

Women sitting on the **glass roof**: Critical perspectives on the **tourism sector**

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In most countries, women account for the majority of the tourism labour force, but they are under-represented in top-management positions, which are mostly filled by men. This is a tendency verified in many other economic sectors and across different regions of the globe, including Portugal.

The tourism sector, namely at the management level, presents specific characteristics that work as an impediment to women's career progression. Long working hours, demands for geographical mobility, and a persisting male corporate culture are some of the most important pillars that support the 'glass ceiling' that hinders women's careers in the sector. Organisations are influenced by constant gendering processes, i.e. formal and informal practices and policies that seem to be 'gender-neutral' at the surface level, but that affect men and women differently (Hearn, 2000). Thus, gender inequality still prevails in organisational practices, despite a dominant perception of equality (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998).

Wahl (1992(2003)) claimed that many studies approaching women in management focus on the individual level (i.e. women's characteristics, background or level of 'femininity'), instead of addressing organisational and societal structures. These studies fail to acknowledge the wider conditions that women face in the organisation and in the society.

Wahl (2001) noted that when women are in a minority position, they are described as lacking leadership qualities. However, when there are more women in the management group, women's competences are reinforced as legitimate. Hearn (2010) also underlined the importance of having a critical mass of women to break the cycle of homosocial reproduction and cultural cloning. This way, the masculine model of lifetime, full-time and continuous employment, which is still central and assumed as the norm, can be challenged (Collinson & Hearn, 2005).

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This article focuses on female managers in hotels and travel agencies in Portugal. It aims to analyse how these women perceive the influence of organisational and sectorial gendering processes on their careers, as well as on other women's careers in the field. Therefore, six in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with female managers in hotels and travel agencies in Portugal.

All the women interviewed fill top level positions or are directors of their own businesses. They underline the importance of several factors for their career progression, not only at the individual level (e.g. being hard-working, adventurous, having formal education, ...), but also at the situational and organisational levels. When asked to suggest strategies or policies to support women's career progression, the interviewees did not mention any structural solutions or even a more equal split of tasks at home between spouses. They mostly focused on individual-level solutions, e.g. improving time management or hiring a housekeeper, and they also mentioned some solutions that could be implemented at the organisational level (e.g. childcare provision).

When approached about whether they had ever felt discriminated against at work on the basis of gender, most interviewees denied it. However, as the interview unfolded, they recognised situations of unequal treatment, disrespect, lack of visibility and credibility. The higher the position reached, the greater the awareness of gender inequalities. Therefore, it is here argued that the concept of 'glass ceiling' is problematic. This metaphor only focuses on the situation of women before breaking the glass ceiling, and leaves the situation of women 'above the glass ceiling' unquestioned. In fact, gender does not seem to stop being an issue even when women have reached the top. Besides, some of the interviewees have chosen a different path in their careers and became directors and owners of their own businesses. Maybe they did not 'break' the glass ceiling in male-dominated organisations, but found an alternative way towards influence and power?

Moreover, having a family has different consequences for male and female leaders. Male managers' family life is not visible for the organisation, while in the case of women their family situation seems to be crucial for their career progression – not only their 'real', but also their 'potential' family situation, since they 'might' get pregnant and leave. Thus, it is not surprising that two of the interviewees admitted that did not have children because of their career ambition.

Women also highlighted that their own sexuality weakened them as managers and as 'power sources'. The opposite is true in the case of men. One of the interviewees mentions that in the beginning she was often taken as the 'secretary mistress'. Some of the interviewees have also observed situations of sexual harassment and even rape.

While the women interviewed address criticisms to gendered structures in the tourism sector, some of them combine this with an essentialist view of women ('having a sixth sense'; 'being too emotional'; 'preferring to go home instead of networking'). Here Wahl's (1998) question should be asked: are female managers 'essentially' different or are they different because they face different 'conditions' in their workplace? Do they always prefer to go home instead of networking, or are they under pressure to fulfil in the first place their roles as mothers? Is it women's preference, or are they discouraged by the practices, prejudices and stereotypes at the workplace and in the society?

One of the positive aspects of the tourism sector is that its workforce tends to be more open-minded, due to their contact with different cultures. The interviewees also mention positive consequences for the organisational culture of having a majority of women in the workforce (even if these are mostly concentrated at the operational level): no sexual harassment; no coarse language; more laughter and 'women's conversations'; and overall a different ambience.

In this study only organisations led by women were analysed. This is not the norm in the tourism field. Most organisations are led by men and they are likely to have different characteristics. According to Wahl (2001) the gender distribution of the management group impacts gender relations. In fact, the only interviewee that works for a hotel chain that has a majority of male hotel directors is the one who notices a greater prevalence of male values in the organisational culture. The organisations of the interviewees seem to be challenging to some extent the masculine values of the apparently 'gender-neutral' organisational model. However, male culture prevails outside these organisations and in the tourism sector. Yet, such gendered processes are not 'monolithic,' and their reproduction can be resisted and challenged (Hearn & Parkin, 2003).

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