



Barriers to Female Participation in Sri Lanka's Hotel Industry: A Qualitative Exploration of Cultural, Social, and Organizational Challenges

P.K.U Perera*, H.L.N Wasantha, P.L.K Lakshan, W.M.A.H Bandara

Uva Wellassa University, Passara Road, 90000 Badulla, Sri Lanka

*Corresponding Author's Email: kasun.p@uwu.ac.lk

Abstract

The under-representation of women in Sri Lanka's hotel industry is a significant issue, reflecting broader global challenges related to gender diversity in the workforce. This study aims to identify and understand the barriers that prevent women from entering and advancing in the hotel industry, gather insights from various stakeholders, and examine the differences in experiences and challenges faced by women in large-scale versus medium-scale hotel establishments. A qualitative research design was employed, with data collected through 50 in-depth interviews with female and male employees, industry experts, and family members of female employees across the North Central, Eastern, and Central Provinces of Sri Lanka. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: cultural and social barriers, family responsibilities, workplace environment and safety concerns, career progression and opportunities, and perceptions and stereotypes. Key findings indicate that traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and lack of supportive workplace policies significantly hinder women's participation. Additionally, safety concerns and limited career advancement opportunities exacerbate these challenges. Stakeholder perspectives underscore the need for comprehensive policies to promote gender diversity, including robust grievance mechanisms, flexible work arrangements, and targeted recruitment efforts. The study concludes that addressing these barriers requires coordinated efforts from hotel management, government, and industry bodies to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for female employees.

Keywords: *Barriers to Participation; Gender Diversity, Hotel Industry, Qualitative Research; Sri Lanka*

Introduction

Gender diversity is increasingly recognised as a vital component for the success and sustainability of businesses across various sectors, including the hospitality industry. A diverse workforce enhances creativity, innovation, and decision-making processes, which are crucial for meeting the dynamic needs of a global customer base (Cox & Blake, 1991). In the hospitality sector, gender diversity can significantly improve service quality and customer satisfaction by offering a broader range of perspectives and experiences (Campos-Soria, Marchante-Mera & Roper-García, 2011). Moreover, promoting gender diversity aligns with social and ethical responsibilities, contributing to gender equality and economic empowerment (Baum, 2013).

Despite the known benefits, gender diversity remains a challenge in many industries, including hospitality. Women often face barriers to entry and advancement, such as gender stereotypes, work-life balance issues, and limited support for career development (International Labour Organisation, 2016). Addressing these barriers is essential for improving business outcomes and promoting social justice and equality (Davidson & Burke, 2011).

The hotel industry is a significant component of Sri Lanka's tourism sector, a key driver of economic growth. Tourism substantially contributes to the country's GDP and employment, with the hotel industry playing a central role in accommodating the increasing number of international and domestic tourists (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2020). The sector has seen rapid expansion, supported by government initiatives to promote Sri Lanka as a premier tourist destination (Bultjens, Ratnayake & Gnanapala, 2016).

However, the industry faces several challenges, particularly regarding workforce diversity. Women represent a significant portion of the population but remain under-represented in the hotel industry, especially in managerial and executive roles (Silva & Mendis, 2017). This under-representation is a loss of potential talent and reflects broader societal issues related to gender norms and economic opportunities for women (Yasarathne & Dunning, 2023).

Despite the critical role of gender diversity in enhancing business performance and promoting equality, female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry remains low (Rasanjali, Sivashankar & Mahaliyanaarachchi, 2021). Several factors contribute to this issue, including cultural and social norms that discourage women from pursuing careers in hospitality, safety concerns, and limited career advancement opportunities (Kodagoda & Jayawardhana, 2022). Women often face additional challenges such as balancing work and family responsibilities and dealing with workplace harassment or discrimination (Strachan, Adikaram & Kailasapathy, 2015).

The lack of female participation in the hotel industry not only limits women's economic empowerment but also hinders the industry's potential for growth and innovation. Addressing these barriers is essential for creating a more inclusive and dynamic workforce that can drive the industry's long-term success (Jayaweera, 2024).

This study aims to explore the underlying reasons for low female participation in the hotel industry in Sri Lanka. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Identify and understand the barriers that prevent women from entering and advancing in the hotel industry.
2. Gather insights from various stakeholders, including female and male employees, industry experts, and family members of female employees.
3. Examine the differences in experiences and challenges faced by women in large-scale versus medium-scale hotel establishments.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing female participation in the hotel industry and offer recommendations for improving gender diversity.

Understanding the factors that contribute to low female participation in the hotel industry is essential for developing targeted strategies to address these barriers. The findings of this study can inform industry practices and policies aimed at promoting gender diversity and inclusion. By fostering a more inclusive work environment, the hotel industry in Sri Lanka can benefit from the diverse talents and perspectives of women, leading to enhanced organisational performance and customer satisfaction (Davidson & Burke, 2011). Additionally, the study's insights can contribute to broader policy initiatives aimed at achieving gender equality and empowering women economically (World Bank, 2012).

Promoting gender diversity is not only a business imperative but also a moral and social responsibility. Ensuring equal opportunities for women in the hospitality industry can lead to broader societal benefits, including increased economic participation and improved living standards for women and their families (International Labour Organisation, 2016). Therefore, the significance of this study extends beyond the hotel industry, contributing to the overall goal of achieving gender equality in the workforce.

Literature Review

The hotel industry in Sri Lanka is a vital part of the country's tourism sector, which has been a significant contributor to its economic development. Over the years, Sri Lanka has become a popular tourist destination due to its rich cultural heritage, diverse wildlife, and scenic landscapes. The tourism sector, including the hotel industry, plays a crucial role in the country's Gross domestic product (GDP) and employment rates (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2020).

The economic significance of the hotel industry in Sri Lanka cannot be overstated. Tourism contributes substantially to foreign exchange earnings, which are essential for the country's economic stability and growth. According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2020, the tourism industry generated approximately USD 4.4 billion in 2018, with a significant portion coming from hotel and accommodation services. The sector also stimulates other industries such as transportation, food and beverage, and retail, thereby creating a multiplier effect on the economy (Silva & Mendis, 2017).

The hotel industry is a major employer in Sri Lanka, providing jobs to thousands of individuals across various skill levels. However, there is a noticeable gender disparity in employment within this sector. Men dominate higher-level positions, while women are often confined to lower-paying, less secure jobs. This trend reflects broader societal norms and challenges related to gender equality in the workforce (Silva & Mendis, 2017). Despite these challenges, the industry remains a critical source of employment and economic activity in Sri Lanka.

Globally, the hospitality industry has been identified as one of the key sectors where gender diversity can significantly enhance business performance and customer satisfaction (Baum, 2013). Diverse teams bring a range of perspectives that can improve problem-solving and innovation, essential for the dynamic hospitality environment. Locally, in Sri Lanka, the situation mirrors global trends, with a significant under-representation of women in leadership roles within the hotel industry (International Labour Organisation, 2016).

Women in the hospitality industry face numerous barriers that hinder their participation and advancement. Cultural norms and societal expectations play a significant role in shaping career opportunities for women. In many cases, women are expected to prioritise family responsibilities over career aspirations, which limits their ability to take on demanding roles in the hospitality sector (Ranasinghe, 2003). Additionally, safety concerns, lack of supportive workplace policies, and gender discrimination further exacerbate the challenges faced by women in this industry (Surangi, 2024).

Several studies have highlighted the importance of gender diversity in improving organisational performance and competitiveness. For instance, Cox & Blake, 1991 argue that diverse teams are more innovative and better at problem-solving due to the variety of perspectives they bring. In the context of the hospitality industry, Campos-Soria, Marchante-Mera & Roper-García (2011) found that gender diversity positively impacts customer satisfaction and business outcomes.

Despite the growing body of research on gender diversity, there are still significant gaps, particularly in understanding the specific barriers faced by women in different cultural and regional contexts. In Sri Lanka, limited research has been conducted to explore the underlying reasons for low female participation in the hotel industry and the effectiveness of existing policies and practices in promoting gender diversity (Strachan, Adikaram & Kailasapathy, 2015). This study aims to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry.

Several theoretical frameworks can be applied to understand gender diversity in the hospitality industry. One such framework is the Social Role Theory, which suggests that gender differences in behaviour and career choices are shaped by societal expectations and norms (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This theory can help explain why women are under-represented in certain roles within the hospitality sector.

Another relevant theory is the Human Capital Theory, which posits that investments in education and training enhance individuals' productivity and economic potential (Becker, 1993). This theory highlights the importance of providing women with equal opportunities for professional development and career advancement in the hospitality industry.

This study is guided by a combination of social role theory and human capital theory to explore the barriers and challenges faced by women in the hotel industry in Sri Lanka. By integrating these theories, the research aims to provide a holistic understanding of the factors influencing female participation and to develop recommendations for promoting gender diversity in the sector.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is suitable for exploring complex phenomena and gaining a deep understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and motivations (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A qualitative approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the reasons behind low female participation in the hotel industry, capturing the rich, contextual insights necessary for understanding the social and cultural barriers women face in this sector (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The research was conducted in three distinct regions of Sri Lanka: The North Central Province, Eastern Province, and Central Province. These areas were selected to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives, given their unique cultural, social, and economic contexts. Each region represents a different facet of Sri Lanka's tourism landscape, with varying levels of hotel industry development and gender dynamics (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2020).

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who could provide relevant and rich information regarding the study's objectives (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). The sample included:

- **Operational and Executive Level Employees:** Both male and female employees were selected to provide insights into gender dynamics and barriers within the workplace.
- **Industry Experts:** Experts with extensive experience in the hotel industry were included to offer professional perspectives on gender diversity issues.
- **Family Members of Female Employees:** Family members were interviewed to understand the social and cultural influences on women's career choices and participation in the hotel industry.

Participants were drawn from both large-scale (4-star and 5-star) and medium-scale (3-star) hotel establishments. This selection criterion ensured a comprehensive understanding of the differences in gender dynamics across various levels of hotel operations.

Data were collected through 50 in-depth interviews, utilising both structured and semi-structured interview guides. This approach provided a balance between obtaining consistent information across interviews and allowing for the exploration of emergent themes (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). The interviews covered topics such as career motivations, workplace experiences, barriers to participation, and suggestions for improving gender diversity.

To ensure accuracy and reliability, all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The use of audio recordings facilitated a thorough analysis of the data, capturing nuances in participants' responses (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, following the guidelines outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This method involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) in the data.

The analysis was conducted in several steps:

1. **Familiarization:** The researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, noting initial ideas.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Systematic coding of the data was conducted to identify significant features related to the research questions.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Codes were collated into potential themes, gathering all relevant data for each theme.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data and captured important aspects of the research questions.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was defined and named, providing a clear narrative for the findings.
6. **Producing the Report:** A detailed report was produced, highlighting the key themes and supporting them with quotes from the data.

This rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis ensured that the findings were robust and provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry

Results

Introduction to Themes and Sub-Themes

This section presents the findings from the qualitative study on the low female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry. Using thematic analysis, the data were coded and organised into themes and sub-themes, which provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers women face in this sector. These themes are aligned with the study's objectives: identifying and understanding barriers, gathering stakeholder insights, and examining differences between large-scale and medium-scale hotel establishments.

Table 1: Themes Visualization

Objective	Theme	Sub-Theme	Codes
Identify barriers to female participation	Cultural and Social Barriers	Traditional Gender Roles	Women's roles, household responsibilities
		Societal Expectations	Social norms, community pressure
	Family Responsibilities	Childcare and Elderly Care	Balancing work and family, support systems
	Workplace Environment	Safety Concerns	Harassment, safety measures
		Working Hours	Irregular shifts, late-night work
	Career Progression	Glass Ceiling	Promotion barriers, mentorship
		Professional Development	Training, career growth opportunities
Perceptions and Stereotypes	Gender Bias	Discriminatory practices, capability beliefs	
Gather stakeholder insights	Employee Perspectives	Female Employees' Experiences	Discrimination, lack of support
		Male Employees' Views	Industry pressures, recognition of issues
	Industry Experts' Views	Policy Implementation	Best practices, policy gaps
	Family Members' Opinions	Societal and Familial Pressures	Cultural expectations, family support
Examine differences between large-scale and medium-scale establishments	Regional Variations	Cultural Norms	Traditional attitudes, progressive attitudes
		Economic Impact	Employment necessity, economic conditions

Source: Developed by the Researcher

Reasons for Low Female Participation

The study identifies a range of cultural, social, and organisational factors that contribute to the low female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry. These factors are systematically categorised into themes, sub-themes, and codes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers women face in entering and advancing within this sector. The major themes include cultural and social barriers, family responsibilities, workplace environment and safety concerns, career progression and opportunities, and perceptions and stereotypes. Each theme is broken down into sub-themes and specific codes that capture the nuances of the issues. For example, under cultural and social barriers, sub-themes like traditional gender roles and societal expectations are explored, with codes such as women's roles and household responsibilities, social norms, and community pressure providing detailed insights. This structured approach highlights the key issues and lays the foundation for developing targeted interventions to promote gender diversity and inclusion in the hotel industry.

Cultural and Social Barriers

One of the primary reasons for low female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry is the deep-rooted cultural and social barriers. Traditional gender roles often dictate that women should prioritise household responsibilities over professional careers. Many women face societal pressure to conform to these roles, which limits their ability to pursue and sustain careers in demanding sectors like hospitality (Davidson & Burke, 2011). As one female participant noted, "My family expects me to be

home early to take care of the children and household chores. Working late shifts in a hotel is not acceptable to them."

These societal attitudes towards women working in the hospitality industry can be negative, further discouraging them from entering the field. Another participant shared, "People think that women working in hotels are not respectable. This mindset makes it very difficult for us to pursue a career in this industry."

Family Expectations and Responsibilities

Family expectations and responsibilities significantly impact women's career choices and participation in the workforce. Women are often expected to shoulder the majority of household duties, including childcare and eldercare, which can conflict with the demands of a career in the hotel industry. This dual burden often leads to women either not entering the workforce or exiting it prematurely (Silva & Mendis, 2017). One female employee explained, "Balancing work and family is exhausting. I have to wake up early to prepare breakfast and get my kids ready for school before heading to work. By the time I get home, I am too tired to do anything else."

Interviews with family members revealed that while some support their female relatives' careers, many still hold traditional views. A family member stated, "I want my daughter to have a career, but I also want her to be a good wife and mother. It is difficult to balance both."

Workplace Environment and Safety Concerns

The workplace environment in many hotels can be a deterrent for female employees. Safety concerns, including the risk of harassment and inadequate safety measures, are major issues that women face in the hotel industry. These concerns are exacerbated by irregular working hours and the nature of hospitality work, which often requires late-night shifts and interactions with a diverse clientele (Strachan, Adikaram & Kailasapathy, 2015). A female employee shared, "I feel unsafe working late at night. There have been incidents of harassment, and the management doesn't take it seriously."

Female employees expressed apprehensions about their personal safety and the lack of robust policies and practices to address these issues. One participant mentioned, "The hotel has no proper grievance mechanism for harassment cases. We are told to keep quiet to protect the hotel's reputation."

Career Progression and Opportunities

Limited career progression and opportunities are significant barriers to female participation in the hotel industry. Women often encounter glass ceilings that prevent them from advancing to higher-level positions, which are predominantly occupied by men. The lack of mentorship and professional development opportunities further hampers their career growth (Thurairajah, Amaratunga & Haigh, 2010). A female executive stated, "I have been in the same position for years, while my male colleagues get promoted. There is no clear path for career advancement for women here."

Many women feel that their career advancement is stymied by gender biases and a lack of support for their professional aspirations. Another participant expressed, "I want to move up in my career, but I don't see any opportunities. The management prefers promoting men."

Perceptions and Stereotypes

Perceptions and stereotypes about women's roles and capabilities also play a crucial role in limiting female participation. There is a prevalent belief that women are less capable of handling the rigours of hospitality management, which can lead to discriminatory hiring and promotion practices. These stereotypes contribute to an environment where women are often relegated to lower-paying, less influential positions (International Labour Organisation, 2016). A male employee remarked, "Many people think women can't handle the stress of this job. They believe men are better suited for managerial roles."

Both male and female employees highlighted the need to challenge these stereotypes to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace. One female employee suggested, "We need training and awareness programs to change these outdated beliefs and show that women are equally capable."

Stakeholder Perspectives

The study explores the perspectives of various stakeholders to gain a holistic understanding of the factors influencing low female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry. These stakeholders include female and male employees, industry experts, and family members of female employees. The data

collected from these groups are systematically categorised into themes, sub-themes, and codes. Key themes include employee perspectives, which cover female employees' experiences of discrimination and lack of support and male employees' views on industry pressures and recognition of gender issues. Another theme is the insights from industry experts, focusing on policy implementation and best practices, while family members' opinions highlight societal and familial pressures. Each theme is broken down into sub-themes and specific codes that provide a detailed understanding of the stakeholders' viewpoints. This structured approach helps identify the multi-faceted barriers and challenges women face and informs the development of strategies to improve gender diversity and inclusion in the hotel industry.

Insights from Female and Male Employees

Interviews with both female and male employees provided valuable insights into the gender dynamics within the hotel industry. Female employees shared their experiences of discrimination, lack of support, and the challenges of balancing work and family life. A female participant noted, "It's hard to be taken seriously as a woman in this industry. We have to work twice as hard to prove ourselves."

Male employees, on the other hand, often acknowledged these issues but also pointed out the competitive nature of the industry and the pressures to perform (Silva & Mendis, 2017). A male employee stated, "I understand the challenges women face, but this industry is tough for everyone. We all have to work hard to succeed."

Views of Industry Experts

Industry experts emphasized the importance of policy changes and the implementation of best practices to address gender diversity issues. They pointed out that while there is a growing recognition of the need for gender diversity, actual implementation of supportive policies is often lacking. One expert commented, "There are policies in place, but they are not enforced effectively. We need a stronger commitment from management to support gender diversity."

Experts also highlighted the role of training and awareness programs in changing organisational cultures and promoting gender-sensitive practices (Thurairajah, Amaratunga & Haigh, 2010). Another expert noted, "Training programs can help break down stereotypes and educate employees about the benefits of gender diversity."

Opinions of Family Members

Family members of female employees offered perspectives on the societal and familial pressures that women face. Many expressed support for their female relatives' careers but also highlighted the cultural expectations that often limit women's participation in the workforce. A family member shared, "I want my daughter to succeed in her career, but our community still holds traditional views about women's roles. It is a difficult balance."

These insights underscore the importance of engaging families and communities in efforts to promote gender diversity in the hotel industry. One family member suggested, "We need community programs to educate people about the benefits of women working and how it can improve our society."

Differences Between Large-Scale and Medium-Scale Establishments

The study examines the differences in experiences and challenges faced by women in large-scale versus medium-scale hotel establishments in Sri Lanka. This analysis is structured into themes, sub-themes, and codes to provide a detailed understanding of how the scale of the establishment impacts female participation. Key themes include regional variations and the impact of local culture and economy. Sub-themes within regional variations highlight the differences in cultural norms and attitudes towards women working in large-scale versus medium-scale hotels. Codes such as traditional attitudes and progressive attitudes capture these nuances. The economic impact theme explores how economic conditions and the necessity of employment influence women's participation differently in large-scale and medium-scale hotels, with codes like employment necessity and economic conditions providing specific insights. This structured approach allows for a comprehensive comparison, identifying unique challenges and opportunities in each type of establishment, thereby informing targeted interventions to enhance gender diversity and inclusion across the hotel industry.

Variations Between Provinces

The study found significant regional differences in the factors influencing female participation in the hotel industry. In the North Central Province, traditional cultural norms and conservative attitudes

towards women working outside the home were more pronounced. A participant from this region stated, "In our community, women working in hotels is still frowned upon. It's seen as inappropriate."

In contrast, the Eastern Province, with its diverse cultural makeup, showed a slightly more progressive attitude, though challenges remained. An interviewee from this region mentioned, "We are more open to women working, but there are still barriers, especially related to safety and family expectations."

The Central Province, being a hub for tourism, had more established hotel industries but still faced significant gender diversity issues (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2020). A participant from this region noted, "There are more opportunities here, but women still struggle to reach higher positions. The competition is tough, and biases are still prevalent."

Impact of Local Culture and Economy

Local cultural practices and economic conditions significantly impact women's participation in the hotel industry. In regions where tourism is a major economic driver, there is a greater acceptance of women working in hotels, albeit within certain roles. Economic necessity also plays a role, with women in economically disadvantaged areas more likely to seek employment despite societal expectations. However, the overall impact of local culture remains a strong deterrent to achieving gender parity in the workforce (Silva & Mendis, 2017). One participant highlighted, "In economically struggling areas, women work out of necessity, but they still face significant challenges and discrimination."

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight several key reasons for the low female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry. Cultural and social barriers emerged as significant factors, with traditional gender roles and societal expectations limiting women's ability to pursue careers in hospitality. These barriers are deeply ingrained and reflect broader societal norms that prioritise women's roles as homemakers over their professional aspirations (Ranasinghe, 2003).

Family expectations and responsibilities also play a crucial role, as many women are expected to manage household duties alongside their professional roles. This dual burden often leads to burnout and a decision to leave the workforce prematurely (Silva & Mendis, 2017). Workplace environment and safety concerns further exacerbate these challenges, with issues such as harassment and inadequate safety measures discouraging women from seeking employment in the hotel industry (Strachan, Adikaram & Kailaspathy, 2015).

Career progression opportunities for women in the hotel industry are limited, with many facing glass ceilings that prevent advancement to higher-level positions. The lack of mentorship and professional development opportunities compounds this issue, leaving women feeling unsupported in their career growth (Thurairajah, Amaratunga, & Haigh, 2010). Perceptions and stereotypes about women's capabilities also contribute to discriminatory practices in hiring and promotion, further hindering their participation (International Labour Organisation, 2016).

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature on gender diversity in the hospitality industry. Previous research has highlighted similar barriers, including cultural norms, family responsibilities, workplace safety, and limited career progression opportunities (Baum, 2013; Campos-Soria, Marchante-Mera & Roper-García, 2011). The study also aligns with broader global trends, where women face significant challenges in achieving equality in the workforce (Davidson & Burke 2011).

Cultural and social factors play a pivotal role in shaping women's participation in the hotel industry. In regions with more conservative cultural norms, such as the North Central Province, traditional attitudes towards women's roles are more pronounced, leading to greater barriers to their participation. Conversely, regions with more diverse cultural makeups, such as the Eastern Province, show slightly more progressive attitudes, although challenges remain (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2020). Economic necessity can sometimes override cultural barriers, with women in economically disadvantaged areas more likely to seek employment despite societal expectations (Ranasinghe, 2003).

Hotel management should take proactive steps to foster an inclusive and supportive work environment for female employees. One of the critical measures is the development and implementation of robust grievance mechanisms to effectively address and resolve workplace harassment issues. This can be achieved by establishing clear policies, providing training to management and staff on handling complaints, and ensuring that there are confidential and safe channels for reporting harassment.

Ensuring the safety of female employees is paramount. Hotels should invest in comprehensive safety measures, such as installing surveillance cameras, providing secure transportation for late-night shifts, and having well-lit and safe working environments. Regular safety audits and employee feedback sessions can help identify potential risks and improve safety protocols (Strachan, Adikaram & Kailasapathy, 2015).

Creating a supportive environment that encourages women's participation is also essential. This includes implementing training and awareness programs to break down stereotypes and educate all employees about the benefits of gender diversity. Such programs should highlight the value of diverse perspectives in enhancing service quality and operational efficiency (Thurairajah, Amaratunga & Haigh, 2010).

To improve female participation, hotel management should focus on providing equal opportunities for career advancement. Mentorship programs can play a significant role in supporting women's professional development by offering guidance, career advice, and networking opportunities. These programs can help women navigate the challenges they face in advancing their careers and provide them with the support needed to overcome barriers (International Labour Organisation, 2016).

Professional development initiatives, such as training workshops, leadership programs, and continuous education opportunities, are crucial in equipping women with the skills and knowledge needed for career progression. These initiatives should be accessible and tailored to address the specific needs of female employees in the hospitality industry (Baum, 2013).

Flexible work arrangements are another key strategy to help women balance work and family responsibilities. Offering options such as flexible working hours, part-time positions, and remote work can significantly reduce the burden of managing both professional and domestic roles. This flexibility can lead to higher job satisfaction and retention rates among female employees (Davidson & Burke, 2011).

Targeted recruitment efforts are necessary to attract more women into the hotel industry. Recruitment campaigns should highlight opportunities for career growth and development for women and emphasise the company's commitment to gender equality. Partnerships with educational institutions and women's organisations can also help reach potential female candidates and encourage them to consider careers in hospitality (International Labour Organisation, 2016).

Government and industry bodies should collaborate to create policies that support gender diversity in the hospitality sector. Offering incentives for hotels that demonstrate a commitment to gender equality can encourage more businesses to adopt inclusive practices. These incentives could include tax breaks, grants, or public recognition programs that reward hotels for their efforts in promoting gender diversity (World Bank, 2012). Implementing regulations to ensure workplace safety is another critical area where government intervention is needed. Regulatory frameworks should mandate safety standards, regular inspections, and penalties for non-compliance. These regulations can help create a safer work environment for female employees and reduce the incidence of workplace harassment and violence (International Labour Organisation, 2016).

Public awareness campaigns are essential for changing societal attitudes towards women working in the hospitality industry. These campaigns can challenge stereotypes and promote the benefits of gender diversity in the workforce. Collaborating with media, educational institutions, and community organisations can help disseminate these messages effectively (Rasanjali, Sivashankar & Mahaliyanaarachchi, 2021).

Policies should also focus on providing affordable childcare and family support services. Access to quality childcare can significantly reduce the burden on working mothers and enable them to participate more fully in the workforce. Government subsidies, employer-sponsored childcare programs, and community-based childcare centres are some of the measures that can support working parents (International Labour Organisation, 2016). By implementing these recommendations and policies, hotel management and policymakers can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for female employees, ultimately leading to greater gender diversity and improved business outcomes in the hospitality sector.

The study's sample size and geographic focus are notable limitations. While 50 interviews provide valuable insights, a larger sample size could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Additionally, focusing on three provinces may not capture the full diversity of experiences and challenges faced by women in other regions of Sri Lanka (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Potential biases in data collection, such as interviewer bias and the willingness of participants to share their experiences

openly, could affect the study's findings. Efforts were made to mitigate these biases through the use of structured and semi-structured interview guides and ensuring confidentiality, but they remain a consideration (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). Future research should expand to include other regions of Sri Lanka to capture a more diverse range of experiences and challenges. This would provide a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing female participation in the hotel industry across the country (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Longitudinal studies are recommended to track changes in female participation in the hotel industry over time. This approach can help assess the effectiveness of implemented policies and practices and provide insights into the long-term impacts of cultural and social changes on women's participation in the workforce (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

Limitations

While this research study provides valuable insights into barriers to female participation in the Sri Lankan hospitality industry, some constraints related to scope, methodology, and representation should be acknowledged. These limitations not only identify areas where the findings may be restricted but also lay the way for future research to address these gaps and build on the knowledge created by this study. First and foremost, the study focuses on three provinces of Sri Lanka—North Central, Eastern, and Central—limiting its ability to capture the full diversity of experiences and challenges faced by women in other areas of the country, limiting its ability to generalise the findings with provinces possessing different cultural, social and economic situations. Also, the study collected data from fifty in-depth interviews where a larger and more diverse sample could have provided a more comprehensive understanding about the issues discussed. Another limitation is that the study primarily considered the hospitality industry, excluding the other sectors within the tourism industry.

Conclusion

This study identified several critical reasons for the low female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry. Cultural and social barriers, such as traditional gender roles and societal expectations, significantly limit women's ability to pursue and sustain careers in hospitality. Family responsibilities further exacerbate these challenges, with women often expected to manage household duties alongside their professional roles. Additionally, workplace environment and safety concerns, including harassment and inadequate safety measures, deter women from seeking employment in this sector. Limited career progression opportunities and pervasive stereotypes about women's capabilities also hinder their participation.

The identified factors have a significant impact on the hotel industry. The under-representation of women in the workforce limits the industry's potential for growth and innovation. Diverse teams are known to enhance creativity and problem-solving abilities, leading to better business outcomes. Therefore, addressing these barriers is crucial for the hotel industry to fully leverage the benefits of gender diversity and achieve sustainable growth.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender diversity in the hospitality industry by providing a comprehensive analysis of the barriers women face in Sri Lanka. It highlights the interplay of cultural, social, and organisational factors that limit female participation and offers insights into the specific challenges encountered in different regions of the country. By focusing on the perspectives of various stakeholders, including employees, industry experts, and family members, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the issue.

The findings of this study offer several practical recommendations for improving female participation in the hotel industry. Hotel management should implement comprehensive policies to ensure workplace safety and address harassment, provide mentorship and professional development opportunities, and create flexible work arrangements to help women balance work and family responsibilities. Additionally, targeted recruitment efforts and training programs can help challenge stereotypes and promote a more inclusive work environment.

Addressing gender diversity issues is not only a business imperative but also a moral and social responsibility. Ensuring equal opportunities for women in the hospitality industry can lead to broader societal benefits, including increased economic participation and improved living standards for women and their families. Gender diversity enhances organisational performance and contributes to a more dynamic and innovative workforce.

Industry stakeholders and policymakers must take coordinated action to promote gender diversity in the hotel industry. This includes developing and enforcing supportive policies, providing incentives for hotels that demonstrate a commitment to gender equality, and promoting public awareness campaigns

to change societal attitudes towards women working in hospitality. By working together, stakeholders can create an environment where women can thrive and contribute fully to the industry's success.

Future Scope

Acknowledging the limitations of the study, the researchers of this paper suggest the following future scope for potential researchers in this field. Future studies can focus on critical tourism hubs such as Western and Southern provinces, where it will ensure a more comprehensive understanding about the regional differences. On the other hand, increasing the sample size and diversity of participants, including representatives from different sectors in the tourism and hospitality industry, would give more insight into the issues discussed and would increase the generalisability of the findings. Also, it would give more insights about the recommendations on overcoming the identified reasons behind the low level of women's participation in the industry if policymakers, educational institutions, and training providers are engaged in the future studies. Also, it would be better if the role of technology, remote work and flexible work arrangements in overcoming the barriers for women in the hotel industry is investigated.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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