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Can you break through a cement ceiling? – female chefs’ possibilities for a career in the Sri Lankan culinary industry

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Introduction

Previous studies have shown that there are few female chefs in executive positions with a clear gender segregation in career advancements (i.e. Druckman, 2010; Harris & Giuffre, 2010). Where women as a group are prevented from rising through the ranks due to their gender (Ng & Sears, 2017), i.e. breaking through the so-called ‘glass ceiling’. Taking on a Sri Lankan perspective, despite the fact that women and men have equal employment rights legally, there is evidence of an experienced gender gap. Not only are there fewer female chefs working in professional kitchens, there are also less females taking on managerial positions that indicates a “glass ceiling” within the culinary industry in Sri Lanka.

By a small sampled qualitative study, this research note aims to highlight issues of gender inequality in career advancement for female chefs in the culinary industry in Sri Lanka. This research note emphasizes the importance of studying women in the tourism industry, in this case with a special focus on Sri Lankan organizational culture at high-end, and according to Sri-Lankan standard, five-star hotels through the lens of Gender Organization Theory. Thirty years ago, Acker (1990) developed the Gender Organization Theory (GOT) after finding current gender-based theories failing to properly examine and provide an informative interpretation of the effect of gender in organizations. According to the GOT, normative gendered patterns exist in institutions and workplace relationships, which favour men and oppress women. According to Acker (1990), sex as an analytic category in understanding organizational culture and processes is important. GOT is a theoretical construct that focuses on the different gendered variables and behaviours that contribute to gender inequality (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019). Undeniably, taking a gendered approach to organizational research reveals the bias, racism, injustice, bigotry, and inequality that patriarchy and male dominance generate in the workplace (Acker, 2006; 2012; Carvalho et al., 2019).

And as such, GOT sees the company as an extension of society, with political aspects that demonstrate patriarchal structure. As a result, comprehending this theory necessitates a close examination of the institution as a tool of control that facilitates patriarchy by perpetuating male privilege.

Methodology

This research note is based on empirical data from eight semi-structured interviews with female chefs in Sri-Lankan five-star hotels, see details in table 1.

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Table 1. Interviewee details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Time working as a Chef</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Junior Sous Chef</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Demi Chef de Partie</td>
<td>7 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Chef de Partie</td>
<td>12 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Sous-Chef</td>
<td>15+ Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Pastry – Chef</td>
<td>6 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Breakfast Chef</td>
<td>8 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Chef De Partie</td>
<td>11 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Commis- Chef</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Narrative analysis was used to interpret the data in four steps (Walker & Myrick, 2006):

1. Going through the recorded interviews and notes taken to examining topics that appeared to be important such as where participants appeared to replicate themselves frequently, each time in a different setting but with a similar plot. In other words, the participants’ consistent experiences and statements were relevant as an issue and a possible category to be further investigated.

2. The audio recordings of each interview were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were first transcribed in Sinhalese before being translated into English.

3. The data was resorted according to a codebook based on prominent themes, categories and subcategories.

4. Selective coding was employed to compare similarities and differences that could confirm/refute original codes.

Results

In Sri Lanka, women encounter numerous challenges while entering a male-dominated sector, particularly in the gastronomic profession. Even though women make up the great majority of home cooks and despite four decades of modern feminism, just a small fraction of professional kitchens are operated by women in Sri Lanka. In table 2 below we state the four most prominent themes in our analysis.

Even though the interviewees are permitted to work in professional kitchens, they believe they do not have the same access to upward mobility in certain occupations as men. Through narrations such as:

Table 2. Main themes of analysis.

| Limited Work and Career Development Options | Occupational restrictions are visible in the accounts of the participants. Female chefs are seldom allowed to start work in professional kitchens in Kandy’s high-end hotels, according to the female responders. Despite the fact that females are allowed to work in professional kitchens, the interviewees felt they do not have the same access to enter and gain career mobility within the occupation, as men do. |
| A Lack of Family-Work Balance Has Resulted in A Heavy Workload | Work involvement has been identified as a major issue for female chefs. Participants discuss how difficult it is to strike a balance between work and family duties. Furthermore, even if a woman start working outside the home, they are still responsible for the household. |
| Obstacles To Women’s Mobility Caused by Pregnancy | The biggest concerns of the interviewees include having children and being pregnant. For the time being, some prefer not to have children, yet they are aware that childbearing is a crucial and necessary stage in creating a family. Several respondents indicated they had trouble executing their job tasks during and after pregnancy. And that they do not get the adjustments needed to gain a healthy work environment. |
| Discrimination Against Women and A Lack of Equality in Professional Kitchens | Female chefs experience that they can only advance to a certain point in their careers. The most frequent answer was that there is fierce competition at the top levels, as well as major gender prejudices. Female chefs are from start assigned duties that are less demanding. They feel frequently cut off from informal networks and feedback loops. |
Even though I earned my culinary degree many years ago from Australia, opportunities to advance in my career are not available (8).

I am not condemning anyone, but we have minimal opportunities for employment and careers as trained female chefs (6).

I became a sous-chef, and I could aspire to become a head chef, but anything higher, like executive chef, is almost impossible for a woman in Sri Lanka. [. . .] Male chefs indicated they could not have a female as their executive chef because they needed a man … So, if you have a lady, we will need a male chef as well. (4)

There is evidence of discrimination against female chefs in the promotion process. Demonstrating that a gendered issue with a patriarchy order exist (Acker, 2012; Carvalho et al., 2019) where gender inequalities are not a hidden agenda or an unseen problem within these organizations. Indicating a normative gendered pattern with patriarch grounds and behaviours that contribute to gender inequality (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019).

Several participants also expressed that employers offer maternity benefits, hence they are unresponsive to maternity needs. According to participant 7, “my previous executive chef expressed dissatisfaction with my lack of flexi-time during my pregnancy, and he believed that I am being less dedicated to work without considering the situation.” Rather than allowing female chefs, who became mothers, to continue to work within their current kitchens, some employers required that they resigned and reapplied after a year or so.

But not only does this pressure come from the employers, female chefs must make sacrifices to help their families; here described by participant 5, “Working mothers must weigh a variety of factors in order to be successful in both their marriage and their careers. According to well-established norms and expectations [. . .] the woman is still regarded as the family’s cornerstone”.

Most women in this study have set societal standards about their position as primary caregivers for their kids. As GOT sees the company as an extension of society it is highly important to understand the societal and cultural orders in which change must be made. If society facilitates patriarchy by perpetuating male privilege, organizations need to work even harder to establish gender equality.

**Conclusion**

In Sri Lankan professional kitchens, the proverbial glass ceiling obstructing women’s professional advancement is not composed of glass at all. It is a “ceiling” that prevents female chefs from breaking through to executive positions in the culinary industry (Alwis, 2002). The ceiling is clearly visible in opposite to the pellucid glass, and people are aware of its composition (Bonawitz & Andel, 2009). However, this issue goes beyond the concept of a “ceiling” to include the concept of “gendered organizations.” GOT makes no distinction between high-level and low-level employees or roles. It examines policies and procedures from a holistic perspective, as well as the difficulties women face in the workplace at all levels.

To conclude, we would like to cite respondent 3 in her statement of future potential: “I agree that process will occur time; it will not change quickly, but women will gradually become active in various professions in our communities. What we need is a little breathing room and a few chances to unleash our full potential”. The main question still exists; who holds the responsibility to help these female chefs to break through the ceiling and how can we make this process go faster?

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Notes on contributor

Jaliya De Silva holds a MSc in tourism studies from Dalarna University and has a background as a trained chef.

Maria Thulemark holds a PhD in Human Geography and her research interest is related to tourism work and workers, mobility and gender.

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References