, for the women interviewed, the support of their family members has been crucial to gain access to positions of greater responsibility. They emphasize the importance of taking specific training and creating 'women networks' that support each other. Also, they focus on the relevance of mentoring, planning and above all, to be clear about the personal and professional objectives.

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