



## WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT PROSPECTS FOR WOMEN IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide an insight into the factors that affect workplace experiences and opportunities for career progression of female employees in the Indian hotel industry. It provides a much-needed perspective on the work-life of women in the Indian hotel industry. The study had two phases: a systematic literature review was conducted for the first phase and the second phase included conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews. The findings of this study reveal that working in the hotel industry remains an ultimate choice for women where they have the opportunities to connect and socialize, enjoy and learn amidst the various challenges and barriers faced. The issue of gender is irrelevant for the women who set their standards and want to achieve their goals. Women show resilience and work against all odds with self-motivation to reach these goals.

### KEYWORDS

experience at work, career advancement, women employees, women leaders, hotels

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Blayney and Blotnicky (2017), female representation on the boards of leading hotel organizations was around 20%, whilst representation was even lower on the boards of international hotel associations. Evidence suggests an under-representation of women in senior management positions in the majority of industries (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2017; Cook & Glass, 2014; Fan, 2011; Fischer, 2013; Repetti, 2020; Russen et al., 2021) is because of

various issues like matrimony, parenthood, inequity and stereotyping (Kara et al., 2018). The job roles of women employees are known to be of lesser value as compared to male employees (Chen et al., 2018), with male and female employees having different experiences in roles with the same job descriptions (Soni, 2017). Female hospitality employees show a higher emotional quotient with a more proactive approach towards fulfilling hotel guests' expectations which improves guest satisfaction and retention (Kim & Agrusa, 2011).

There is a consistent entry of women into the hospitality industry in India and a moderate rise (Patwardhan et al., 2016). Nevertheless, hotels face challenges in retaining their female employees due to longer and odd working hours and work-life balance issues (Karatepe & Uludag, 2008; Mooney & Ryan, 2009). The retention strategies and advancement programs executed by hotels have been yielding unsatisfactory outcomes, leading to an outflow of talented women employees (Gröschl & Arcot, 2014), and consequently making it imperative to examine the work-experiences and career advancement prospects for female employees.

The extant literature highlights the career development of female hotel employees in Asian countries (Li & Wang Leung, 2001; Ng & Pine, 2003) and in the countries of the west (Brownell, 1994; Calinaud et al., 2021). In view of the progress made by the Indian hotel industry and its contribution towards the social and fiscal development of the nation (Hole, 2019), it is important to examine the career advancement prospects for women in Indian hotels. This research highlights some notable career life realities faced by women working in Indian five-star hotels. The objective of this research is to provide an insight into the factors that affect workplace experiences and opportunities for career progression of female employees in the Indian hotel industry.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. INDIA'S UNIQUENESS IN TERMS WOMEN'S STATUS

In 200 BC, Manu, an Indian writer wrote, "be a young girl, be a young woman, or even be an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her house" (Buhler, 1964, p. 195). Islam has also influenced Indian culture, causing the practice of purdah, or female seclusion, which leads to a low female employment rate (Jayachandran, 2020). Indian women managers have made substantial progress in a brief span of time (Budhwar et al., 2005), but India's deeply rooted traditional gender roles and cultural norms can influence work culture affecting women's career choices and work-life balance. Interestingly, India has progressive legislation to address gender discrimination and workplace harassment. *The sexual harassment of women at workplace (prevention, prohibition and redressal): Act, 2013*, provides a legal framework for addressing sexual harassment (Government of India. Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2015). However, implementation and cognizance can vary, and some gaps remain. The Indian government's work reservation policies for women, such as in local governance (Panchayati Raj), to promote their

participation in decision-making roles are unique to India and can influence the landscape of women in leadership positions. India has various women-only initiatives, women's self-help groups, microfinance programs and entrepreneurship support programs, designed to empower women economically. These initiatives are not as prevalent in many other countries. India relatively has a more extended maternity leave (26 weeks) (Government of India. Ministry of Law and Justice [Legislative Department], 2017) as compared to some countries supporting women in maintaining equilibrium between employment and domestic responsibilities. India also has extensive cultural and regional diversity (Muni, 1996) which means that work culture for women can differ significantly between different parts of the country (Gulati, 1975).

### 2.2. EXPERIENCES AT WORK

Women hotel employees have a myriad of work-related experiences. Casado-Díaz et al. (2022) found remuneration inequality among men and women in the hospitality sector where women worked for low-wage firms (Vargas-Jiménez et al., 2020) and were pushed to lesser-skilled jobs with fewer decision-making tasks. Wage inequality is clearly visible for women at the managerial level in hotels, despite their level of education and commitment towards the job (Sparrowe & Iverson, 1999). According to Tindell and Padavic (2022), low-wage women employees from service industries also face 'incivilities' from supervisors, customers, and co-workers respectively. The root cause of the wage inequality predominant in the hospitality sector is gender discrimination (Campos-Soria et al., 2015) and the disproportionate presence of women in inferior job roles (Campos-Soria et al., 2009).

Supportive supervisors towards women hospitality employees assist in improving their work experiences and loyalty towards the organisation (Jolly et al., 2022). The attitudes of hotel managers and busy working schedules deepen the stresses faced at the workplace (Mohamed, 2015) with women receiving less support from their supervisors than men may weaken their sense of belonging, eventually wearing away their work engagement (Ling Suan & Mohd Nasurdin, 2016). Handling stress at work by female employees requires managerial support (Tsaur & Tang, 2012) and close communication (Kim et al., 2009).

A common phenomenon experienced across all countries is the glass ceiling leading to burnout; burnout being exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficacy (Min & Yoon, 2021). Female employees found it complicated to pinpoint the presence of the glass ceiling or the presence of pay differences, behind the facade of a good work culture and career progression (Mwashita et al., 2020). The barriers of the glass ceiling

perceived by women differed based on their career phase (Mooney & Ryan, 2009).

Networking among hotel employees as a social norm favours men's promotions, barring numerous females (Ryan & Mooney, 2020). These networking groups, also known as the 'old boys' network' provide guidance and recommendation for career advancement (Bac & Inci, 2010; Ibarra et al., 2013; Patwardhan & Venkatachalam, 2012). Sexual harassment in the workplace poses another major challenge faced by women employees working in the hospitality sector (Hoel, 2002; Poulston, 2008; Weber et al., 2002), leading to high staff turnover and reduced job satisfaction (Chan et al., 2008) and ultimately causing extensive psychological distress and low self-worth (Cho, 2002). Sexually-harassed females bear direct financial losses and diminished professional opportunities (Theocharous & Philaretou, 2009). Incivility towards female employees also spreads negativity amongst other female workers resulting in feelings of resentment and dejection (Miner & Eischeid, 2012).

### 2.3. EFFECT OF WORK CONDITIONS ON WOMEN

The work environment of a hotel is a key motivational factor (Kaliappen & Hilman, 2014; Kara et al., 2012) with a lack of workplace flexibility negatively affecting the work-life balance, leading to a higher turnover ratio (Blomme et al., 2010). On the contrary, self-accomplishment is a key driver of motivation (Kara et al., 2012) and jobs that are as enriched as those of their male counterparts make the women feel empowered and motivated (Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Empowerment (Ruiz-Palomo et al., 2020) and autonomy (Allan, 2019) facilitate job enrichment and satisfaction and enable women to deal with workplace discrimination (Baum, 2013).

Women tend to gain work experience at a decelerated pace which is conventionally episodic because of life changing events like matrimony, pregnancy and child rearing (Blau & Kahn, 2006; Polachek, 2006). The early stages of maternity leave, company policies about leave length, remuneration and eligibility criteria impact the experiences of working women (Ma et al., 2021). Women hospitality employees were more susceptible to "work interfering with family" than to "family interfering with work", and their chances of resigning from work were greater when work interfered with family (Yang & Peng, 2018). Psychological violence and emotional abuse perpetrated by hotel managers (manager mobbing behaviour) is found to be inversely proportional to quality of life at work and general quality of life (Kara et al., 2012; Kara et al., 2018). Gen-Y employees are more satisfied at work when being appreciated (Muskat & Reitsamer, 2020) with women easily being satisfied at work due to their lower expectations (Clark, 1997; Huang & Gamble, 2015).

### 2.4. CAREER ADVANCEMENT PROSPECTS

Career advancement is associated with the clarity of growth prospects, empowerment, the ability to take greater responsibilities, and the number of promotions acquired (Calinaud et al., 2021; Gong & Chang, 2008). Millennial women desire fairness in career advancement with equal growth opportunities (Maxwell et al., 2010) and more avenues are being created by leading organizations for women in management roles (Madera, 2015). To reach a leadership role, female managers have to conquer gender-bias (Ma et al., 2021; Woodhams et al., 2015) and work harder than men (Dinakaran, 2016). Hotel organizations' learning and development opportunities have the most effect on the career advancement of women, giving them the confidence to seek promotions (Brites da Silva et al., 2021). Career rewards and career development are two expectations of which career rewards was found to affect advancement more (Liu et al., 2021). The presence of women leaders is reassuring for female employees in entry level positions who see that they have a fair chance of career advancement (Ali et al., 2022).

### 2.5. WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

The presence of women in leadership roles is correlated to a larger number of women at entry level (Ali et al., 2022). Concerning the role congruity theory of prejudice regarding female leaders recommended by Eagly and Karau (2002), leadership roles are difficult for women because of the prejudice that women are less successful leaders, and the fact that their achievements and output are therefore assessed less advantageously (Koburtay & Syed, 2019, 2020). Hospitality businesses must aim at employing and retaining women leaders until gender parity is achieved, while managing criticism from male employees (Ali et al., 2022). On studying data from 2006 to 2018, Repetti (2020) found an increase in women's representation at senior levels within hospitality, even though it was still on the lower side, being only 13.22% from the sample considered.

The main obstacle to women's advancement to senior management was the struggle in managing employment with domestic responsibilities. Thus, legislation to provide childcare can help to diminish vertical segregation (Doherty & Manfredi, 2001; Doherty, 2004). In the Indian context, the reasons for less women in leadership roles were domestic duties, choosing not to take leadership responsibility, and the extended work hours (Dinakaran, 2016). Gupta (2015) also highlighted the under-representation of women at higher positions in the Indian hotel sector. The efficient management of human resources practices together with timely recognition and rewards for generating supportive work practices are vital for work engagement (Burke

et al., 2009). Koburtay and Syed (2019) suggested that following gender equality programs and conducting leadership development would increase the numbers and efficiency of women leaders.

## 2.6. ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Xiong et al. (2022) suggested that there is a need for leadership and management to have an androgynous approach in the hospitality industry. Leadership support and motivation towards employees to innovate and to bring about positive changes in the organization enhances their performance (Kusumah et al., 2021).

Women in management roles can develop a robust bond with their subordinates leading to lower turnover rates. This is extremely important for the hospitality sector due to the 'perishable' nature of the industry (Chen et al., 2014). Women hotel employees believe that female managers will create a favourable work environment with better training opportunities (Pinar et al., 2013).

## 2.7. SYNTHESIS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

India's traditional gender roles still impact women's career choices, with legislation targeting discrimination and job reservation policies affecting women's experiences. The hotel industry is particularly challenging for women due to inequality in remuneration, gender discrimination and overrepresentation in lower-tier positions. Supportive supervisors improve work experiences, but stresses like the glass ceiling and male-dominated networking hinder career progression. The work environment affects motivation and job satisfaction, with Gen-Y employees more satisfied with appreciation. Career advancement for women in the hotel industry is influenced by growth prospects, empowerment, increased responsibilities, and promotions. To address this, effective human resource practices, recognition and leadership development programs are recommended. Inclusive leadership styles can reduce turnover rates, create a favourable work environment, and improve training opportunities. After analysing the literature, the need for conducting a qualitative study in the Indian context on the following research gaps was identified:

1. The experiences of women hotel employees at different stages (entry, mid-management, and senior management).
2. The effect of work conditions on women hotel employees.
3. The career advancement prospects for women hotel employees.
4. Leadership with female representation in hotels.
5. The ambition of women hotel employees to reach top leadership roles.

6. The role of leadership in career advancement and motivation (or demotivation) of women employees.
7. Challenges faced by women hotel employees and their coping mechanisms.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The current study used a systematic review of literature as a first stage, to present the initial framework and to collect and collate the findings of all related research on workplace experiences and career advancement prospects for women in the hotel industry. For the second stage the objective was fully accomplished through interviewing women employees working in five-star hotels in India. Fink (2010, p. 3) defined the systematic review of literature as a "systematic, explicit and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars and practitioners". Following Fink's (2010) sequence, the validity of the review's output was assessed, and the articles were re-examined with a timeframe between reviews to assure their reliability (Okoli & Schabram, 2010). A careful documentation of the search procedure was maintained for consistency and reliability throughout the systematic literature review process.

This review has been illustrated in Figure 1. Initially, the goals were accurately devised followed by detailing the protocols and the context literature was examined in the next step. In this study, the authors searched articles and reviewed theoretical frameworks from key academic journals with a peer review process to engender a proficient knowledge base (Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruís-Navarro, 2004). Only works which were conducted on women in hotels and hospitality and included women employees' experiences and career advancement were examined. This ensured that the works which met the criteria were accessed by defining and incorporating review parameters. All the research articles related to women employees in hotels were extricated from Scopus and Web of Science databases. The broad terms used during the initial search of the chosen database, with no limitation to the year of publication in English, were 'hotel' OR 'hospitality' OR 'catering' OR 'restaurants' AND 'women' OR 'female' AND 'employees' AND limited to subject area 'business' OR 'social science' OR 'multidisciplinary'. This search identified 286 sources. A scrutiny of the articles was conducted in a series of stages to identify the most apt suited to answering the research questions of the study. The final step incorporated the screening of the literature for inclusion. Thus, the omission of irrelevant research works, and the selection of the relevant articles was done to elicit the study objectives resulted in 127 sources.

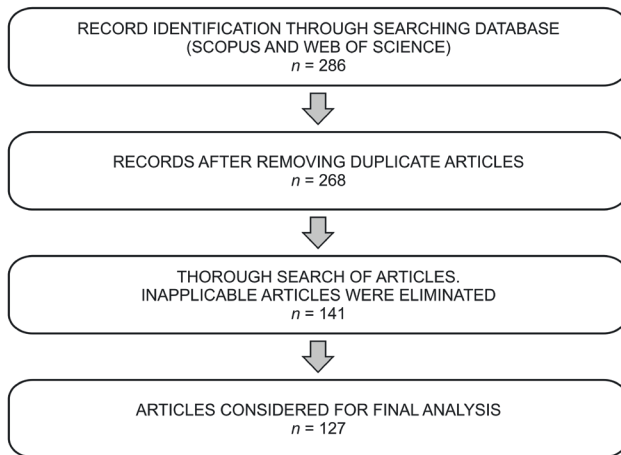


Figure 1. Selection process of research studies

Source: authors' own

### 3.1. DATA COLLECTION

The next phase included conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews as these allow investigation of divergent experiences, views and perceptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Five-star Indian hotels have worked towards identifying the different needs of female managers (Patwardhan et al., 2016), and there is a larger number of women working in five-star hotels in India at various levels as compared to lower hotels (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2011; Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India, 2017). Also, Kara et al. (2012) explains that employees of five-star hotels are better. Therefore, the researchers considered respondents from five-star hotels of India for investigation. Extant literature also shows that a qualitative approach is mainly considered in the western context, therefore it was important to learn about the experiences and expectations of women from an Indian perspective. India is a young nation with 66% of the population under thirty-five years old (Y20 India, 2023). With such a high proportion, it is important to study and analyse the career advancement prospects for women separately. Since this study is concerned with the thoughts, experiences and emotions of participants yielding subjective data, a qualitative approach was found to be more suitable. Research has found that "semi-structured interview is a widely accepted method due to its flexibility, fairly balanced structure as well as the quality of the data obtained" (Abaeian et al., 2014, p. 426). The interview questions were based on the literature available on experiences at work, career advancement prospects for women employees, impact of work conditions, women leadership representation, overcoming workplace challenges, and role of leadership in career advancement.

### 3.2. PARTICIPANTS

Sixty seven women hotel employees of five-star hotels of India were approached using a non-probability judgmental sampling method based on definite qualities (Zikmund, 2003). Malhotra and Birks (2007) stated that judgmental sampling requires the researchers to select elements from the population of interest. Due to their busy work schedules and other personal reasons (not disclosed) thirteen women employees working in five-star hotels of India participated, at which point the information gathered had touched saturation point. Conducting twelve interviews for analysing emergent themes in a qualitative study is sufficient (Guest et al., 2006). The interviews were conducted in English and lasted from 25 minutes to an hour conducted by the authors from January 2023 to March 2023. Initially, ten interviews were conducted with female hotel employees working in India and a preliminary analysis of the notes from the semi-structured interviews revealed that data saturation had been reached. However, the authors conducted three additional interviews. Francis et al. (2010) confirmed that a 10 + 3 criterion for conducting interviews is an effective method to identify new themes and achieve data saturation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim within a period of three days. The transcript of each interview was also validated by the participants. Ethical considerations were given paramount significance at all times with the participants being given a code to protect confidentiality and were informed that the responses obtained would be used for academic research only. Participants were given a consent form and were informed that they were free to withdraw from the assignment at any time. The interviews were recorded after obtaining permission from the participants. Table 1 represents a summary of the participant profiles.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Participant code	Designation	Experience (in years)
P 1	Cluster communication agent	1
P 2	Management trainee	2
P 3	Management executive	3
P 4	Duty manager	3
P 5	Assistant manager	9
P 6	Sous chef	10
P 7	Executive assistant	11
P 8	Housekeeping manager	13
P 9	Senior manager	15

Table 1 (cont.)

Participant code	Designation	Experience (in years)
P 10	Director – guest services	15
P 11	General manager	18
P 12	Sales executive	23
P 13	VP – learning and development	30

Source: authors.

#### 4. FINDINGS

##### 4.1. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis along with the generation of codes was based on the transcripts of interviews and analysed using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) NVivo (Release 1.0). The researchers checked for equivalence and differences while forming codes (Creswell, 2007) and checked the coded data to verify the logical pattern (Egberg Thyme et al., 2013). Four main themes and twenty-three sub-themes emerged from the transcript analysis that broadly summarise the workplace experiences and career advancement prospects for women in the Indian hotel industry. Table 2 presents the details of the thematic analysis. Within the findings of the study, quotes from the participants are included as evidence (inductive analysis) and the findings are further supported by the extant literature (deductive analysis) (Gummesson, 2000). Further, ‘word clouds’ were generated by means of synonym-selection of the word frequency selection furnished in NVivo (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Work experiences of women hotel employees  
Source: authors



Figure 3. Career advancement prospects of women hotel employees  
Source: authors

Table 2. Themes, sub-themes and codes

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Workplace experiences	Work culture	Discrimination, more effort, prove oneself, late acceptance, late recognition, difficulty in acceptance, prove one’s worth, lack of encouragement, no bias, no gender discrimination, fair, fun, wonderful
	Work challenges	Frustration, mental pressure, physical pressure, exertion, maintaining cordial relations, high attrition, untrained staff, low salary, high work pressure, position matters, coping with different bosses
	Work characteristics	Tough, long hours, odd hours, hard work, difficult, attrition, staff shortage, empathetic, no problem, 12–16 hours, timings, long shifts, shift timings
	Work perception	Difficult, hard work, routine work, challenges, increased work pressure, favourable conditions, growth, support
	Work-life balance	No personal life, lack of holidays, no work life balance, work life balance, balance, reduced social circle, quitting work, family support
	Semantic barriers	Language barriers, language issue

Human resource development and policies	Policies	Lack of promotions, unable to upskill, skewed gender ratio, company policies, glass ceiling effect, evolving, best work environment, team management, HR policies, withholding promotions due to maternity leave, minimum experience criteria
	Promotions career	Hard to get hold of the opportunities, stagnation, less opportunity, constantly prove oneself, rejection
	Empowerment opportunities	Achievement, self-awareness, knowledge, growth, development, opportunities, respect, motivated, confident, determination, encouragement, experience, good opportunities, career growth, positive environment, motivating, promotional opportunity, achievements, support, trust, guidance, encouragement, recognition, training
	Learning and development (L&D)	Internal programs, learning opportunities, support for L&D, exposure to varied responsibilities, professional and personal growth, career advancement opportunity, trainings, development plan
	Growth opportunities	Higher studies, fast track growth environment, more growth in less time, support for career growth, promotion opportunity, mentorship, varied responsibilities, interesting opportunities, well advanced in career
	Creative freedom	Show self-creativity, employee rotation, honing skill
	Expectations	Clean accommodation, call families/children at workplace, feeling of safety, mental health training, flexibility, empathy, being human, gender equity, more compassion, less judgment and more trust, impart training, equality, positive and empowering corporate culture, encourage women to be in leadership roles, equal ratio, more support
	Suggestions	Support for career advancement, career advancement programs, better HR policies, period leave, reasonable working hours, reasonable time off, lesser work hours, flexibility of location, night drop provision, complaint corner for females, equal gender ratio, more upskilling opportunities, career enhancement workshops, company offsite, work hours, shift timing adherence, crèche facility, employee concierge services, redesign job roles
Leadership and representation	Representation	Hard work to achieve positions, no women general managers, less women leaders, very few women in leadership roles, significant senior leadership, leaders only to department level, one-fourth of the management strength, women boss, top management comprising of women, women representatives, head of department positions were held by women, female leaders, encouraging to watch women grow, good scope for more leaders
	Mentor support	Encouraging, boost confidence, train, lack of mentorship, management support and motivation, ethical conduct, way to shine
	Prejudice	Less tolerance towards a female boss, prove oneself in comparison to male counterparts, disregard, gender bias / gender equality, gender-defined roles and lack of support, gender neutrality, no effort for women's cause, perceive women to be less dedicated/ underperformers
	Leadership role	Role of managers in growth, special programs for training female general managers, leaders pave the way, positive leadership, positive and encouraging leaders, individual developmental need
	Leadership support	Trust for promotion, only employees with exceptional skills are encouraged, stagnation in career, stagnation, lack of career advancement opportunities, positive and motivating environment, missed promotion, support from organization, lack of support, exposure to varied roles, handle cluster properties, effective leadership, supportive environment, strive for more, initiative to excel, support and secure, environment, better performance, good opportunity, supportive seniors, unconditional support, trust
Career advice for women	Good career choice	Best industry for women, chance to enjoy luxury, meet different people, learn different languages, fun to work, happening place, has both ups and downs, enjoyment, being passionate, wonderful place, true passion, worth the experience, ease of expression, great experience, better suited, enjoyment, entertainment
	Success mantra	Set priorities, time, patience, bold, confident, learn, take initiative, self-confidence, perseverance, achieve goals, not give up, handle multiple roles, accept challenges, initiatives for self-growth, development, updating of skills, open to learning, face challenges, be ambitious, persistent, goal focused, tap opportunities, gender is irrelevant
	Future of women	Gender neutral, young women leaders, major change, women excel in the industry, great future leaders, high-aspirations, different phases
	Recognition	Appreciation, valued, respect, treated with respect

Source: authors.

During the process of coding, a total of 273 codes were created and were grouped under four main themes identified as human resource development and policies, leadership and representation, workplace experiences and career advice for women. These findings are reflected in Table 3.

Table 3. Core themes based on experiences of women in the Indian hotel industry

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Human resource development and policies	Policies, career promotions, empowerment opportunities, learning and development, growth opportunities, creative freedom, expectations, suggestions	101
Leadership and representation	Representation, mentor support, prejudice, leadership role, leadership support	61
Workplace experiences	Work culture, work challenges, work characteristics, work perception, work-life balance, semantic barriers	60
Career advice for women	Good career choice, success mantra, future of women, recognition	51

Source: authors.

#### 4.2. SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

A sentiment analysis was conducted to comprehend the sentiments of the participants. This assists in automatically analysing a large amount of text with

classifications automatically generated by NVivo and helped in extracting opinions that ranged from very negative to very positive sentiments representing the feelings of participants. The 108 coded references generated by NVivo resulted in 10 statements that were given the coding of very negative, 22 statements the coding of moderately negative, 45 statements moderately positive, and 31 very positive. Examples of statements that reflect the sentiments of women employees in the Indian hotel industry are presented in Table 4. The results based on workplace experiences and career advancement prospects are also graphically represented in Figure 4.

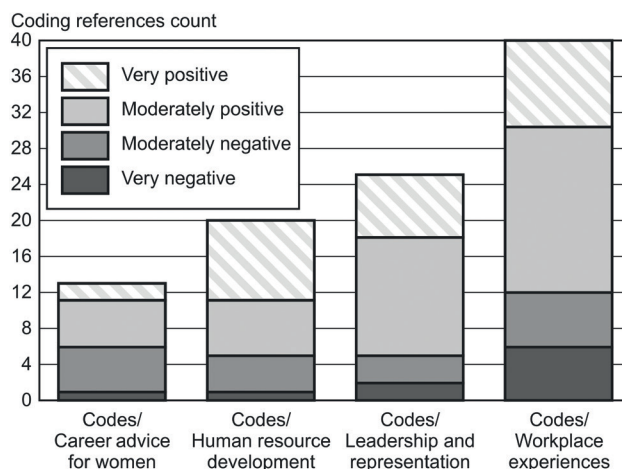


Figure 4. Sentiment analysis after automatic coding based on workplace experiences and career advancement prospects  
Source: authors

Table 4. Statements exemplifying the sentiments of women in Indian hotels towards workplace experiences and career advancement prospects

Statements	Sentiments
In early career I felt discriminated as a woman as they do not assign you task which they do to the men; sometimes it used to get very frustrating	Very negative
As it is a very small percentage of women can give the kind of time that the industry demands, hence you can see the fallout in numbers at entry level	Very negative
It felt very difficult in getting ahead, as in, I was working for 12–16 hours every day, therefore, I couldn't have managed to upskill myself along with the job	Moderately negative
As a fresher, it was like I didn't know anything about operations so from taking check-in to briefing to handling complaints, they told me to handle it my way	Moderately negative
And if I mess up something they were always there to help me, but they told us to bring our own creative ideas to do everything	Moderately positive
Having an organization that focuses a great deal on ensuring gender equality is a blessing in disguise	Moderately positive
It is very encouraging to see women handling everything like a boss, and it's better than men	Very positive
Have been grateful enough to have worked with some wonderful female leaders who have taught me the basic ethics of working and the way to shine and had me confident enough to be trained in a way that reaching the top shall be the goal	Very positive
Initially it gets challenging with shifts and long hours but as you cope up with these challenges, you see respect for yourself	Very positive

Source: authors.



#### 4.3. WORD CLOUD OF WORK EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN HOTEL EMPLOYEES

For an enhanced result visualization, a word cloud was generated (Figure 2) based on the 'frequency of words' option on NVivo. The standard words related to the workplace experiences of women hotel employees are indicated in the centre (working, level, hotel, employee) and these are surrounded by preferential words associated with positive work experiences (good, management, experience, encouraging, easy, learn, grow, assuring) as well as negative work experiences (prove, challenging, efforts, entry, hours, difficult, mid, entry, years).

#### 4.4. WORD CLOUD OF CAREER ADVANCEMENT PROSPECTS OF WOMEN HOTEL EMPLOYEES

A separate word cloud was generated (Figure 3) to represent the career advancement prospects of women hotel employees based on the most frequently used words. The key words related to the concept are portrayed in the centre (development, career advancement) surrounded by the preferential key words (manager, helped, experience, support, work, prospects, opportunities, responsibilities, motivated, training, role, plan, department, fortunate, promote, excel, assigned).

### 5. DISCUSSION

Amongst the work experiences that women employees had in different stages – entry level, middle management and senior management – women had to put in much harder work in comparison to men to prove their competence and women hotel employees found getting accepted tougher as compared to their male counterparts. The findings of the study agree with Ling Suan and Mohd Nasurdin (2016) who mentioned that female employees received less support from their supervisors as compared to male, which may weaken their enthusiasm and wear away their work engagement. Women show resilience and work against all odds with self-motivation to reach their goals. Kara et al. (2012) agreed that self-accomplishment is a key driver of motivation for female hotel employees. Regarding work experiences, P 5 and P 7 stated:

It has been challenging, but wonderful always. In the beginning as an entry level staff, I was required to prove myself for being as good as a man in the kitchen. Afterwards, once I transitioned into management, the most important lesson I learnt was

people management. Earning the respect of older male staff has been tough. That is where you learn how to command respect through hard work and consistency. [P 5]

At the entry level, gender does not matter. It is the scope of work that matters. It is an individual's responsibility to learn and grow. [P 7]

Workplace experiences and conditions have a direct effect on employees. The participants expressed that long work hours, exertion, low salary, changing shift timings, lack of holidays, high work pressure, high attrition and difficulty in maintaining work-life balance were the major challenges faced. As women, they always have the added pressure of family responsibilities which makes working in the industry challenging for women. Ng and Sorensen (2008) informed that when women employees were given enriched roles like their male counterparts, they felt empowered. Regarding the effect of conditions at work on women, P 2 and P 8 stated:

Working with this big property I gained more knowledge and experience with the policies provided. I felt I was in the right place to be guided. Further to the difficulties sometimes, it was hard to get hold of everything, and when I felt like I was getting lost I always had my team and my management to guide me back and push me towards my goal. [P 2]

One faces challenges at different stages of life. It depends on us whether we step back or move forward and face them. Working in middle management with mostly male HODs always motivated me as I felt that I have earned the position, and I am no less. There were times when I was offered to move to departments which have general shifts as the higher management felt that as a woman it could be difficult to carry on further. This rather made me more determined. Initially it gets challenging with shifts and long hours but as you cope up with these challenges, you see respect for yourself. [P 8]

Career advancement prospects are a reason to come to work regularly in anticipation of growth. The findings highlighted that the female employees of 5-star hotels in India found it hard to get hold of the opportunities, felt stagnation, there were also lesser opportunities available to them, they had to constantly prove themselves, and faced rejection often. When organizations give training, show a clear growth path, and have examples to set, then the work environment becomes a place where the talented thrive. Kim and Agrusa (2011) explained that feedback, training and support from colleagues or supervisors helped in propelling the careers of female employees. But for women the path to success may not be as clear, straight, and smooth. Human resources development and policies must be robust and fair for women who

must undergo maternity breaks, need childcare leave and require support from families as well. Similar conclusions were also given by Ma et al. (2021). The findings are also in accordance with Burke et al. (2009), emphasising that efficiently managed HR practices along with timely recognition and rewards generate the progressive work environment needed for better work engagement. The results also coincide with Blau and Kahn (2006) and Polachek (2006), who discussed the fluctuations in women's careers because of life-changing events like matrimony, pregnancy and child rearing. Regarding their career advancement prospects, P 6 and P 10 stated:

My career advancement prospects are a bit cloudy as I recently had a child and I had to take many sick days during my difficult pregnancy. My batchmate got promoted but I was left out. Well, hoping for next year now. [P 6]

My company sponsored me for some career advancement courses, which definitely helped me to perform better. [P 10]

Leadership having appropriate representation of women is a sign of inclusion and fair practices. The findings reveal that it is encouraging for women employees as they look up to female leadership as role models. The right representation of women leaders gives hope for women employees to continue in the organization. Mostly, women can lead their specific departments but not so many are at higher positions. Women too need to be more ambitious to reach top positions. Positive changes have occurred in the last decade in women's representation in leadership in hotels, which is in accordance with Repetti's (2020) finding of an increase in women's representation at senior levels (13.22%) within hospitality. Regarding women's representation in leadership, P 3 and P 11 stated:

A lot of leadership positions like head of department positions were held by women. But very less could reach to general manager position or further. It is encouraging to watch women grow, in any industry. And, nothing is impossible. If I would have stayed, I might have had a chance to make it to the top. [P 3]

Over the last decade, hotel companies have changed a lot. There is women representation in the senior leadership roles. But it's not enough. Women barely constitute about one-fourth of the management, and I believe there is scope to increase those numbers. In my view, it also works both ways. There are very few women who aspire to grow in the hotel business. Most are either content or opt for other industries. That is also the reason for the lesser representation of women in hotel operations. [P 11]

Motivation by the leadership gives women the confidence to excel, and to consider themselves

worthy of growth in their careers. From this study it was observed that women hotel employees expect their leaders to be unbiased, assisting in showing the way for career advancement and conduct training for leadership roles. This is consistent with previous studies of Hillman et al. (2007) and Kusumah et al. (2021). The need for an unbiased and non-gendered leadership approach has also been discussed by Xiong et al. (2022). Regarding the role of leadership in career advancement, P 5 and P 1 stated:

There is most certainly a big role of the leadership in my growth. Leaders pave the way, but the people do the walking. It has been positive most of the time. However, motivation comes from within. These days, post the pandemic, everyone has lost the motivation to work because the jobs require more time and pay lesser. In these tough times, self-motivation is very necessary. [P 5]

There is good women representation. Seeing them, I worked hard to get this position, has been very encouraging. I always believe that we can achieve a lot more. [P 1]

Women hotel employees face numerous challenges and find ways to overcome them. The participants' challenges at work were feelings of frustration, mental pressure, physical pressure and exertion. They also found maintaining cordial relations was demanding, along with high attrition, untrained staff and low salaries, as also raised by Kara et al. (2012). There were also position-related issues which came with responsibilities, along with coping with different bosses over a period. A lack of workplace flexibility, also pointed out by Blomme et al. (2010), is also perceived as a challenge. Regarding the challenges faced in the workplace, P 8 and P 11 stated:

Being in operations there are long working hours and shifts. It can be challenging especially when you must manage family too. The challenge I faced was stagnation and less opportunities in operations. I had to constantly prove that having a family won't affect my dedication towards my job. [P 8]

The biggest challenge has been to balance work and home. A highly supportive family has ensured my continuation in the industry. [P 11]

Women hotel employees find that the hotel industry is a good career choice for women where they can be amidst a luxurious environment, meet new people, get to learn different languages and enjoy the overall environment. They find workplaces have both negative and positive aspects. Overall, they enjoy their work because of ease of expression. The career advice that women hotel employees have for other aspiring women workers is to set priorities; manage time; have patience; be bold and confident; be open to learning and taking

the initiative; have perseverance; set and achieve goals and do not give up; be smart enough to handle multiple roles; accept and face challenges; take initiatives for self-growth, development and the updating of skills; be ambitious, persistent and goal focused; and tap opportunities. The career advice from women hotel employees is unique not found in the hospitality research discourse. Regarding the career advice from women hotel employees, P 12 and P 13 stated:

Today is the right time to join the industry as young women leaders are much wanted. Organizations like Marriott and IHG have mandated growth of women leaders and thus a major change can be seen. [P 12]

I can say now many women are now excelling, growing in their careers and proving to be a great future leader which I always appreciate and encourage. [P 13]

Women hotel employees expect changes and amendments to be incorporated in hotel policies and strategies. Some suggestions included support for career advancement, inclusion of career advancement programs, making better HR policies, having reasonable working hours, providing flexibility of location, night shift pickup and drop provision, having a complaint corner for females, maintaining an equal gender ratio, providing more upskilling opportunities and career enhancement workshops, conducting team building activities, having a crèche facility at work, providing employee concierge services, and redesigning job roles to make the environment favourable as a workplace for women employees. Some of these concerns were also raised by Kim and Agrusa (2011), Mohamed (2015), Liu et al. (2019), and Liu et al. (2021). P 9 suggested:

More flexible timings and a little empathy towards those handling their work and families goes a long way. Be human and treat others the same way. Having a cooperative and understanding HR makes or breaks an organization.

We need to create a positive and empowering corporate culture and create more upskilling opportunities for women. [P 9]

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

This study has contributed to the literature on workplace experiences and career advancement prospects for women in the hotel industry. The study was conducted on female employees of five-star hotels in India. Various studies have been conducted on such employees but a qualitative study with a detailed review of literature and a first-hand comprehensive account does not exist.

This work contributes theoretically by revealing that female hotel employees receive less support from

supervisors than males, which can weaken their motivation and work engagement as also informed by Ling Suan and Mohd Nasurdin (2016). However, women show resilience and self-motivation, and when given enriched roles, they feel empowered. Empowerment, as also suggested by Ruiz-Palomo et al. (2020) and autonomy which is in line with Allan (2019), facilitate job enrichment and satisfaction, and Gen-Y employees are more satisfied when appreciated, which has been pointed out by Muskat and Reitsamer (2020). Career advancement was found to be linked to growth prospects, empowerment and promotions which is in accordance with Calinaud et al. (2021) and Gong and Chang (2008). Hotel organizations' learning and development opportunities positively impact female employees' career advancement which is also in line with Brites da Silva et al. (2021). The study also reveals that supportive family (Kara et al., 2012; Kara et al., 2018; Yang & Peng, 2018) and the presence of women leaders contribute to overall female representation (Ali et al., 2022; Hillman et al., 2007; Kusumah et al., 2021).

Past research has delved into hypothesis testing and quantitatively establishing the connections between career expectations and career advancement, work family support and motivation, but for the most part each aspect has been researched separately. This study is more holistic in nature as it has considered all areas that impact women's experiences at work and career advancement prospects.

The unbiased approach has led to more realistic feedback by women, which was mostly moderately positive. The findings of the study will help the hotel industry in being truly inclusive and supportive. Knowing what women expect from their careers and what effect workplace experiences have on them will direct the industry to change its policies to fit the requirements of the workforce. Equality, diversity, androgynous leadership and flexible work conditions are not just fads but a reality which needs to be implemented.

The findings of the current study reveal that working in this industry remains an ultimate choice for Indian women where they could connect and socialize, enjoy and learn amidst the various challenges and barriers faced. This study has brought forward career advice for women from women, which is a unique finding not found in the hospitality research discourse, hence providing a strong contribution. Women hotel employees offer career advice to aspiring women, emphasizing priority setting, time management, patience, boldness, confidence, perseverance, goal-setting and embracing challenges. They advise taking self-growth initiatives, being ambitious, persistent and tapping opportunities. Another unique finding of this study is that almost all big hotel companies in India have targets to ensure there are enough women in the workforce.

The issue of gender is irrelevant for the women who are self-driven and motivated. There is a need for robust and fair HR practices for women especially for those who have to undergo maternity leave. Hotels should prioritize women in leadership roles for career progression. In India, flexible schedules and understanding of organizational culture, including issues like gender bias and work-life balance, are needed. Implementing flexible scheduling and training solutions can help women employees contribute effectively. Hotel leaders must initiate more understanding of the organizational culture within hotels, including issues such as gender bias, sexual harassment and work-life balance.

Organizations should explore leadership and mentorship programs for women in the hotel industry, like the Women's Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (WICCI) Tourism and Hospitality Council in India, to promote career progression.

## 7. FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

The current study had a qualitative research design considering women employees at all levels and years of experience. Future research may be carried out for different levels and experience brackets, giving detailed insights into changes in the perception of women employees at different stages of their careers. Research on women as a monolithic group is common, but it is crucial to look at how gender interacts with race, age and sexual orientation to affect career advancement and experiences at work. Additional long-term, longitudinal investigations could be carried out to provide insights into how career trajectories change over time for women in the hotel industry.

The participants were from five-star hotels in India. Other categories and other hospitality sectors could also be considered for future research. One major challenge faced during this research was an unwillingness of women hotel employees to participate in the interview process. Generalisability was not an issue for the authors as they were concerned in studying a specific situation. But this points towards resolving a generalisation issue by conducting a quantitative study to know whether the findings could be applied elsewhere.

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