

## **Holding Out for a Hero**

### **Female management role models in hotels**

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**Abstract**

*This paper investigates what barriers are present for female managers in the organisational structure of Australian and New Zealand hotels that may delay their progress to senior management positions. Research was carried out in an international group represented by more than 30 hotels in two countries. The methodology included a survey of the hotel group's female supervisors and managers with 18 follow up interviews. One major issue that arose from the research was the absence of role models for women. Women managers found that the many women who have 'made it to the top' were "childless superwomen" (Liff and Ward, 2001) and as such, unrealistic role models. These findings provide implications for hospitality management practice.*

**Key Words:** Gender and diversity in Organisations, Organisational Behaviour, Critical Management Studies, International Management, Role models, Women in Management, Hotel Management

## **ROLE MODELS IN HOTELS**

This paper specifically examines the existence of female role models within hotels. It looks at the experiences of female managers generally within a large hotel chain and specifically at their views on the female role models in their organisations. Role models are regarded as important in inducting employees into new careers, organisations and job content. Individuals are believed to select reputable persons, for example supervisors and mentors, as role models and the influence of these role models can carry on long after the initial socialisation period (Gibson, 2003). Not only do role models contribute to an individual's career development but they may be a provider of motivation, self belief and career direction (Murrell & Zagenczyk, 2006). Women who have access to mentoring relationships (which includes role modelling) earn more and are promoted more than those women who do not have such assistance (Blake-Beard, 2001), although there is evidence to suggest that more positive outcomes are associated with having a male white mentor (Dreher & Chargois, 1998).

Research has been carried out into organisational practices that prevent the advancement of women beyond lower managerial roles, a situation, it is argued, that needs to be changed (Burke & Mattis 2005). In New Zealand 8.65% of companies have women as company directors (compared to 8.7% in Australia, 11% in the UK and 14.8% in the United States), yet women form 46.1% of the New Zealand labour force (Human Rights Commission, 2008). There still exists a pattern of vertical sex segregation that, in common with other western countries, remains resistant to change (Olsson & Pringle, 2004). This paper reviews how the visibility of role models can itself form a barrier.

## **HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL SEGREGATION IN HOSPITALITY**

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. Gendered segregations of labour exist in management with women and men specialising in different types of work (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008). Horizontal and vertical segregation is clearly illustrated in the hierarchical structures of large hotels (Purcell, 1997) and practice continues to stereotype the roles for which woman are deemed more suitable such as housekeeping or human resources management. A particular feature of the service industry is its strong emotional labour content; women may be hired for their ability to provide empathy in dealing with people in a service capacity (Korczynsky, 2002). 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). Executives wishing for advancement to General Manager make career decisions that will help them become GMs, actively seeking management experience and responsibility, even outside their chosen area (Beck & Lopa, 2001) and an ideal hotel manager is one who has developed competencies across a variety of hotel departments (Deery 2002; Carbery et al. 2003). However, competencies such as “flexible to business needs” can give rise to the expectations that women with family commitments will not be able to meet directive competencies (Rees & Garnsey 2003). Social factors can impact on women’s career progression (Burke, 2005) and may influence their decision to change jobs or relocate.

## ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

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). The ‘gentleman’s club’ culture, among others, excludes women in a paternalistic fashion and many organisational cultures appear to be dominated by male values (Maddock & Parkin, 1993). Oakley (2000) defines the ‘Old Boy Network’ as an unofficial male social system that stretches within and across organisations and excludes both less powerful males and all women from its ranks. Homosocial practices such as marginalisation and competitiveness may also be demonstrated in organisations where male managers show a preference for “men and men’s company” (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008, p. 44). The type of culture described above may reflect the male values of an organisation and can have an impact on definitions of appropriate behaviour for male and female managers. In hotels, this can apply to behaviour in the workplace and also to the many work-based social activities inherent in management roles. ‘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). Guerrier (1986) mentions being ‘visible’ as intrinsic to the role of hotel manager and women (as the minority) will experience discomfort at being visible when to ensure progression they must conform to male norms. Kanter (1977) portrays the difficulties of advancing while being a minority in an organisation and Acker (2006) states that:

*“in general, work is organised on the image of a white man who is totally dedicated to the work and has no responsibilities for children or family demands other than earning a living”* (page 448).

The desirable worker is seen as passionate about his / her job (Caproni 2004) and fully committed to the corporation. Workplace norms continue to penalise those who do not conform to the image of the traditional worker, where paid work is prioritised over all else. The long working day in hotels is seen as intrinsic to working practices in hotels (Hicks 1990; Brownell 1993; Knutson, 1999) and shapes the experiences of women aspiring to a management career.

## **CHILDLESSNESS AS A CAREER ADVANTAGE**

For women, childlessness can appear to be a career advantage. Brownell (1994) found that less than 7% of the male General Managers (GMs) surveyed compared to 33% of female hotel GMs were single. In 2002, 33% of high achieving professional women in the 41-55 age group were childless, compared with 25% of their male peers. This childless figure rose to 49% of the corporate ultra high achievers (earning in excess of \$100,000) compared to 19% of their male colleagues men (Hewlett, 2002). Kanter (1977) noted that minorities (for example, women managers) in organisations are subject to more group stereotypes of behaviour. Ragins (1997) argues one behavioural strategy used by such minorities is to develop into “superachievers” (p.9) in order to overcome negative stereotypes. In the banking sector, having children was not viewed as compatible with commitment to work and in order to be seen as committed to their jobs women became “childless superwomen” (Liff and Ward, 2001, p. 32). In Western society differences between work and social life can also become blurred; a phenomenon that Bauman (2007) refers to as ‘liquidity’. This liquidity is pervasive in the highly social hotel industry. 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). Lack of adequate childcare has been reported by women managers as a barrier and ultimately damaging to their career (Tharenou, 2005). The difficulty of combining hotel working conditions with family commitments was frequently stressed as issues concerning hotel school graduates, particularly women (O’Leary 2005).

The preceding research has, therefore, identified the low proportion of women in the more senior roles and established some of the challenges associated with the career of hotel manager.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed triangulation through the use of multiple methods. The first method used to

collect data was a quantitative survey, the purpose of which was to gather preliminary data about possible barriers that would direct the scope of the later interview questions. The second approach was qualitative and involved the use of semi-structured interviews. The initial survey was web based and open to 605 female managers and supervisors within company hotels in Australia and New Zealand. Respondents to the survey were asked if they wished to take part in follow-up semi-structured interviews. On the strength of the results of the preliminary data collection from the survey, a purposive sample of 18 was selected with the aim of gaining as wide a cross section of women as possible. A principal theme to emerge at an early stage was the importance of role models.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Survey findings**

**Respondent profiles:** There were 320 responses from a pool of 605 potential women: a response rate of 53%. Of these 60.8% comprised of Managers/directors, 39.2% were supervisors. Respondents were spread equally across all departments; the highest proportion was 26.2% in Rooms Division which includes Front Office, Reservations, and Housekeeping. Of the respondents, 97.5% were full time, 2.5% were employed part time. While 60% of the respondents possessed tertiary qualifications, 30.6% of respondents held no qualifications in hospitality. In terms of continuity of employment, 82.4% of the respondents had been in their present position for up to two years, 17.2% had been in their present position longer than three years and 25.8 % had been employed for more than five years.

### **Exhibit 1: Respondent’s ranking of personal qualities/characteristics required for success in the hotel industry**

Hard work	256	79.0%
Personality	236	73.3%
Relevant departmental experience	179	55.6%
Business financial knowledge	163	50.6%
Networking abilities	120	37.3%

Having a mentor	75	23.3%
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Respondents were asked to rank their three top choices of personal characteristics required for success from a list. The open-ended answers in the ‘Other’ category included personal characteristics, job skills, political skills, and moving both geographically and hierarchically. The majority of the respondents felt hard work and personality to be most important characteristics. However a significant 25.8% indicated that having a mentor was important for success.

**Exhibit 2: Respondents chose what option had been of the most benefit in their career**

Hard work	272	84.50%
Personality	222	68.90%
Relevant departmental experience	180	55.90%
Having a mentor	83	25.8%

The respondents were asked to list their top three choices with regard to what had helped them most in their career. As with the previous question, the majority of respondents felt hard work and personality to have been of most benefit. However having a mentor was ranked in fourth place of importance as being of benefit in the respondents’ career.

**Exhibit 3: Most successful strategies in advancing respondent’s careers**

Gaining a wide variety of experience	199	62.20%
Strategic moves from one property to another	168	52.50%
Having a strong support network	165	51.60%
Having a mentor	127	39.7%

Respondents were asked to pick the top three strategies that were most likely to have been of benefit in their career. Having a mentor was in fifth place with nearly 40% regarding it as very important.

**Exhibit 4: Top four barriers in moving to the next position identified by respondents (they could choose as many barriers as they wished)**

Wish to start a family / pregnancy	48	38.1%
Family commitments	40	31.7%
Lack of required / relevant experience	34	27.0%
Other	30	23.8%
No female role models	27	21.4%

Lack of role models came fourth in order of barriers in moving to the next position. One comment was:

*The boys' club and the women in management roles are not role models. They have had to be very hard to get to where they are, and what they become are not women I would*

*look up to.*

## **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 (Altman, Simpson, Baruch, & Burke, 2005) 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 term intersectionality is used to describe the mutually constitutive relations among social identities. (Shields, 2008). Groups differentiated by diversity categories, for example chronological age or gender, may perceive and experience forms of institutional life at different times in the workplace. 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 the survey data (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.

### **Expectations of Women's Roles**

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.*

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 they should be restricted to certain jobs and described the existence of informal male networks built around sports, engendered for example by tickets for events being passed out by Concierge but rarely given to female staff or 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.

*It's not only the football they're talking about, they talk about work or opportunities that are becoming available or things that the hotel is changing , all that information could actually help you if you knew it.*

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.

*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 but we are going to get more bang for our buck out of him and the reason is simply because I know that if she is a family woman, whether she's going to leave because of the company or 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*

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.

*I also wonder if you have a child, how management above views that as well, and what their impression of that is, you may still be able to work your hours but do they make certain assumptions on your desire to move on or your desire to succeed ahead?*

More senior women managers felt that they were marginalised as women in a male workplace. The attitudes they encountered may reflect the interviewees' belief that society values youth and freshness – especially physical beauty – over age and experience. All 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 or mentors for promotion, then one might not be eligible for a job opportunity. Interviewees saw the Old Boy 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 GMs.

### **The 'Long Hours' Culture**

There is an expectation of long hours in the hotel industry. The interviewees experienced resistance 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.*

The women who were just starting their careers did expect to work long hours with interviewees revealing that this was a norm for advancement. There was also the realisation that it was actually easier to achieve workplace flexibility at more senior levels of management. There were concerns how long hours might affect parents of young children at lower management levels. The company expected its managers to be flexible to the needs of the business but with irregular hours it can be difficult to reserve places in childcare centres. Some of the younger interviewees explained that they

would need to make a choice between career or a personal life and that some of them were prepared to make that sacrifice.

If I want to make it as General Manager I know that marriage and children will probably be out of the picture because if you look at all the examples of female GMs there are so many whose marriages go under. You have to work so many hours and it consumes you so much.

### **Role Models**

Interviewees reported that female role models are necessary. They commented that they wanted ‘normal’ role models, with a lifestyle that women could relate to. Not all respondents identified with the senior women in their organisation, although particular female managers seemed to be inspirational for the respondents. There appeared to be too few role models, and female managers were concentrated in areas such as Human Resources:

*I was really inspired by XXX, when I started working. I thought, well, here's this woman who has it all, and she's the career woman and she's high flying and she gets to travel everywhere and wear power suits and you know it's every little girl's Barbie fantasy, or whatever you want to call it, and then I realised that she works constantly.*

Interviewees expressed concern over how few women there were at senior levels in their organisation. Younger female managers felt “invisible” and that they would be an exception if they were to proceed up the career ladder.

*It would be good, it would be nice, it wouldn't be necessary, but just to hear how some women have achieved, what they wanted, how they've gone about it, like talking about real women, not ... if you know what I mean ... normal women who have respect for themselves. When you start talking about directors and area managers, pathetic, like you've got no hope, as keen and no matter how much drive you've got...*

## **Role Models with Families**

Interviewees frequently raised the issue of the scarcity of women with partners and families as role models within the organisation. Women who were considering the possibility of having a family were concerned that there were few mothers with young children in senior roles. They felt that this made it very difficult to stand out and be different.

*I feel that I don't have enough role models, I feel that in managerial situations (women are in Human Resources and not in rooms and it's like a different department) it would be nice to have a mother who has had to deal with whatever is here and dealing with children at the same time, and with all the people I work with, **none** of them have children*

Some respondents expressed concern that pregnant women may not have been considered for promotion or had been made redundant.

*There's this huge issue. Even when women get pregnant in hotels their opportunities for promotion are immediately dismissed*

Various respondents commented that most of the women in senior positions 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'.

*In this organisation when you look at the women who are in senior roles very few of them are in relationships that have lasted, that have been married since they first got into hotels and are still married a few years down the track, and have children. In fact I don't know [any] apart from the housekeepers perhaps.*

What also emerged was that some women in higher level positions had taken time out to rear their family, and then returned at a later stage when their children were more independent.

## **REALISTIC ROLE MODEL OR CHILDLESS SUPERWOMAN?**

When discussing the findings from the research it is essential to note how the intersection of gender, age and life stage affected women's perceptions of the barriers that they encountered.

The most substantial visible barrier for the women interviewed 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 principal 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. Women 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.

The most significant invisible barrier to the women in this research was identified as the Old Boy's network. One of the key issues in this debate was how women managers who decided to have children would be viewed by the masculine culture around them. The findings showed the possibility of bias against hiring women who may not be capable of conforming to the image of a manager that will put the needs of the organisation before his/her family which correlates to 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 how 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 being made redundant. 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. Women established in their career spoke of being made to feel marginalised by homosocial practices (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008) that manifested itself through comments during meetings and exclusion from social activities. For the more senior managers there was an emphasis on looks and a youthful appearance extending to advice on how to have corrective treatment. However at this life/career stage 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 lack of role models clouds women's expectations of what they can aspire to in this organisation. The survey results showed clearly the importance the respondents attached to the concept of a mentor in their strategies for future success. The subsequent interviews underlined the lack of realistic female role models in the organisation. This exerted a negative influence on women's upward mobility as women who have access to mentoring (including role modelling) are promoted more than those women who do not have such assistance (Blake-Beard, 2001). The fact that the interviewees did not discuss the existence of female mentors in the organisation could have been because more positive outcomes were associated with having a male mentor in this strongly male oriented culture (Dreher & Chargois, 1998). In a hotel management career where the individual faces many conflicting choices in assembling their skill portfolio across a wide array of departments, advice from a mentor is critical for career development. In this organisation successful female role models would be significant in providing motivation and self belief (Murell & Zagenczyk, 2006). In the hotels where the research was based there were few senior women in the company working outside the traditional departments of Housekeeping and Human Resources therefore female role models in the departments that provided a direct career path to General Manager such as Food and Beverage Manager and Executive Assistant Manager were less universal.

The lack of female role models with partners and young children validated the assumption that for women, within this organisation, family and career were not compatible. The fact younger women might in the future have a family constituted a significant career disadvantage. It is clear from the research findings that the presence of the Old Boys Network and the long hours culture made it difficult for women with young families to survive easily within the organisation. The findings showed the possibility of bias against hiring women who may not be capable of conforming to the image of the childless superwoman. The length of the working day in hotels was more advantageous to Acker's (2006) male manager with no family responsibilities. Female managers expressed concern about the difficulty of combining a management role with motherhood. There was apprehension that

if they were to have children, the organisation might view them differently. It is difficult to be regarded as a super achiever (Ragins 1997) if the choice of a family may demonstrate a lack of commitment to the organisation.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS**

In summary, the lack of realistic 'normal' role models was commented on by many of the respondents. There were undoubtedly positive male and female role models within the company, as they were spoken about with great respect. In general, however, the female senior managers were childless -or at least without young children. This holds great implications for the attractiveness of hotel management as a career choice for younger women who would like to reconcile having a family with their chosen career. Given that the present organisational culture can have a negative effect on female managers' career progression, then it is in the interests of hotels to promote women that will provide more realistic role models in the future. With regards to future research it would be rewarding to return to the hotel group that this research was based upon, and to see if their initiatives to facilitate an organisational culture that supports equality in the workplace have been successful.

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