

## **A woman's place in hotel management: Upstairs or Downstairs?**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper asks whether it is the notion of choice (a pro life work/life balance decision) that influences woman's desire to strive for promotion within a hotel organisation or is the choice made for female managers by a system of organisational processes.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This research within an international hotel group in Australia and New Zealand explored what barriers prevent women from reaching the top echelons in hotel management. A qualitative approach used semi-structured interviews to study the intersection of gender, age and time in life with career progression and their combined impact on the glass ceiling phenomenon.

**Findings:** The interviews revealed that the perception of glass ceiling barriers faced by women differed depending on where they were in their career cycle. They were revealed as the 'long hours' culture, the Old Boy's network, hiring practices and geographical mobility. These significantly influenced women's work-life balance, and personal life choices.

**Originality/value:** The hospitality industry faces a worldwide shortage of skilled staff. This paper seeks to answer why the hotel sector is struggling to retain talented female employees who wish to take advantage of the managerial career paths offered.

**Research limitations/implications:** Interviews were carried out in three locations across a variety of job positions; therefore this study has a reasonable degree of validity. Findings could be applied to other large hotel enterprises in Australia and New Zealand.

**Practical implications:** The findings from this study offer implications for management practice.

**Keywords:** Hotels, Glass ceiling, Work-life balance, Intersectionality, Career barriers

**Article type:** Research paper

## **Introduction**

Is the 4-5 star hotel industry a place of opportunity for aspiring female managers or a further example of what Acker (2006, p. 450) terms, an “inequality regime”? The hospitality industry overall faces a worldwide shortage of trained hospitality staff (Barr, 2006; Chon, 2005; Robinson & Barron, 2007). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, hotels remain labour intensive, fragmented, and multi-faceted service organisations. This operational structure reflects an entrenched tradition of twenty-four hour, seven day week service to the customer. On the one hand, functional, numerical and temporal flexibility are extolled by hotel management as necessary for survival in the global marketplace while on the other, are promoted to attract service-orientated individuals through, for example, structured career pathways and a flexible work environment. Add to this the pervasiveness of gender-role stereotyping; it would appear that employment in this sector is advantageous for talented, career orientated women. Why then is the hotel industry overall struggling to retain staff and in particular, talented, female employees who wish to take advantage of the managerial career paths offered?

It is this question that frames the rationale for this paper. The purpose of the paper is twofold. Firstly it aims to add to the limited knowledge on the barriers for women in international hotel structures in New Zealand and Australia. The glass ceiling metaphor, that subtle, transparent and seemingly impenetrable barrier that prevents women and minorities from moving up the management hierarchy (Altman, Simpson, Baruch, & Burke, 2005) remains integral to any discussions on the career development of women. Evidence of its continuing relevance is not hard to find in the Western context where patterns of gender inequality persist in leadership positions even with women’s increasing visibility in the lower echelons of management (Weyer, 2007). This is in spite of rhetoric around ‘choice’ for the relatively affluent professional female worker, often couched in terms of work-life balance and the ‘win-win’ scenario of the flexible workplace. ‘Choice’, it appears, is demonstrated by enlightened human resource policies that foster opportunities (Lewis, 2006). Ideally then, in a workplace that offers the flexibility associated with a 24/7, seven day week operation, opportunities should exist for talented men and women with appropriate qualifications and relevant work experience to advance in their managerial career at a comparable rate. It would appear this is not the case. The article will draw attention to both the ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’

barriers to career advancement in hotel management and in doing so, highlight why female managers in one international hotel chain based in New Zealand and Australia appear unable or unwilling to 'puncture' the glass ceiling.

Secondly, that the glass ceiling exists implies a single, invisible, structural barrier is also questioned. This aligns with the need to acknowledge the dynamic complexity of the glass ceiling metaphor (Altman et al., 2005) by addressing the call from feminist scholars for intersectional analyses (Acker, 2006; McCall, 2008). The term intersectionality is used to describe the mutually constitutive relations among social identities (Shields, 2008). Groups differentiated by diversity categories, for example chronological age, may perceive and experience forms of institutional life, in this case, the glass ceiling, at different times in the workplace. In contrast to the traditional power-based structural view of the glass ceiling, Altman et al. (2005) suggest a life-career approach as an alternative interpretation. This approach aims to recognise the diversity of experience between groups of women. Three groups are identified in this study: younger women in the junior ranks of management in their early to late 20's, women established in their career who occupy roles at department head level in their late 20's to early 30's, and some women established in their career at a more senior level, older and sometimes with independent children. Thus, the paper argues that when looking at the glass ceiling phenomenon, it is critical that attention be paid to intersections between gender, other diversity characteristics and the glass ceiling. In this research, the intersection of gender, age and time in life with career progression and their combined impact on the glass ceiling phenomenon is investigated.

This article is organised as follows. Firstly some of the research literature on women in the hotel industry is reviewed. The methodology of the study is briefly outlined and the findings are revealed and discussed. Tentative conclusions are drawn to answer the questions posed in the introduction as to what factors in 4-5star hotels may inhibit women who wish to take advantage of the managerial career paths offered, in other words, from puncturing the glass ceiling. Are career barriers imposed upon women organisational or societal, or is it their decision to choose a life and / or family over a career? If it is a woman's choice, is it one that is made for them by the existing 'inequality regimes' (Acker, 2006)? Answers to these issues are complex but these are questions that this paper aims to explore.

## **A woman's place in the large hotel sector**

The following review of selected literature raises a number of questions on the roles women hold in large hotels which have provided the context for much of the research in the hospitality sector. Although the hotel industry has embraced many aspects of modern technology, the provision of services in hotels has not changed radically from the last century. They are dependent on the critical human elements of service and what Korzensky (2002, p. 63) calls “customer sovereignty” to ensure a successful and profitable operation.

Research suggests that overall a woman's place in hotels is generally not an enviable one. Women frequently carry out the most undesirable and lowest status work in hospitality (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Korczynski, 2002). They are horizontally segregated into particular jobs and areas of operation (Ng & Pine, 2003) and, vertically segregated into jobs regarded as low in skills and consequently low in status (Purcell, 1996, p. 18). Women in hotels in the U.S.A. tend to be marginalised in “pink ghetto” jobs, the lowest paid jobs with limited or less obvious career paths (Woods & Viehland, 2000). Essential to large hotels is the strong emotional labour content and women may be hired for their ability to provide empathy in dealing with people in a service capacity. Purcell's (1997) framework of horizontal and vertical segregation within the hospitality industry is clearly illustrated in the hierarchical structures of large hotels and practice continues to stereotype the roles for which woman are deemed more suitable. An additional negative aspect to women's work in hotels is that they are subject to high levels of sexual harassment from both guests and peers due to their low status and low educational levels (Poulston, 2008).

### **Women managers in hotels**

So how do women fare as managers within hotels? It would appear that at the higher levels of hotel work there are two distinct ways in which women are disadvantaged. Firstly, there are the formal or visible aspects of male exclusionary practice – the way that jobs and working hours are constructed – found in many bureaucratic organisations. In hotels, the long working day is seen as intrinsic to working practices (Brownell, 1993; Hicks, 1990; Knutson & Schmidgall, 1999). In Australia both ‘visible’ and ‘being there’ styles of hotel general management embedded in the ‘job’ have given rise to managerial practices which are informal, paternalistic, and authoritarian in nature (Timo & Davidson, 2002, p. 192). Visibility and the additional social activities expected from the hotel industry also affect work

- life balance. Differences between work and social life can become blurred; a phenomenon that Bauman (2007) refers to as 'liquidity'. It becomes a negative factor for women with young children, as in the majority of cases; women remain the primary caregiver with the added responsibility of household organisation (Lopez - Claros & Zahidi, 2005). Domestic duties have been shown to decrease both men and women's advancement in management (Tharenou, 2005). However, even in dual income households, where couples share the responsibility for childcare, the ideal role sharing arrangement still leaves the woman with more responsibility (Budworth, Enns, & Rowbotham, 2008). Social factors also impact on women's career progression (Burke, 2005) and may influence their decision to change jobs or relocate. It can be a career advantage for a woman to stay with one particular organisation in order not to dilute the social capital that she has accumulated. The concept of social capital can be explained as a person's standing or reputation in an organisation depending on the social network that they have built up with mentors, peers and superiors, and its complex interaction of favours owed and received (Sirven, 2008). Younger women are more likely to gain advancement by moving outside their organisation, in contrast to younger men who have a higher chance of promotion by remaining within their existing organisation (Altman et al., 2005). However necessary relocations may also have a detrimental effect on a female hotel manager's personal life (Brownell, 1994).

The career ladder within hotels is predicated on the conventional employment models of continuous employment and linear progression (Boxall & Purcell, 2003). The sector is prone to vocational mobility, with employees actively seeking job change (Baum, 2007). Career mobility is a key feature of a hotel management career, and of a self directed career (Ladkin, 2002). There is an onus on the employee to be more active in managing his or her career (Hall & Moss, 1998). The responsibility for career development has shifted from employer to employee with the 'ideal' hotel manager able to demonstrate competencies across a variety of hotel departments and there is evidence that employee mobility is seen as a positive feature in the sector, offering more career opportunities and higher salary levels (Carbery, Garavan, O'Brien, & McDonnell, 2003).

Secondly, the informal, less tangible, invisible aspects that underlie expectations of hotel management reflect organisational cultures that reproduce corporate patriarchy, characteristically found in bureaucratic organisations (Green & Cassell, 1996). Homosocial practices such as marginalisation and competitiveness are demonstrated in organisations where male managers show a preference for "men and men's company" (Broadbridge &

Hearn, 2008, p. 44). Clearly, in the hotel environment, men appear more culturally active and adept at fostering solidarity while women, depending on where they are in the hierarchy, have to “draw on different sources of power to modify their position within an organisations structure and culture” (Halford & Leonard, 2001, p.100). Guerrier (1986) commented on the need for female hotel General Managers to be seen to fulfil the necessary social element of the job and the discomfort of being conspicuous in a working world where they are trying to blend in with male norms.

In conclusion, a number of key issues emerged from the research on women employed in hotels for example, organisational culture, work/family conflict, the necessity for long hours and geographical mobility. The literature also highlights that recruitment and selection processes may not be transparent. Both may be likened to an invisible web that works against women (Green & Cassell, 1996; Lan & Wang Leung, 2001; Rees & Garnsey, 2003). Further, the literature raises questions around whether women are in a position to gain broad experience of hotel departments which allow them to be considered for future higher positions (Woods & Viehland, 2000).

On the other hand, it could be argued that hotels do provide professional opportunities for women. This argument is based on the notion of choice as discussed previously. Certainly a percentage of women reach a certain point in their career and do not *want* to progress further within the industry. This could be due to a lack of desirable role models, or that they perceive there is no easy way to reconcile the dual realities of a career and a family. It is obliquely communicated to women that they cannot be mothers and career women concurrently (Liff & Ward, 2001). Having children does not decrease women managers’ career progress (Tharenou, 2005) yet the potential for becoming pregnant or having children is viewed as a liability for some women managers in hotels (Williamson, 2008). However it all comes down to individual choice and opportunities do exist.

### **Methodology:**

The research from which this article is drawn, sought to explain the persistence of a glass ceiling for aspiring female managers in one international hotel chain with a significant presence in New Zealand and Australia. It also sought to acknowledge the dynamic complexity of the glass ceiling metaphor (Altman et al., 2005) by recognising the diversity of experience between groups of women, while being mindful of the need not to reduce identities to categories that may become fixed (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). Bierema (2002) reiterates that the

category 'woman' does not imply one homogenous group within which one individual's experiences can be easily replaced by another. The dual purpose of the research meant it was important to bring to the fore the meanings women at different levels of their management careers attributed to their work place experiences by providing an environment where they felt comfortable to express their views without fear of repercussions.

There has to-date been little discussion of how methodologically to study intersectionality (McCall, 2008) despite the acceptance of and need for intersectional analyses (Acker, 2006; Perry & Parlamis, 2006). As discussed in the introduction, groups identified by diversity categories such as gender and chronological age, may perceive and experience the glass ceiling, in different forms and at varying times in the workplace. Altman et al.'s (2005) life-career approach was chosen to recognise this diversity of experience between different groups of women. Young women identified as being between 21 and 29 years of age have a focus on career and reputation establishment in their organisation. They are also occupied with issues such as whether to establish a family and childcare issues, whereas women between the ages of 30-45 years of age have attained recognition and career advancement. Women in a later life stage will no longer be concerned with childcare and their focus on career may also change (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2005). While simplistic and subjective, it was clear from a pilot study (Mooney, 2007) that both their gender and the career life stage that the women were positioned in at the time of the research coloured their experiences and subsequent reflections. Semi-structured, conversational style interviews appeared the best method to understand how each of the participants gave meaning to their work experiences. From a pool of women in management and supervisory positions employed by the company who voluntarily agreed to be interviewed, 18 women across three cities in two countries and occupying a variety of positions were selected by the researcher. By using a series of open ended questions, the interviews sought to capture women's perception of the promotional process and what factors may have contributed to or slowed down their progress towards attaining their career goals in the large hotel environment.

## **Interview Results**

### **The importance of position in the respondent's career cycle**

As the interview findings were assembled, thematic similarities of the data began to emerge, lending them to analysis according to life/career stages. The interviews revealed that the

perception of glass ceiling barriers faced by women in their hotel career differed depending on where they were in their career cycle. The three groupings identified were: younger women at the start of their career, women established in their career, and older women at a more senior level.

#### *Younger women at the start of their career*

The women on average were in their early to late 20s. At this junior level there are almost equal numbers of men and women working in hotels. It is only at the more senior levels that there are markedly more men than women managers. They are focussed on their career and on gaining as wide a variety of development positions as possible. They are geographically mobile and are not thinking of having a family in the near future.

#### *Women established in their career*

Women who are established in their career are generally at department head level and executive level, for example Front Office or Food and Beverage Manager. The age group is generally late 20s, early 30s, and the managers are becoming recognised in their careers. They have a reputation in the company, and they have worked hard to gain the skills and cross departmental knowledge that will enable them to progress. They may be single, are thinking about having children, or may already have children. In practice there were very few women with young children who either responded to the questionnaire or were interviewed.

#### *Older Women at a more senior level*

Many have regional responsibilities in addition to senior roles. Various respondents commented that most of the women who made it to the top were single and some were lesbian. This signalled to the younger women that they may have to be without a partner and children to 'get on'. Some women in higher level positions were women who had taken time out to rear their family, then returned at a later stage when their children were more independent.

The women managers in this study encountered both visible and invisible barriers: these affected the groups in different ways at different stages in their career life cycle.

### **‘Long hours’ culture**

There is an expectation of long hours in the hotel industry and this in some hotels is influenced by the General Manager. What was expressed clearly in the interviews was the sense of disapproval that respondents experienced when they attempted to reduce their working hours:

I don't like the fact that indirectly you're made to feel like you are doing something wrong, you shouldn't be leaving and although you put in five 12-hour days and then one day you leave early and I still feel like I shouldn't be leaving but I'm trying for myself to not feel guilty about that.

#### *Younger women at the start of their career*

The women who were just starting their careers did expect to work long hours with interviewees revealing that this was a norm for advancement. The respondents had also been considering how to reconcile the realities of the length of their working day with having children, they wondered how it would be possible to look after a child and combine this with their working day. Some respondents felt that even as a single person it was hard to achieve a work life balance

If I was to have a child, how would I make childcare work around, you know, the hours that I work?

Some women respondents who were at this stage of their careers reported there was no compatibility between the hours that they worked and the reality of having children. There was also the realisation that it was actually easier to achieve workplace flexibility at more senior levels of management.

#### *Women established in their career and women at a more senior level*

There were concerns about long hours and how that might affect parents of young children. The company expected its managers to be flexible to the needs of the business but with irregular hours it can be difficult to reserve childcare. It is apparent from the many comments relating to this issue that they this group felt unease about work practices. Long hours are the norm and the age group that was considering having children expressed worries about how the two could be compatible. They also expressed concern about role models in this respect. Interviewees thought that many executives were away from home for up to sixteen hours a

day. The interviewees indicated that there was a perception that the industry can attract workaholics or maybe one needed to be a workaholic to succeed.

### **Productivity**

Productivity concerned respondents as hours worked make a crucial difference to family time. In theory there should have been more flexibility for the women in more executive roles to get the job done in the most efficient manner. Many thought, however, that there would need to be changes in the culture to adopt more lifestyle friendly work practices. Working from home and job sharing were two practices that were mentioned. The younger women in more operational roles felt there could be shorter hours while at the more senior executive levels the women felt that a lack of flexibility impaired productivity. Various reasons were put forward for this, standard operating manuals led to a culture of micro management and this had been the way in which executives had been trained. Respondents felt that the organisation was not supportive of working from home practices even in departments where this was feasible.

### **Mobility and travel**

Three aspects of mobility emerged from the interviews. The first was travel as an integral component of a more senior role, as a 'regional' or 'cluster' head; the second was geographical mobility – the need to move for promotion and the third aspect was that it was a career advantage for women who wished to have a family to stay with the company where they have built up social capital.

#### *Younger women at the start of their career*

Some of these younger women had partners, others were single – none had children. This group expressed concerns about moving with regards to gaining experience. The women in this study strongly associated moving to gain experience or a promotion as necessary to their career path. Not being able to move was a barrier to advancing not just for women but men too. Remarks made by the younger interviewees show that they were the least disadvantaged by mobility factors, as they are unencumbered enough to be able to move easily. It is more difficult being mobile while factoring in a husband or children's needs. If these developmental opportunities are not possible to achieve, the respondents indicated they thought of moving company or having a family. One could argue that a man moving also has to factor in his children's needs but generally, this appeared to be the responsibility of his wife rather than his primary responsibility:

When I look at the men a lot of them have children, they continue on their daily lives, doing the long hours and they are still in the office, still doing what they need to do. Yeah, its funny, none of the women I work with have children at our level or above.

#### *Women more established in their career*

Some of this more established group reported being relatively independent and willing to avail themselves of the chance to ‘try out’ a position for a short time. These interviewees reported needing to move to where the best developmental position was for them to progress. Often a short-term posting enabled them to ‘try out’ a more senior role. If children were involved, this became prohibitively difficult; for example, organising short-term arrangements for childcare and schools.

#### *Older women at a more senior level*

Travel and mobility was also an issue for the senior women. Regional positions carried travel responsibilities particularly if the hotels in one geographical region were spread out. There was an expectation that managers would have to move hotels in order to progress, every two years at more junior levels. The perception was that one could stay at a hotel for a longer period as a General Manager.

One further point to be considered in respect of a manager’s need to move in order to progress, is that it can be a career advantage for women to remain with one organisation, instead of moving frequently. This need for ‘a history’ could hold women back from moving for promotion outside of their company. To be recognised for skills or excellence prior to the arrival of children may counter the perceived negativity:

Probably because of the length of time that I’ve been with the organisation prior to having children, and I think that that is really key, I know for example if someone had applied for my role, if that was a female that had children, no way, they would have to be absolutely shining on paper.

### **The Old Boy Network**

Women referred constantly to the ‘Old Boy Network’ or the ‘Old Boy Club’. It had varying meanings and a varying impact on women’s careers. Participants in all life stage groups identified aspects of the Old Boy Network as problematic for women.

For example:

I wouldn’t know how to describe it ... I’d say it is the culture of the industry, it’s not anyone specific, the culture is what’s expected ... a male run industry ... as much as we like to deny it ... if you take a look at management ... I’d say 99.5 % of it is male, it’s extremely hard.

The strength of the Old Boys' Network was commented on frequently and by most of the interviewees. They described it as a common attitude among many of the male managers, particularly at senior levels of management. It was referred to as a shared background, a shared history – a mindset with informal networks that were not easily entered by women. Women reported that they had been given the impression that women should hold certain jobs. The respondents discussed the existence of male informal networks built around sports, such as tickets for events passed out by Concierge and rarely given to female staff; the Friday night drinking sessions where after a certain time women felt vulnerable, yet that was possibly when the most information was shared about opportunities within the organisation.

#### *Younger women at the start of their career*

Development opportunities were important for most of the interviewees; areas where they felt the Old Boys' Network disadvantaged them were networking, the interview and selection process, double standards of behaviour for men and women and potential discrimination against women with young families. They also raised concerns about how they would be regarded if they decided to have children. Some spoke about women who had been employed by the company being made redundant when they became pregnant. To them it flagged a mindset in the organisation that indicated it was not a career advantage to get pregnant.

#### *Women more established in their career*

The concerns of the first group were shared by these managers.

You know what the worst, worst, worst, worst thing is? Sometimes I even think it in my own head when I'm interviewing and I look at the guy and I look at the girl and I think he looks great, she looks great, but we are going to get more bang for our buck out of him and the reason is simply because that if she is a family woman, she's going to leave and whether she's going to leave because of the company, because we're going to make it so difficult for her that she's going to have no other alternative. It's because if I was sitting there talking to the General Manager and they were equally skilled, the guy would get the job.

#### *Older Women at a more senior level*

In addition to the previously expressed opinions this group expressed how they felt the Old Boys' Network marginalised them as women managers in a male workplace. The attitudes may also be a reflection that they believe that society values youth and freshness – especially physical beauty – over age and experience.

All three groups spoke of the fact that although promotions were based on a knowledge of competencies required for the position (and therefore selection was theoretically unbiased), unless one was aware of job opportunities or indeed put forward by managers for promotion, then one might not be eligible for a job opportunity. Interviewees saw the Old Boys' Network as preserving the status quo. One interviewee stated that hotel owners, generally male, expected General Managers to be male, and this was put forward as another reason why there were few female General Managers.

## **Discussion**

When discussing the data from this research, it is critical to note the intersection of gender, age and time in life with career progression and their combined impact on the progression of women managers in hotels. Some barriers affected all groups of women whereas others applied only to certain groups. A barrier such as long hours though impacting on all groups would not be as critical to the senior women as it would be to women with young children.

The most significant visible barrier to the women in this research was the long working hours' culture. All groups spoke of this embedded norm, and the necessity of conforming in order to progress. The hotel management working day was modelled on the presumption of 12 hour days, with organisational goals as the only commitment. There was a strong perception from the respondents that these long hours were unconnected with productivity. Instead they were perceived as a requirement of the organisation, underpinned by competency requirements such as flexibility to business needs and contracts stating that hours were as the business required.

The women established in their career and the older women at a more senior level were concerned with choices related to how they were supposed to work and how restrictive this was in terms of a flexible working life. Women with children were greatly affected by long hours as they had to juggle childcare and working hours. Many childcare centres operate according to office hours and need fixed attendance. Lack of adequate childcare has been reported by women managers as a barrier and ultimately damaging to their career (Tharenou, 2005). The expensive option of a nanny remains financially unviable option for women among the junior ranks of hotel management with minimal wages. Long working hours also meant a greater reliance on convenience meals with associated higher costs. Some of this group felt that they would need to be at a higher position in order to be allowed to plan their

time flexibly. Interviewees did not feel that they had a choice to work less hours; they experienced a strong expectation for all managers to conform, those that did not encountered a strongly negative reaction whether sternly expressed or couched in jocular remarks. They felt that if they had been allowed to adopt more flexible work systems such as working from home, their lives with its attendant work related functions would have been less stressful. For those with children, any concessions negotiated such as the ability to work from home one day a week had to be agreed to by the functional head as well as the area head. One interviewee spoke of feeling vulnerable should her senior manager relocate. So although the option theoretically was there to “choose” to work more family friendly hours, in reality this was difficult and dependent on senior managers’ goodwill, a finding which correlates to those of previous studies (Timo & Davidson, 2002).

The most significant invisible barrier to the women in this research was identified as the Old Boys’ Network. Women are confronted with choices when starting a family and this tends to happen when women reach their mid thirties (Altman et al., 2005). One of the key issues in this debate was how this choice would be viewed by the masculine culture around them. This was evident in the many discussions that the women had about their “choice” to have a family and what the implications of that decision might be. The findings showed the possibility of bias against hiring women who may not be capable of conforming to the image of a manager who will put the needs of the organisation before his/her family, a similar bias revealed in Acker’s (2006) research. Female managers expressed concern as to whether they could possibly combine a management role with motherhood and if they were to have children, the organisation might view them differently. Some also perceived discriminatory practices against women who had become pregnant, such as not being considered for promotion or redundancy. What was prominent in the attitudes of some of this group was how they felt it would be necessary to sacrifice personal relationships and children to gain promotion. The women established in their career and older women in more senior positions were also disadvantaged by the factors affecting the junior group. They spoke of being made to feel marginalised by homosocial practices (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008) that were manifested through comments during meetings, exclusion from social activities and inappropriate entertainment at the predominantly masculine company conferences. Female managers reported that they were given the impression that women should only hold specific jobs appropriate for them. Oakley (2000) reflects that women in senior positions may also be viewed as a threat by their male counterparts due to their propensity to challenge the status

quo. The women in more senior positions felt that there was an emphasis on looks and youthful appearance by the managers, both male and female surrounding them. This youth focussed attitude extended to advice on how to have corrective treatment. However at this stage given that few women in this group had younger dependent children, the presence of a family was no longer viewed as a liability. Some of this group had teenage children and it was not reported as a problem in terms of career. These women were also unlikely to be taking maternity leave.

The Old Boys' Network strongly affected hiring practices within this organisation. Affirmative action programmes can have an affect on hiring practices in some organisations, requiring selection from gender neutral criteria of competence rather than "*selection based on an old boy (white) network*" (Acker, 2006, p. 450). However within this organisation, competency based selection policies were not always impartial. Although a competency such as flexibility to the needs of the business may appear gender neutral, when interpreted through the lens of a male manager's viewpoint, a woman manager with childcare responsibilities would be regarded as less 'flexible' than her male counterpart with few such responsibilities. The women established in their career clearly felt that although competency selection systems existed, there were barriers for woman managers that could prevent candidates from being selected for an initial interview. Interviewees spoke of the fact that although promotions are based on a knowledge of competencies required for the position (and therefore selection is theoretically unbiased), unless one is aware of job opportunities or indeed put forward by managers for promotion, then one would not be likely to know about or to be considered for a job opportunity. Once again this group was disadvantaged by lack of access to the male networks. The possibility of bias against hiring women who may be likely to have a family is also strong. Respondents spoke of a mindset that deliberately chose male over female candidates so as not to lose the employee later because of family concerns. The older women at a more senior level felt less disadvantaged than their younger colleagues. They spoke of decisions made behind closed doors but ultimately these decisions and biased attitudes did not affect them to the same degree. At this stage they had enough social capital invested with the company to be able to use their networks to their advantage.

The last visible barrier to be discussed is geographical mobility. There is evidence in the literature that suggests that mobility is a positive feature in the hotel sector, a factor

associated with more career opportunities and higher salary levels (Carbery et al., 2003; Hicks, 1990). The interviewees frequently referred to mobility as a necessity – to obtain the next developmental position, one needed to move location when the right promotional role came up. The younger group at the start of their career were less likely to be hampered by this. However in the group that was more established career wise, women with young or school age children were unable to take up development positions on short secondments as they could not fit in their family commitments with placements of two to three months away from their home environment. As the women in this group attained more senior positions there were fewer developmental and senior positions available. Moving geographically was even more crucial. This problem is also found in other male-dominated careers such as engineering when women need to relocate for career advancement (Mattis, 2005). Younger women are more likely to be promoted by moving to another company (Altman, Simpson, Baruch and Burke, 2005). Women are therefore in a double bind, they need to move for promotion, yet they must remain in their present company to be in a position to realise the social capital that they have built up in terms of reputation and professional networks. There was also the further difficulty for those in a relationship, if the other partner was unable to find a suitable job. One divorced manager with a child said she was unable to relocate geographically as the child's father refused to have the child living too far away.

### **Conclusion: the question of choice**

This research sought to explore the visible and invisible barriers to career advancement within hotel management in large hotels in New Zealand and Australia. A further aim of the paper was to highlight the way that when looking at the glass ceiling phenomenon it is essential to observe the intersections between gender, other diversity characteristics and the glass ceiling. Within the context of this study the concept of intersectionality takes on a real relevance as clearly not all women experienced the barriers to career progression within the organisation to the same degree. A key contribution of the paper has been to make visible collective social identity groupings and the influence these have on how individuals see themselves and, importantly, how others perceive them through association with a group (Kirton & Greene, 2000). In order of importance the barriers were revealed as the 'long hours' culture, the Old Boys' network, hiring practices and geographical mobility. While the barriers related to women managers' career progression, they were also a significant influence on women's work-life balance, and their personal life choices.

Integral, to any discussion on ‘choice’, a concept that is at the heart of the discourse on work-life balance is a hegemonic belief that given gender equity, choice will follow. So, even when there is clear evidence to the contrary, much of the prevailing organizational rhetoric still typically emphasizes equality, equal opportunity and the virtues of work-life policies (Lewis, 2006; Tienari, Quack, & Theobald, 2002). Commentators do highlight the problematic nature of the work-life balance discourse and its complexity (Caproni, 2004; Lewis, 2006; Waring & Fouche, 2007). However work life balance policies’ intuitive appeal as a panacea capable of overcoming barriers for individual women in organisations has led to heightened expectations and in doing so, has promoted a belief that gender no longer has explanatory relevance for workplace inequities (Lewis, 2006). Companies such as the hotel company which took part in this research had no work- life balance policy in place although it was stated that work life balance was a priority for the company (not just an issue for women). Yet the reality was that many of their organisational practices made it impossible for women with family responsibilities to survive easily within the company. Notions such as the restricted roles women were deemed fit for and the changed expectations of women with children made women decide at an early stage in their careers that the life of a hotel manager would not be compatible with the lifestyle that they sought to attain.

So, the findings of this research show that ‘genuine choice’ in this contemporary workplace is still, for women, as much an ideal to strive for now as it was two decades ago. Or, as Dupuis (2007) aptly reminds us, the phrase work-life balance may have simply become a further convenient, overworked, misrepresented term to divert attention away from the demands of a 24 / 7 economy and a society where ‘choice’ and individual autonomy are juxtaposed with employers’ demands for flexibility and the needs of family. In other words, is the ‘hype’ simply masking an obsolete belief about the ‘ideal worker’ and the way paid work should be done (Simpson & Lewis, 2007)? Choice, for aspiring female managers in the Australasian hotel sector remains an illusion, constrained by the visible and invisible barriers of an “inequality regime” (Acker, 2006).

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