

## **Challenges in Recruiting and Retaining Women in Five-Star Hotels, Sri Lanka**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study focuses on the challenges faced in recruiting and retaining women in five-star hotels in Sri Lanka. While women make up a significant portion of the workforce in the hospitality industry, they are underrepresented in many positions in Sri Lanka. This paper aims to identify the barriers that contribute to this disproportion and identify potential solutions. The research is based on a mixed-methods approach that involves surveys and interviews with women employees and managers in five-star hotels in Sri Lanka. The findings suggest that there are several challenges that hinder the recruitment and retention of women within the overall industry, including cultural norms, biases, and lack of flexibility in work arrangements. Additionally, women face barriers related to employment strategies and negative perceptions held by the society, as well as a lack of support from their family members and spouses. To address these challenges, this paper proposes several recommendations, such as implementing diversity and inclusion training programs, offering flexible work arrangements, promoting mentoring, and networking programs, and providing equal opportunities for employment and training. These recommendations aim to improve the recruitment and retention of women in the hospitality industry in Sri Lanka, which can benefit both the individual employees and the industry.

**Keywords:** Recruiting, Retention, Challenges, Women, Hospitality

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to recognize the challenges that hinder women from joining and continuing their employment in five-star hotels within Sri Lanka's hospitality industry. As the country heavily relies on the service sector, it requires competent human resources to sustain and advance its tourism and hospitality sector as a significant part of its economic strategy. The research objectives are:

1. To understand the factors that hinder women from entering and remaining in five-star hotels.
2. To recognize these obstacles with regards to the recruitment and retention of women in five-star hotels.
3. To assess how managerial level, age group, and gender affect the recruitment and retention of women.
4. To provide recommendations for addressing the identified challenges.

The hospitality industry in Sri Lanka faces challenges in recruiting and retaining women employees. The term 'hotel' is often misused in Sri Lanka, leading to a lack of clarity in job roles (Abeywardana & Priyadarshani, 2017). Women in the hospitality industry experience disparities in professional advancement and empowerment, particularly in underdeveloped countries like Sri Lanka (Karunaratne, 2015). Despite an increase in women's enrolment in higher education, there is still a disproportionate dissatisfaction among women in upper managerial positions within hotels. Corporate leaders and managers, who are primarily men, often claim that women lack the necessary qualifications and experience for significant advancement (Manoharan et al., 1999). Discrimination is viewed as less of a problem, but there remains a gender disparity in promotion rates, with women at a disadvantage.

Efforts have been made to attract human resources in the Sri Lankan hotel industry due to limited applications through standard newspaper advertisements. However, the retention of women employees in the industry has not been thoroughly studied. Female employment in the industry, which was higher in the late 1970s and early 1980s, has declined and currently stands at or below 7%. This decline highlights the challenges faced in recruiting and retaining women in the hospitality sector (Abeywardana & Priyadarshani, 2017).

Retention of women in the industry is also a challenge. A World Bank survey revealed that 85% of respondents believed that women are likely to leave their jobs in tourism after getting married (Wijayasiri, 2020). Societal and cultural pressures, including the expectation that women prioritize family responsibilities over their careers, discourage women and young people from applying for jobs in Sri Lankan hotels.

The challenges faced by the hospitality industry in recruiting and retaining women in five-star hotels in Sri Lanka are not unique to the country but represent a global issue. These challenges stem from complex and multifaceted factors, with societal and cultural influences playing a significant role in limiting women's participation and advancement. Addressing these challenges is crucial to providing women with equal opportunities for employment, professional growth, and empowerment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'hospitality' is frequently used to refer to the large industry that includes accommodation, food and beverages, recreation, conventions, travel, and attractions (Ottenbacher et al., 2009). Additionally, it can be used to describe someone's behaviour to another person. The more elaborate definition provided by Morrison and O'Gorman (2008) is as follows: "It represents a host's courteous reception, welcome and entertainment of guests or strangers of various social backgrounds and cultures into one's space for temporary lodging or socialising in a kind and lavish manner".

Wood and Brotherton (2008) has mentioned that hospitality is a harmonic combination of shelter, food, drink, physical environment and people's attitude and behaviour. According to this definition, hospitality is a practice that is primarily and intentionally developed for consumption. When this definition is further enhanced, it includes establishments that offer people numerous services while they are away from home, such as casinos, resorts, private clubs, and other attractions (Barrows & Powers 2009).

In Sri Lankan context because of the two perceptions and sectors, tourism and hospitality are frequently used interchangeably (Abeywardana & Priyadarshani, 2017). For the purpose of this study, the term 'hospitality industry' refers to businesses that offer food, drink and lodging to those who are travelling for several reasons. The hospitality industry is the backbone of Sri Lanka's tourism industry. The potential to offer accommodation continues to be a major service, hence its size remains unchanged. As of December 31, 2022, there were 3,829 SLTDA-registered lodging establishments. There were 156 classified tourist hotels, 37 of which were five-star establishments. When total establishments and total room count are compared for the years 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021, it can be seen that total establishments reached by 46.1% in 2022 compared to 2019 while total room count increased by 19.2%. In addition, a breakdown of establishments by star category was observed in 2022: 37 were classed as five-star, 37 as four-star, 26 as three-star, 28 as two-star, 28 as one-star, and 224 as unclassified and 40 boutique hotels (Research and International Relations Division Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2022).

Within the European Union, the tourist sector employs a significant number of women. In 2020, there were more women (58%) than men working in the tourism industries, compared to 36% of all non-financial business employees. The sectors of the industry with the largest percentages was travel and tour operators (64%) and lodging (60%) respectively. While little over one in ten males worked part-time in the tourism industry, nearly three out of ten women did the same, accounting for the largest percentage of employment (41%). Only two Member States—Malta and Luxembourg—had a lower percentage of employed women than the whole tourism industry. Over half of all workers in the tourism industry in Estonia, Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia were female. (Eurostat, 2022). According to Baum (2015), less than 40% of all managerial and supervisory positions and less than 20% general management positions are held by women. In Fortune 500 Companies women make up 52.4% of the workforce but only 15.5% are in executive roles (Catalyst, 2015). Because of this gender segregation, employment laws appear to vary from country to country, but the truth is that the top levels are still closed to most women (Obadic and Ivana, 2009).

According to Wickramasinghe and Jayatilaka (2013), gender stereotyping is the practise of assuming that women are better suited to perform specific tasks, work in specific locations, or

operate in specific industries than males are. As stated by Shrestha (2016), men have long held a significant amount of power in the tourist sector since it is inherently masculine.

In Sri Lanka, the employment rate is 51.8%, with 72.7% of males and 34% of female participating in the labour force. The unemployment rate is 75% which includes both young people and women and is becoming a major worry in the Sri Lankan labour market (Sri Lanka, 2019). Young women make up a significantly large portion of unemployed population, hence it is arguable whether or not certain industries tend to offer more employment openings for women. According to the government registered hotel schools, Colombo, Kandy, and Anuradhapura have 21%, 12% and 6% female students which shows a lack of interest among Sri Lankan women in studying and working in tourism industry (Silva and Mendis, 2017).

Young women who are freshly entering the workforce, need to be realistic about their career advancement and dedicate time to learning about the culture and operations of the sector. Women with strong professional profiles and relevant operational department experience are typically recruited by the hospitality sector. They should try to accomplish these goals early in their work before getting married or taking on household responsibilities because this experience is seen to be crucial for upward development (Peshave & Gupta, 2017).

Since traditional newspaper advertisements do not generate enough applications, the hospitality industry itself employs a variety of strategies to find the necessary candidates. The recruitment process should also include a career guidance counselling, where the applicant is helped by a third party to determine his/her true goals, professional aspirations, and skills in order to match them with the needs of the labour market. Retention is the process of keeping desired employees on board once they are hired (Allen et al. 2010). However, when it comes to salary compensation and services, the hotel businesses face a challenge in keeping its employees. Hence it was discovered to be a key factor in an employee's decision to stay in the industry or quit.

The shortage of trained human resources is one of the challenges that Sri Lanka's tourism industry and its growth must overcome. It has been projected that 25,000-30,000 more workers will be needed annually to handle the forecasted increase in visitor arrivals to the island, because only 10,000 graduates with hotel training are produced each year. Considering this, the National Policy Framework has planned to expand the number of workers to one million from 388,487, while developing hospitality training institutions in major tourist cities and introducing competitive skill development courses. Compared to the 54% of female employment internationally, less than 10% of the workforce is made up of women in Sri Lanka. Men are identified to be more prevalent than women across all operational categories in Sri Lanka's hospitality industry, apart from positions in marketing, front office, and guest relations. Therefore, encouraging more women to enter the field will support in addressing the growing labour shortage, a major obstacle to the sector's expansion (Wijayasiri, 2020). According to Eagly and Wood (1991), those who are typically driven will certainly like a competitive environment than those who are less motivated. Furthermore, it appears that men will stick to a strong organizational culture more firmly than women. It is advised that if a company really wants to encourage more women to pursue top management roles, they should work to improve the culture there and provide greater compensation and equal status (Peshave & Gupta, 2017).

From a Sri Lankan perspective, a lack of female leaders limits potential female aspirants in the sector from advancing to the top levels of executive roles (Karunarathna, 2015). The research by Mooney and Ryan (2009) also revealed a bias against recruiting women who would not be able to fit the profile of a manager. Men have historically used networks to advance in their employment, whereas women are denied this opportunity since they are not exposed to

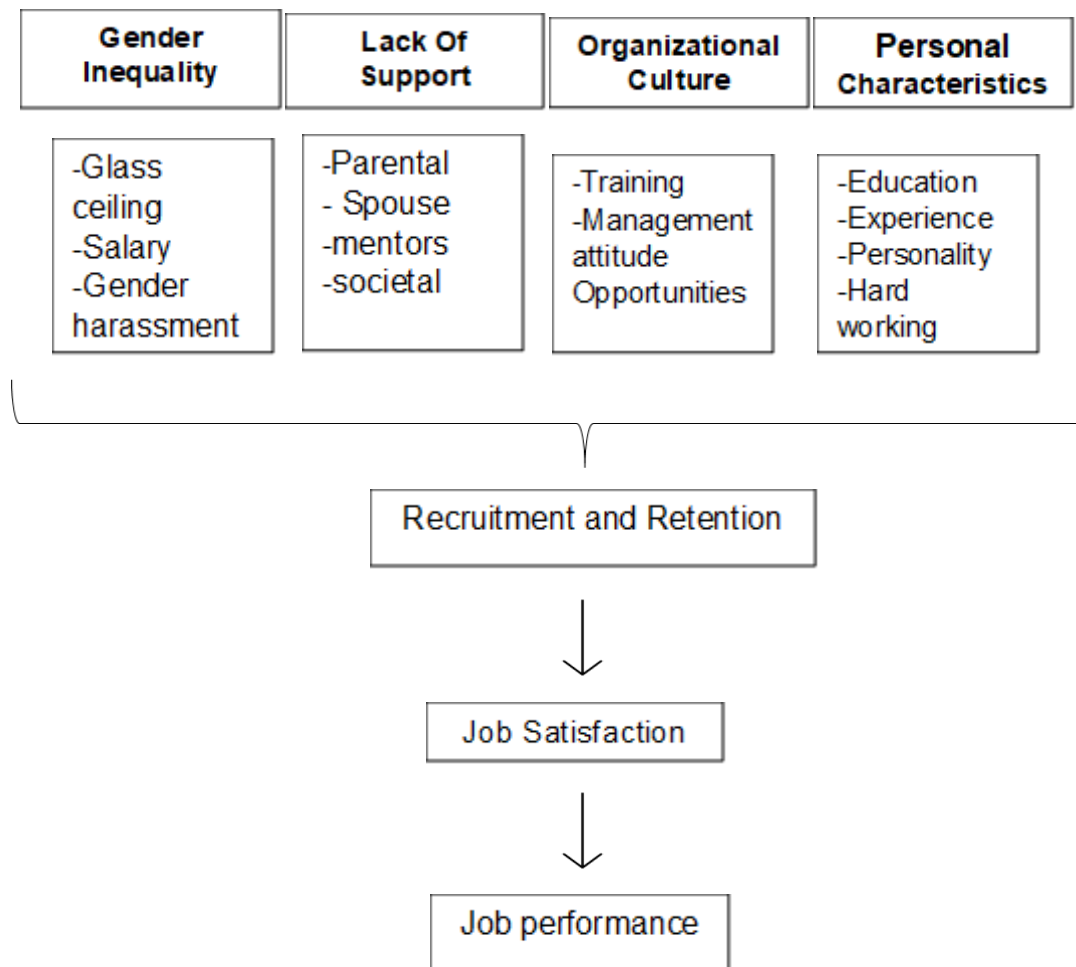
necessary information needed for advancement (Mooney, 2009). Meanwhile, research conducted in five-star hotels in India found that there are no connections between networking and career guidance for women's professional growth (Patwardhan et al., 2015). Being able to build strong networks will give you a platform to raise your visibility in your business, which is a crucial component of success. A future investment can be made by reaching out to those on an equal footing since one of them would become the CEO of a different company.

Mooney & Ryan (2009), refer to the challenge of retaining outstanding female employees in their career development in the face of obstacles including the tradition of long work hours, the 'old boys' network', hiring and recruiting procedures, and geographic mobility. The 'old boys' network' is a term that describes the informal patriarchal networks within companies that hold power and influence while frequently excluding minority groups. The members of old boy networks transfer the competitiveness and power advantages gained in the formal system onto friendship networks and alliances inside the informal system (Oakley, 2000).

The tourism and hospitality sector are a service-based economy that operates perpetually. For everyday operation and maintenance, it significantly relies on its human resources. Due to the sector's potential to generate foreign currency for the nation, both public and private sector organisations have given it a great deal of attention with the prolonged war came to an end. Accommodations for tourists and the human resources need to deliver the essential services to a labour-intensive sector are an immediate and direct demand. With a Governmental operating framework, which we refer to as tourist governance, the tourism and hospitality industries are highly reliant on contributions from the private sector, which owns most hotels and leisure facilities (Abeywardana & Priyadarshani, 2017).

Since the majority of the private sector training providers are in the Western, North-Western, and Central Provinces, the public vocational skills development offer in the hospitality sector has the potential to step in and produce the required human resource through its network of Vocational training (VT) centres and regional schools. In other provinces, there is a lack of VT centres from the public and private sectors offering training relevant to the hospitality industry. The socio-cultural obstacles of family, community, and the workplace prevent the skilled human resource from entering and remaining in the sector due to the mismatch between industry demand and the present skills development offer.

Although, the literature review demonstrates that women are still underrepresented in the hospitality industry as a result of barriers to their professional advancement, the hotel industry should essentially hire and retain women at various levels by offering a secure and supportive environment that promotes their progress. The hospitality industry should develop measures to retain this skilled pool of workers and not undervalue the value of women in the workplace (Peshave & Gupta, 2017).



**Figure 1: Conceptual framework (Based on literature review)**

Theories of recruiting and retaining women in the hospitality industry indicate that women have been devalued in both theory and social contexts. Several factors were identified that act as obstacles to women’s career growth; gender discrimination and sexual harassments (Brownell, 1994), glass ceiling (Hendrie, 2008), pay inequalities (Pavesic & Brymer, 1990), organizational culture (Eagly & Wood, 1991), work-life balance (Guerrier, 1999; Pizam, 1999), old boy network (Oakley, 2000), lack of career guidance (Riley, 1996) and unhelpful bosses (Weber, 1998) and other social constraints. From the critical discussion of the relevant literature, it is evident that there are a range of factors that have influence on women employed in the hospitality industry, in the Sri Lankan context. This can be seen in Figure 1, which represents these in a conceptual framework.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used in the current study, known as an explanatory mixed methodology, is quite common among researchers and involves collecting and analysing data all within the context of a single study (Creswell, 2014). This, the sequential mixed-methods explanatory design features two separate phases: quantitative and qualitative (Creswell et al., 2003, pp. 209–240). An explanatory sequential design begins with the gathering and analysis of

quantitative data, moves on to the collection and analysis of qualitative data, and concludes with interpretation. This aids in identifying the quantitative findings that require more justification (Harvard Catalyst, 2023)

The purpose of using this method was to pinpoint the elements that stand as obstacles to hire and keep women in five-star hotels Sri Lanka and the following sections will further discuss about the methods used in collecting and analysing the data.

## **Research Methods**

A Web-based, self-completion questionnaire was used by the researcher to acquire the quantitative data (McMillan 2000; Creswell 2008). Six demographic questions, four Likert scale questions, two multiple-choice questions, and an open-ended question made up the questionnaire. The questionnaire took at best 5-10 minutes to complete by the respondents and the validity and reliability of the questionnaire items were determined in accordance with the factors that the researcher discovered through the review of the pertinent literature.

The second phase of the study was qualitative, and the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews in which a planned set of themes and perhaps some key questions pertaining to these themes are used to guide the performance of each interview during a semi-structured interview (Saunders et al., 2019). The interviews were conducted via zoom and there timed for 45 minutes per interviewee. Two male and one female management professionals who are currently employed in hotels were given preference since they would have sufficient insider knowledge and awareness of the sector to be able to discuss potential causes for the low levels of women's employment.

## **Sampling**

The sampling method used for quantitative method was snowball sampling, which involves passing down references from one person to another, which results in the sample being produced (Denscombe, 2017). There were only 50 working individuals who working in five-star hotels as one of the criteria for choosing the respondents for the quantitative method. As a result, they would be able to consider the obstacles they faced outside of the sector as well as any problems they may have with their families or society.

The sampling method used for the qualitative method was purposeful sampling as it is an effective technique when the researcher has prior knowledge of the individuals or events in question and chooses those instances specifically because they are thought to be likely to provide the most insightful information (Denscombe, 2017). Three hospitality industry experts were chosen for the study based on their expertise and relevance.

## **Data Analysis**

In order to analyse quantitative data, the SPSS statistical software was used which performs comparison and correlational statistical tests in the scope of univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analysis for both parametric and non-parametric statistical procedures (Hanafi et al., 2017).

According to Saunders et Al. (2019), when an interpretivist strategy is used, the approach to the list of prepared themes is possibly going to be more adaptable and reliant upon what every participant says and if this is the case, the conversational flow and the information provided with you will determine the sequence in which you ask every respondent to discuss these

themes. As these interviews were recorded, the audio recordings were transcribed, because doing so allows for more thorough searches and data comparisons (Denscombe, 2017).

## **Ethics**

Each participant received a copy of the consent form and information sheet, as required by the university's policies and every interview was conducted over Zoom, with the password-protected recordings stored on the researcher's personal laptop. All respondents were voluntary, and confidentiality was always prime.

The questionnaire consisted of 6 sections which included 12 questions. Some of the themes in the questionnaire were work-life balance, gender disparities, social stigma, and these included questions such as 'You believe that working after 5pm is stressful', 'You are provided with transportation on the days that you are required to work for longer working hours or night shifts', 'You believe that your partner is supportive and understanding about balancing home activities with your career goals'. The interview questions are as follows:

1. Why did you enter the hotel industry for employment?
2. How do you feel about your job and working in the industry?
3. What do you like about working in your current hotel and why do you think that women should join the industry?
4. What are key recruitment drives in your hotel?
5. Why do you think there are lesser female workforce in the hospitality industry as a whole? (Ask about their own experiences in this regard like whether they had or have any pertaining obstacles when joining or remaining in the industry)
6. Can you briefly tell me about the retention practices that are currently in place with your hotel?
7. In your opinion, what can be done to address the negative perceptions and attract more women to the industry?

## **RESULTS**

The study obtained 50 complete questionnaire responses, which are presented in this section as the study's findings. The results can be separated into two categories as quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative results are categorised into the following: demographic characteristics; work life balance; gender inequality; social stigma; corporate governance and challenges for recruitment and retention of women within the hospitality industry. Quantitative results were analysed using graphs, frequencies, and descriptive statistics. The qualitative section will help to explain about in-depth responses related to the study objectives.

### **Quantitative Results**

#### ***Demographic characteristics***

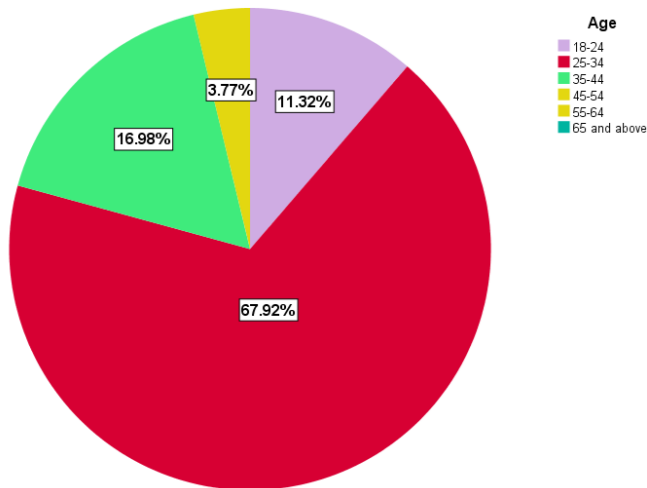
- ***Age and sex of respondents***

Respondents of all ages (18 to over 60) were represented, with slightly larger numbers in the lowest age bracket 25-34 and 35-44 categories accounting for 67% and 16.98% respectively

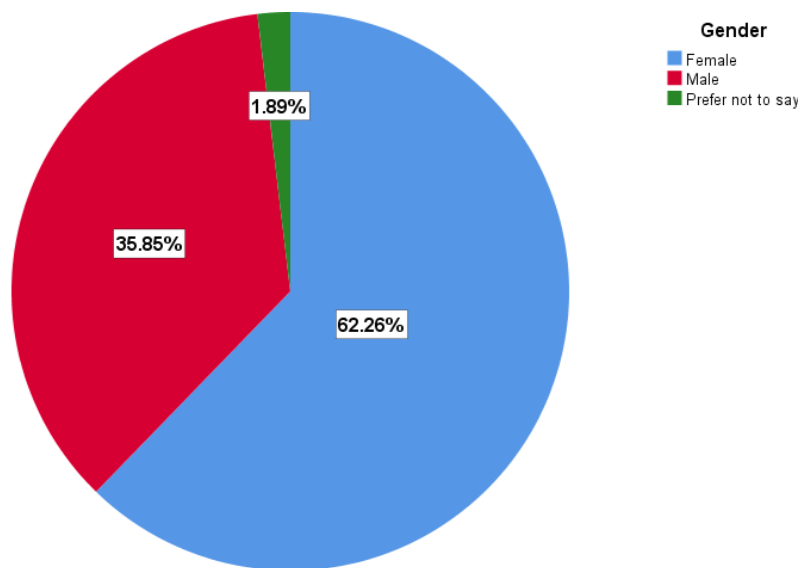


(Figure 2). The lowest age category was 18-24 which accounted for 11.32% of the respondents. Males made up 32.85% of the population while females made up 67.92% (Figure 3).

*Figure 2: Age*



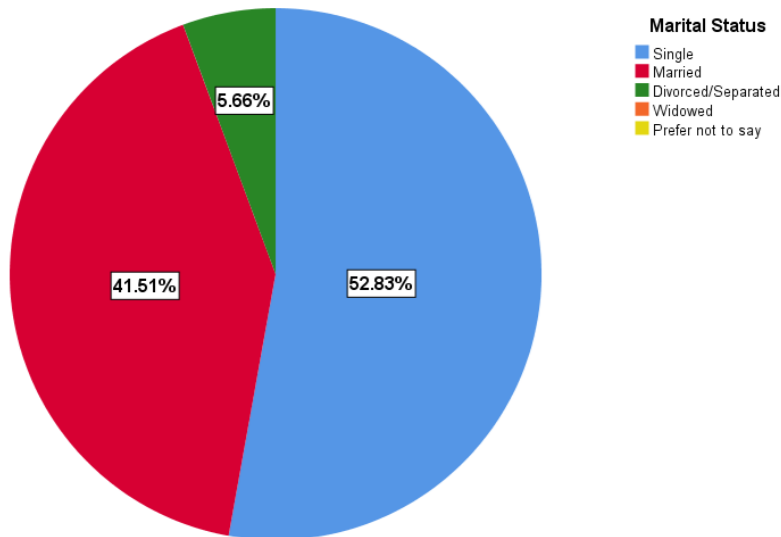
*Figure 3: Gender*



- ***Marital status of respondents***

The findings of this study showed that most of the respondents, 52.83% were single and 41.51% were married. Further, 5.66% were divorced or separated (**Figure 4**).

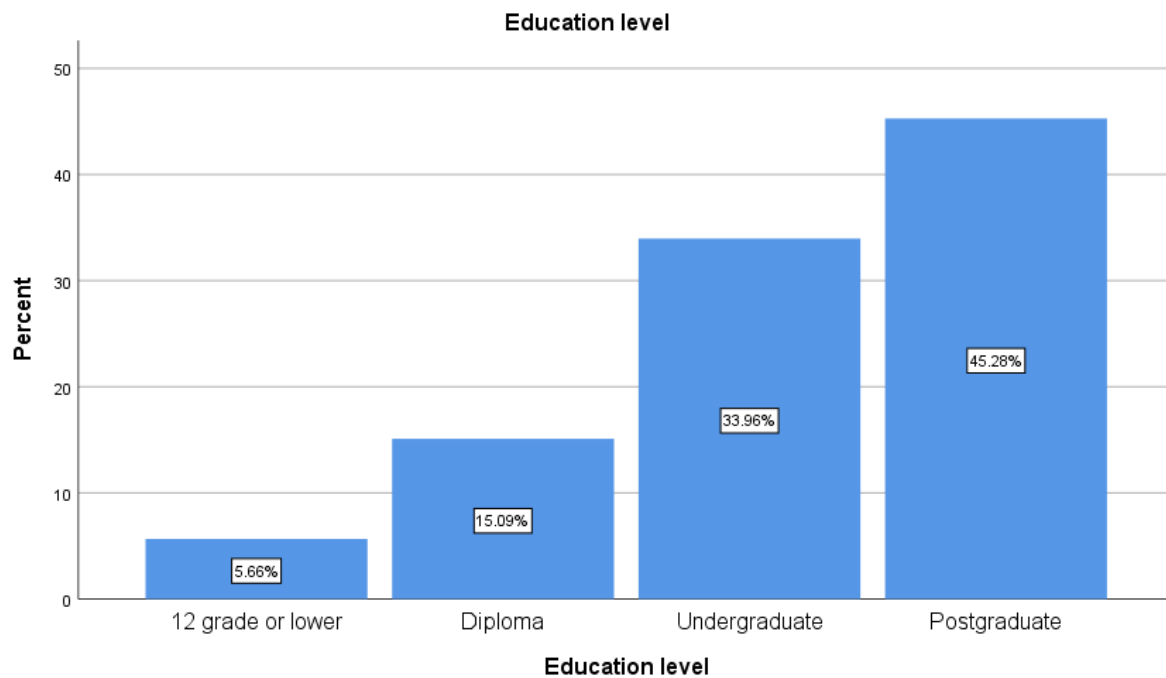
**Figure 4: Marital Status**



- ***Education level of respondents***

Many studies show a link between education, knowledge, and behaviours of people. **Figure 5** shows the respondents' educational backgrounds. Overall, the results showed that 5.66% of the respondents had completed their schooling up to the 12th grade or lower. Among others, 15.09% have a diploma, and 45.28% have finished their postgraduate studies.

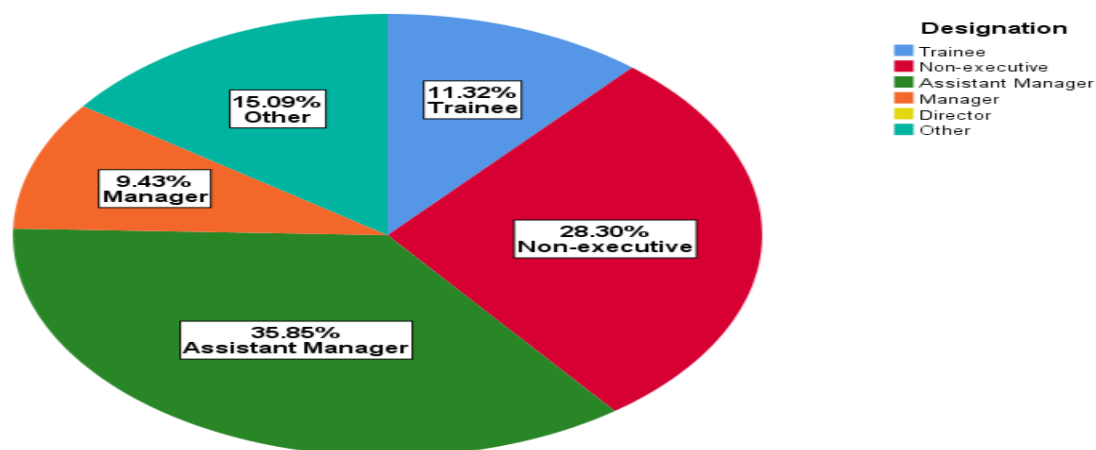
**Figure 5: Education level**



**Designation of respondents**

The results indicated that the main designation of a majority 35.85% are at assistant managerial level. A smaller percentage, 9.43% consisted of managers and a mere 11.32% were grouped under trainee level. The remaining respondents were grouped under non-executive level (28.30%) and other job roles (15.09%) respectively (Figure 6)

**Figure 6: Designation**



- Work experience of respondents**

In this study, 32.08% of the respondents have been working in the hospitality industry for 3-5 years and nearly 30.19% have worked for 5-10 years while a mere 7.55% have been employed more than 10 years (Figure 7). However, surprisingly females tend to have more work experience than males according to Table 2.

**Figure 7: Years of work experience**



**Table 2: Work experience of respondents**

Years of working experience		Gender		
		Female Count	Male Count	Prefer not to say Count
Years of working experience	Less than 1 year	5	0	0
	1-2 years	8	2	1
	3-5 years	11	6	0
	5-10 years	9	7	0
	Over 10 years	0	4	0

- Work life balance**

Results of the study revealed that most of the respondents held a neutral opinion about working after 5pm or working from 9.00am-5.00pm. However, 43.4% of them agreed that they mainly work to support families. Surprisingly, 9.4% responded that they strongly disagree with the statement ‘household chores are more comforting than working full time.’ 54.7% strongly agreed that they expect to have a work life balance from the current job (**Table 3**). 10 female respondents have agreed that they prefer working from 9.00am to 5.00pm only and 6 females have strongly agreed that household chores are more comforting than working full time.

Among the respondents 8 females have strongly agreed that working after 5.00pm is stressful (Table 4).

**Table 3: Work life balance**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Working after 5pm is stressful	15.1%	26.4%	32.1%	22.6%	3.8%
Prefer working from 9.00 am to 5.00pm only	15.1%	24.5%	37.7%	18.9%	3.8%
Professional life as a means of earning an income to support family	20.8%	43.4%	22.6%	11.3%	1.9%
Household chores more comforting that working full time	11.3%	26.4%	34.0%	18.9%	9.4%
Having a balance between work and personal life is what you expect from the current job	54.7%	30.2%	9.4%	1.9%	3.8%

**Table 4: Work life balance**

		Gender		
		Female Count	Male Count	Prefer not to say Count
Working after 5pm is stressful	Strongly Agree	8	0	0
	Agree	6	7	1
	Neutral	9	8	0
	Disagree	8	4	0
	Strongly Disagree	2	0	0
Prefer working from 9.00 am to 5.00pm only	Agree	10	3	0
	Disagree	5	5	0
	Neutral	11	8	1
	Strongly Agree	6	2	0
	Strongly Disagree	1	1	0
Professional life as a means of earning an income to support family	Agree	11	11	1
	Disagree	5	1	0
	Neutral	8	4	0
	Strongly Agree	8	3	0
	Strongly Disagree	1	0	0
Household chores more comforting that working full time	Agree	6	8	0
	Disagree	6	4	0
	Neutral	11	7	0
	Strongly Agree	6	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	4	0	1
Having a balance between work and personal life is what you expect from the current job	Agree	10	6	0
	Disagree	0	1	0
	Neutral	3	2	0
	Strongly Agree	18	10	1
	Strongly Disagree	2	0	0

- **Gender disparities**

The study analysed five perceptions of hotel management, focusing on female employees' perceptions of feedback, promotion systems, and opportunities for growth. Female respondents (47.2%) agreed that they receive correct feedback and promotion systems, while 30.2% strongly agreed and 15.1% disagreed. Additionally, 41.5% of females agreed that they are provided with transportation for longer shifts, while 13.2% disagreed. The last statement stated that all hotel employees have equal opportunities to grow and achieve career goals, with 15.1% holding a neutral opinion and 1.9% strongly disagreeing (**Table 5 and Table 6**).

**Table 5: Gender disparities**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
You are provided with correct feedback and promotion systems to be promoted in your current position	18.9%	47.2%	17.0%	13.2%	3.8%
Regardless of your gender, the management of the hotel provides you opportunity to grow	30.2%	41.5%	13.2%	15.1%	0.0%
You are provided with transportation on the days that you are required to work for longer working hours or night shifts	20.8%	41.5%	24.5%	13.2%	0.0%
You feel comfortable working long hours as long as the company provides with good pay and all other needs	18.9%	39.6%	30.2%	9.4%	1.9%
All employees in the hotel, regardless of gender has equal opportunity to grow and achieve career goals	28.3%	39.6%	15.1%	15.1%	1.9%

**Table 6: Gender disparities**

		Gender		
		Female Count	Male Count	Prefer not to say Count
You are provided with correct feedback and promotion systems to be promoted in your current position	Strongly Agree	8	2	0
	Agree	15	9	1
	Neutral	4	5	0
	Disagree	5	2	0
	Strongly Disagree	1	1	0

Regardless of your gender, the management of the hotel provides you opportunity to grow	Strongly Agree	11	5	0
	Agree	12	9	1
	Neutral	4	3	0
	Disagree	6	2	0
You are provided with transportation on the days that you are required to work for longer working hours or night shifts	Strongly Agree	7	4	0
	Agree	14	7	1
	Neutral	7	6	0
	Disagree	5	2	0
You feel comfortable working long hours as long as the company provides with good pay and all other needs	Strongly Agree	8	2	0
	Agree	11	10	0
	Neutral	11	4	1
	Disagree	3	2	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	1	0
All employees in the hotel, regardless of gender has equal opportunity to grow and achieve career goals	Strongly Agree	7	8	0
	Agree	14	7	0
	Neutral	6	1	1
	Disagree	5	3	0
	Strongly Disagree	1	0	0

- ***Social stigma***

The study found significant differences in perceptions of social stigma among respondents. A majority (50.9%) agreed that they receive support from colleagues for personal matters and management grants leave for family matters. 13.2% disagreed with the statement about future responsibilities, while 7 females held neutral opinions on their partner's support and understanding of balancing home activities with career goals (**Table 7 and 8**).

**Table 7: Social stigma**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In ten years from now you will still remain within the hotel industry regardless of increasing future responsibilities	15.1%	43.4%	28.3%	13.2%	0.0%
You receive support from work colleagues to cover up in case you require a day off to fulfill personal responsibilities	32.1%	50.9%	15.1%	0.0%	1.9%
The management is happy to support and grant leave in case you require a day off to attend to family matters	32.1%	50.9%	17.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Your parents are supportive of your involvement in work and happy to help when you have long hours of work	37.7%	43.4%	15.1%	1.9%	1.9%
Your partner is supportive and understanding about balancing home activities with your career goals	32.1%	39.6%	20.8%	1.9%	5.7%

**Table 8: Social stigma**

		Gender		
		Female	Male	Prefer not to say
		Count	Count	Count
In ten years from now you will remain within the hotel industry regardless of increasing future responsibilities	Strongly Agree	3	4	1
	Agree	14	9	0
	Neutral	12	3	0
	Disagree	4	3	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0
You receive support from work colleagues to cover up in case you require a day off to fulfill personal responsibilities	Strongly Agree	11	6	0
	Agree	16	11	0
	Neutral	5	2	1
	Disagree	0	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	1	0	0
The management is happy to support and grant leave in case you require a day off to attend to family matters	Strongly Agree	9	8	0
	Agree	18	8	1
	Neutral	6	3	0
	Disagree	0	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0
Your parents are supportive of your involvement in work and happy to help when you have long hours of work	Strongly Agree	16	3	1
	Agree	13	10	0
	Neutral	2	6	0
	Disagree	1	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	1	0	0
Your partner is supportive and understanding about balancing home activities with your career goals	Strongly Agree	10	6	1
	Agree	13	8	0
	Neutral	7	4	0
	Disagree	0	1	0
	Strongly Disagree	3	0	0

- **Corporate governance**

Respondents were provided with five statements on corporate governance. According to the results in **Table 9**, 58.5% (20 females and 10 males) of the respondents agreed that their organization has assumptions in the recruitment process meanwhile 13 females agreed that their organization is actively doing enough to recruit women. Notably, 6 females and 2 males (15.1%) have disagreed with the statement; *There are proper retention strategies for women in your current organization* while 45.3% agreed with it (**Table 10**).



**Table 9: Corporate governance**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The current organization you work for practices high level of gender equality	35.8%	47.2%	13.2%	3.8%	0.0%
Your organization has assumptions in the recruitment process	9.4%	58.5%	24.5%	7.5%	0.0%
Your current organizational diversity policies are sufficiently effective	26.4%	45.3%	26.4%	1.9%	0.0%
Your organization is actively doing enough to attract and recruit women	28.3%	49.1%	13.2%	9.4%	0.0%
There are proper retention strategies for women in your current organization	22.6%	45.3%	17.0%	15.1%	0.0%

**Table 10: Corporate governance**

		Gender		
		Female Count	Male Count	Prefer not to say Count
The current organization you work for practices high level of gender equality	Strongly Agree	9	10	0
	Agree	17	7	1
	Neutral	5	2	0
	Disagree	2	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0
Your organization has assumptions in the recruitment process	Strongly Agree	2	3	0
	Agree	20	10	1
	Neutral	8	5	0
	Disagree	3	1	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0
Your current organizational diversity policies are sufficiently effective	Strongly Agree	7	7	0
	Agree	16	7	1
	Neutral	9	5	0
	Disagree	1	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0
Your organization is actively doing enough to attract and recruit women	Strongly Agree	9	6	0
	Agree	13	12	1
	Neutral	6	1	0
	Disagree	5	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0
There are proper retention strategies for women in your current organization	Strongly Agree	7	5	0
	Agree	15	9	0
	Neutral	5	3	1
	Disagree	6	2	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0

### ***Challenges for recruiting women in hospitality industry.***

Respondents identified challenges in recruiting women in the hospitality industry, with 43.4% citing negative perceptions and 27.6% focusing on employment strategies (**Table 11**). Other obstacles include gender, distance, pay, growth development, and lack of support from spouses and families. Career aspirations and educational qualifications were also identified as obstacles.

**Table 11: Recruitment challenges**

#### **Recruitment Challenges**

Challenges in recruiting women	Responses		
	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
Negative Perception	33	43.4%	62.3%
Educational Qualifications	11	14.5%	20.8%
Employment Strategy	21	27.6%	39.6%
Career Aspirations	9	11.8%	17.0%
Other	2	2.6%	3.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>143.4%</b>

### ***Challenges in retaining women in hospitality industry.***

Retention challenges in the industry are primarily attributed to family commitments (47.8%), language skills development (9.8%), salary and gender visibility (15.2% each), and gender visibility (15.2% each) (**Table 12**).

**Table 12: Retaining challenges**

#### **Retaining Challenges**

Challenges in retaining women	Responses		
	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
Salary	14	15.2%	26.4%
Family Commitments	44	47.8%	83.0%
Language Skills Development	9	9.8%	17.0%
Human Resources Practices	11	12.0%	20.8%
Gender and visibility	14	15.2%	26.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>173.6%</b>

The questionnaire asked respondents to suggest ways to empower female engagement in the industry. 50 respondents were considered reliable and valid. Key findings included gender equality, safe work environments, flexible hours, perception, HR practices, and amendments to Sri Lankan labour laws (**Table 12**).

## Qualitative Results

The researcher selected three industrial professionals from renowned three five-star hotels in Sri Lanka, through purposeful sampling and approaching them through email interviews. Seven qualitative questions were used to assess research objectives and value. Three themes emerged from the interviews.

### *Organisational Level*

- ***Diversity and inclusion in the workplace***

R1 believes women possess multitasking, commitment, and responsibility, making them more faithful than men. They believe women can bring flair and glamour to the hospitality industry. To recruit more ladies, R2 suggests correcting mindsets and using the word "hotel" more effectively. R3 believes hospitality is not new to women in Sri Lanka, and they should challenge beginners to start with feminine qualities to create a strong female workforce.

- ***Recruitment and retention strategies practised in the organisations.***

The economic crisis in Sri Lanka has led to high turnover in the hospitality industry, with hotels like Hotel A and Hotel B aiming to attract more women through recruitment and training programs. Hotel B targets 10% female carders and initiates regional pre-opening programs to attract women for housekeeping and public areas.

Hotel C does not have any CSR program in place, but they focus on bilingual skills, attitude, and passion for work. R3 mentioned that; "What we most look into is what you are passionate about, what comes out from your heart".

Retention strategies include training programs, long-term incentives, job chats, and additional knowledge and task force assignments. However, retaining staff is challenging due to the low salary scale in Sri Lanka. Hotel C has special programs for sexual harassment, consistent staff needs checks, one-to-one sessions with the HR department, and GM listens, where the general manager meets with department members to better understand staff members.

### *Societal Level*

- ***Gender stereotypes and biases***

The hospitality industry faces challenges due to old school thinking patterns, long working hours, physical work, household chores, and male dominance in the family.

According to R2, other obstacles include odd working hours, male preference for females to be at home, late returns, instability due to the banking sector absorbing more women, marriage, and workload. However, the trend is slowly changing as local and private universities offer foreign degrees related to hotel/hospitality management.

*But I think that this trend is changing because most of the foreign universities are offering hospitality management related degrees. The word hospitality, I think is changing this hotel sort of thing.*

R3 has a neutral opinion on the challenge of having more females in the housekeeping department due to the distance between villas and room service, as ladies do not like working late at night.

*But when it comes to room service, it's a little bit of a challenge in this property because the villas are situated 2 km away from the main building. So it is a little bit of a risky thing because the ladies don't like to work in the night.*

- ***Mentorship and networking opportunities***

As mentioned by R1, the hotel sector should increase awareness, portray a more favourable image, and draw in more women. R1 suggests showcasing lady personalities and working with schools and universities to clarify misconceptions. R2 emphasizes that women's charm is more powerful than men and should be treated as stars. R3 calls for more role models and the use of hotel associations and women's unions to attract more women. R4 emphasizes the need for Sri Lankan society to adapt to the changing and developing world, despite some people still embracing new concepts. It will take years for Sri Lanka to accept women in the hospitality industry with an open mind.

### ***Individual Level***

- ***Reason for entering hotel industry.***

Three participants shared their experiences in the hotel industry, ranging from passion for food to studies. R1 and R2 were mature professionals who never considered becoming hoteliers. R1 joined the industry as a trainee, later becoming an executive chef and managing. R2 worked as a night operator and later as an operations manager and general manager at Hotel B companies. R3 entered the industry through studying and joining management trainee programs.

- ***Perceptions about their current job role***

Two respondents expressed economic reasons for pursuing a career in the hospitality industry. R1 enjoyed working in the industry due to the potential for development and innovation.

“I prefer to work in a place where there must be certain improvements to be done. There is room or scope for development.”

R2 found international exposure interesting and content with his work; “The fact remains that I have worked all over the place, so it's pretty interesting.”

R3 mentioned the challenges faced by female employees in Sri Lanka, where the industry is still closed. However, she acknowledged the support she receives from family and friends.

The results of the questionnaire and interviews revealed several obstacles for women to join and retain the hospitality industry.

## DISCUSSION

The literature review highlights the challenges in attracting and retaining women in the hospitality industry. Thematic analysis and quantitative and qualitative methods were used to gather data, revealing sub-themes that were supported by quotations. Most of the female employees experienced discrimination, including treatment differently, less pay, and promotion opportunities. They also faced inequality in recruitment, work-life balance, and advancement. A better understanding of these issues will enable social services to defend women's rights and develop personalized solutions.

Sri Lankan men are conservative and disapprove of women working in the hotel sector. The difficulties of juggling work and family life contribute to a high percentage of female workers quitting their jobs. However, the study participants' courage and commitment to succeed at work and home were evident in their responses. They were persistent and eager to help the economy flourish. Several barriers were mentioned by research participants as they advanced in their employment, including organizational, societal, and individual challenges. Understanding these issues will enable social services to provide personalized solutions and defend the rights of discriminated-against women.

### *Organisational Level*

The study found that women in Sri Lanka's hospitality industry face challenges such as remuneration discrepancies, human resources policies, employment strategies, diversity, and inclusion. The hotel sector does not discriminate between men and women, but the lower proportion of women is due to their independent choice. Cultural assumptions about men and women's roles contribute to the wage gap (Mooney, 2020). Power structures and networking are crucial for women's professional advancement. The organizational culture of the industry also hinders women's professional advancement (Eagly and Wood, 2012).

Insufficient mentors and role models in the workplace and lack of high-level management roles are also identified as barriers. Encouraging more women to work in the hospitality sector and strengthening their potential to hold executive roles can help address these issues.

Lack of mentorship can hinder women's advancement to leadership roles, as female leaders are more transformational in mentoring and training co-workers (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). The lack of female role models is a top obstacle for women in the workplace, suggesting that having someone to mentor success, particularly female role models, is more important than simply observing successful women. Women are typically more responsible and hardworking than men, and development criteria are often more imprecise.

There is still a gender difference in job advancement, with women being at a disadvantage, even though both male and female employees are promoted based on their performance (Baum, 2013). To put it another way, despite the fact that men and women are equally qualified, males are given preference because prejudiced employers tie male employees more closely to "responsibility for capital" (Baum, 2013, p. 15) than they do to "responsibility for people" (Baum, 2013, p. 15). According to Arlotta (2019), the hospitality business offers little professional chances for women aspired to high positions. Sustained dedication to the company increases loyalty and decreases female turnover, which is advantageous for career advancement and promotion (Namasivayam and Zhao, 2007). Organizational culture affects career expectations, work-life balance, career development, and advancement, acting as a mediator

between these variables. To increase women's career development levels, better organization, time support, and work support can be implemented.

### ***Societal Level***

Social obstacles hinder women from finding employment in the hotel sector, as they are not considered welcome in the workforce. While other industries like nursing may have comparable working conditions, traditional ones may have fewer societal barriers for women. Most household chores in Sri Lanka fall on women, and the family is the biggest institution responsible for women (Ajwad & Kurukulasuriya, 2002). This creates difficulties in getting to and from work at unsociable hours, and some families may be hesitant to send their female relatives out late at night on public transportation due to cultural norms.

Hotel staff, particularly women, face constant anxiety due to social criticism and societal stereotypes. The food and beverage department are the most underrepresented in the Sri Lankan hospitality industry. Parental and marital influences can impact women's careers, with parental support reducing barriers to employment. However, a significant proportion of respondents reported that their spouses did not support or understand their professional goals. The study by Abeywardana & Priyadarshani (2017) found that female employment has decreased from 10% to 7% due to women choosing comfort zones based on family preferences.

Family obligations and society's misperception of the hotel sector were the primary obstacles women faced in entering and staying in the industry. Some women were less effective in their professions, so they had to ask their spouses and families for permission before choosing their careers.

### ***Individual Level***

Mooney (2020) and Fernando & Cohen (2011) highlight the importance of education, work ethic, attitude, and experience in advancing one's profession. Women possess the necessary skills and personality traits to succeed in their careers. However, work-life balance remains a significant barrier to women's career advancement.

The study highlights the challenges women face in balancing a profession and personal life, particularly in hotels, where simultaneous service is required. The structured work environment and limited flexibility further hinder women's progress in their careers.

The hotel industry faces challenges in balancing family and professional obligations due to constant availability and geographic mobility. Costa et al. (2017) found that most participants had adequate education but had low self-confidence. Women's negotiation of job techniques, such as wage, is affected by their lack of passion and self-confidence (Babcock et al., 2003). Regulations are necessary to prevent gender inequality and role stereotypes, ensure equal opportunities and pay for women, and prevent cultural assumptions from restricting female career success.

Five-star hotels in Sri Lanka should focus on eradicating workplace discrimination, removing the glass ceiling, and supporting women in taking on more responsibility and leadership positions.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Limitations of the Research**

The sample size in this study is limited to a single category and area. To improve findings, interviews should be conducted at a national level with a wider range of men and women. The lack of female employees and leaders in the Sri Lankan hospitality industry creates barriers, and it is difficult to reach participants. Further research should explore Sri Lankan hospitality firms' implementation of labour laws, specifically regarding hiring and retaining women in five-star hotels.

### ***Conclusion***

The hospitality industry in Sri Lanka is rapidly growing, with a rise in five-star hotels. However, gender disparities and biases persist, making it difficult to recruit and retain women in these hotels. Women face stereotypes, limited access to training and development opportunities, and limited career advancement opportunities. The male-dominated culture also poses challenges for women, making it difficult for them to succeed and advance their careers. Additionally, women often struggle to find female role models and mentors, which can hinder their career growth.

Workplace culture also plays a crucial role in recruiting and retaining women in the hospitality sector, with hostile work environments, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence being significant concerns. Work-life balance and flexibility are also significant challenges, as women often struggle to balance work and personal responsibilities, making it difficult for them to pursue their careers.

### ***Recommendations***

To address the challenges faced by the Sri Lankan five-star hotel industry in recruiting and retaining women, several recommendations are suggested:

- Promote gender diversity and inclusion.
- Address stereotypes and biases
- Offer flexible working arrangements.
- Provide equal pay and benefits.
- Build a supportive work culture.

The study reveals low women's employment rates in Sri Lanka's hotel industry, despite the tourism industry's long history. Societal, organizational, and personal barriers contribute to these low rates. Industry stakeholders must address retaining and recruiting women in Sri Lanka's five-star hotels.

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