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## **Challenges faced by Women in progressing their Career in the Tourism Industry in Maldives**

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### **Abstract**

This research conducted in the Maldives highlights the challenges faced by local women in advancing their careers in the tourism industry. It reveals disparities in labour force participation and salaries between men and women, emphasizing societal views and obstacles hindering women's progression. Through qualitative methods and interviews with local women, this research identifies socio-cultural perceptions, work environment, skills, training, mentorship, and work-life balance as key barriers. Recommendations include shifting perspectives, implementing inclusive policies, ensuring safety, and increasing women's representation in decision-making roles to enhance women's participation in the tourism sector. This research contributes to the limited literature on women's career challenges.

**Keywords:** Career Progression; Gender Roles; Societal Perception; Tourism Environment

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### **1.0 Introduction**

Maldives, with a population of 515,132 and a gender ratio of 60% male and 40% female, showcases a unique demographic distribution. While 41% reside in the capital city, Male', the rest are spread across various islands, including 168 resorts and 106 industrial islands across the atolls (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The country's economy, primarily driven by tourism since the 1970s, has seen consistent GDP growth, reaching 6.19 billion US dollars in 2022 (World Bank, 2022), mainly contributing to the thriving tourism sector. The tourism industry in the Maldives is a significant employer. However, there is a notable gender disparity in the workforce. In 2019, out of 44,954 resort employees, only 10% were female, with a mere 3% being local women (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). This under-representation of local women in tourism may stem from societal norms and traditional beliefs that working in resorts is not suitable for them, influenced by stereotypical gender roles assigning household responsibilities to women. Recognizing the importance of gender equality in the tourism sector, policymakers have initiated measures to promote women's employment opportunities. Many efforts were made to promote equality. This includes the amendment to the Gender Equality Act in 2016, which defines and prohibits direct and indirect gender-based discrimination; the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission, whose priorities include promoting women's rights and gender equality; and The Family Act, which allows for both men and women to commence divorce proceedings (United Nations, 2022). While strides have been made to promote gender equality, the progression of women to managerial

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positions remains limited in the tourism industry, reflecting broader challenges in achieving gender parity in leadership roles (Tisaker & Swart, 2023). Ongoing efforts are needed to overcome societal norms and biases that hinder women's career advancement. By implementing targeted policies and fostering a supportive environment, Maldives can work towards a more inclusive and diverse workforce, empowering women to participate in the tourism industry and excel in leadership positions.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Tourism can empower women by creating equal opportunities, employment, and income. Tourism can also enhance adult education and literacy, improve health (especially maternal health) and hygiene, and support the preservation of traditions (Coelho et al., 2023; Saltık & Akova, 2022). Rinaldi and Salerno (2020) believe that tourism can be a powerful tool for women's empowerment, as it can boost their self-esteem, enhance their participation in the community, and open new opportunities for leadership roles for women. Maldives has adopted policies and laws that promote gender equality, enabling many women to pursue careers in different fields and positions. However, Maldivian women still face challenges and disparities in human development and socioeconomic indicators. Deep-rooted cultural beliefs and inconsistent institutional policies contribute to work and wage inequalities for women (Faizal, 2020). Statistics showed that men dominated almost all industries, including tourism. Additionally, men hold higher positions in the workplace, enabling them to receive higher salaries than women. In 2022, it was reported that men, on average, earn MVR 11,977 per month, while women earn MVR 7,510 per month (United Nations, 2022). This indicates a gap in employment and a disparity in pay between men and women. Maldives has a strong Islamic cultural legacy that shapes its society. The state religion Islam influences the legal framework and legislation within the Maldives, shaping the governance and societal norms (Wille, 2022). Gender roles and responsibilities shape the society and the culture of its people. Men are often regarded as the providers of the family and have more access to power and status in the social order. Women, on the other hand, are limited to gender stereotypes, such as managing households or raising children. The tourism sector is less attractive to women because the stereotype discourages them from pursuing such careers (Faizal, 2020). Parents and husbands often oppose women's employment in resorts and the society deemed working in remote tourist resorts, away from their families for long periods, unsuitable for young and unmarried women. The working conditions in resorts are often unfavourable to local women, as they must live in accommodations on the resort island without adequate facilities and services such as childcare. Additionally, women have fears for their safety and face social stigma and taboo. These factors can deter women from working in the tourism sector. While Maldives has achieved gender equality in essential well-being, health, and primary education, significant gaps and challenges exist in other domains, such as labour market opportunities, especially in the tourism industry. To bridge the gender gaps and accelerate progress, the underlying causes of challenges for women in participating and progressing their careers in the tourism industry must be addressed.

Therefore, this research aims to explore the reasons behind the low level of local women's participation in the tourism industry in the Maldives. It also analyses the obstacles that women encounter in pursuing and advancing their careers in the tourism industry. Ultimately, recommendations will be made to address the barriers women encounter at the organizational and national levels.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Societal Norms and Family Related Barriers

The roles socially determined for women can create an obstacle for women to participate in working life (Ventura et al., 2021). Hutchings et al. (2020) highlight the persistence of gender discrimination in the tourism sector, affecting women's employment opportunities. In societies where patriarchal and machismo values are strong, women face negative power imbalance that limits their participation in the employment sector. In societies with deep patriarchal histories, normative expectations are embedded within society (Morgan & Winkler, 2020). Zhang and Zhang (2020) posit that women's attempts to work and earn income within the tourism sector will meet with resistance from the prevailing patriarchal culture. Although there has been a steady increase in the number of women entering the workforce in the Maldives since the last decade, deep-rooted patriarchal-based cultural beliefs are still prevalent within the society (Faizal, 2020). In the rural areas in Pakistan, while women make economic contributions towards their families, their primary responsibility is still confined to their household and family needs. Some of the women also revealed that their additional economic contribution towards their families negatively impacted their physical and psychological health due to the extensive workload in balancing their role in making money and managing their families (Jabeen et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in the Caribbean countries, opportunities for women in the tourism industry are limited to less productive and profitable firms; however, the firms headed by female leaders employ more women, especially in management roles (Pastore et al., 2021).

According to the Great Man Theory, leadership qualities are believed to be innate and predominantly found in men, contributing to the suppression of women's leadership opportunities (Sadiq, 2023). Women face challenges in reaching senior management roles due to the glass ceiling, which refers to the invisible and often insurmountable barriers that marginalize their abilities and accomplishments (Eşitti, 2023). Gender-based social perspectives also create complications for women in their career development. The limited number of women leaders in the tourism sector proves that the glass ceiling is still prevalent (Eşitti, 2023), and the glass ceiling effect continued for female managers through gender stereotyping and misogynistic cultures (Macpherson, 2021).

## 2.2 Cultural Values and Gender Roles

Men and women have different perceptions of the impact of tourism, and tourism benefits them differently (Dadvar-Khani, 2021). In rural societies where the assumed ideology positions men as leaders and women confined to domestic roles in the family, tourism is seen as 'women's work,' thus cementing the position of women as vulnerable, low-paid workers (Dashper, 2023). Rural communities are less inclined to believe that tourism contributes positively to the overall economy, as they tend to uphold traditional societal and cultural norms. In such settings, women often encounter racial stereotypes and carry significant family-related responsibilities. According to social role theory, gender roles are deeply ingrained in individuals based on societal beliefs. Women are stereotypically viewed as communal, displaying traits such as being emotional, kind, helpful, and affectionate. At the same time, men are perceived as agentic, characterized by traits like being controlling, forceful, aggressive, independent, and ambitious (Alqahtani, 2019). These stereotypes influence occupational choices, with women more likely to pursue nurturing roles like teaching and nursing, while men gravitate towards assertive and competitive fields such as construction, business, and engineering. Consequently, women, especially in developing countries, often face challenges in attaining leadership positions due to societal beliefs (Alqahtani, 2019).

Women often experience heightened pressure as they strive to balance their careers with the predominant responsibilities of housework and childcare. This presents a significant obstacle for women seeking career advancement (Feng & Savani, 2020). Frequently, ambitious women, dedicated to their careers, opt to forgo having children to fulfil the prerequisites necessary for career progression. Miller and Riley (2022) confirmed that increased work demands reduced working mothers perceived ability to become the ideal parent; however, in contrast, increased work demands experienced by working fathers do not. Litwin et al. (2019) argue that women in patriarchal societies still face gender-related prejudices in modern times. In Malaysia, for example, societal expectations emphasize women's roles in family matters over self-fulfilment, forcing them to choose between career and family. Consequently, Malay women are obligated to prioritize their family responsibilities even when employed (Litwin et al., 2019).

## 3.0 Research Methodology

This research employed qualitative research, utilizing semi-structured interviews as a data collection method. Qualitative method is employed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Maldivian women in progressing their careers in the tourism industry. Data were collected from seven participants as the saturation point was reached on the seventh interview. A purposive sampling method was used where the participants must be women who are or who have experience working in the tourism industry. All interviews were recorded with consent obtained from the participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Data was then coded using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves systematic identification and analysis of recurring themes within the dataset. The analysed data is reported in the next section.

## 4.0 Findings and Discussions

Table 1 showed the summary demographics of all respondents and in Table 2, the summary of recurring themes captured from the interviews are coded.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the participants

Participant code	Age	Position	Education level	Marital status	Children
P1	25	HR assistant	Bachelor's degree	Married	Nil
P2	29	Sales Manager	Bachelor's degree	Single	Nil
P3	28	Sales Manager	Bachelor's degree	Married	Nil
P4	25	Business support and performance Analyst	Bachelor's degree	Single	Nil
P5	26	Event Manager	O' level	Single	Nil
P6	40	Resort Manager	Master's Degree	Single	Nil
P7	37	Director of Sales	O' level	Married	Nil

Table 2: Factors, Challenges and Recommendations

#1 Factors:
Socio-cultural perception. Family related pressures.
# 2 Challenges:
Resort working environment. Inadequate skillset, training, and mentorship. Work-life balance.
# 3 Recommendations:
Ensure safety and security. Structural Change. Increase Women's participation.

#### 4.1 Underrepresentation of local women in the tourism industry of Maldives.

##### 4.1.1. Theme 1: Socio-cultural perception.

Social and cultural perception was recognised as a significant factor that acts as a barrier in deterring local women from pursuing careers in the tourism industry. All seven participants shared similar thoughts and mentioned that society has rather negative views of women working in the resort, citing a male-dominated environment and cultural norms as critical factors. Society scrutinizes local women who choose to work in tourism, viewing it as going against traditional beliefs and norms. Participants shared experiences of societal pressure to conform to traditional roles, such as getting married early, and the stigma attached to women working in resorts, including assumptions of immoral behaviour. The perception that the tourism industry is primarily for men and that women should prioritize family over career was prevalent among the participants. Participants believed women may become reluctant to work in the tourism industry due to societal pressures and stigmas. While there is a gradual shift towards a more positive perception of women in the industry, stigma, discrimination, and negative attitudes persist, making it challenging for women to thrive in this sector (Papadopoulou, 2021; Faizal, 2022).

##### 4.1.2 Theme 2: Family-related pressures.

The participants highlighted that both nucleus and extended families have concerns over local women participating in the tourism industry. While most participants exclaimed that their families mainly supported them in pursuing their careers in the industry, some participants shared that they faced resistance. Maldivian women often face pressures from family as the tourism industry is male-dominated, and the islands are often secluded. P1, P5, and P6 expressed that their families were the most prominent opponents when they voiced their intention to work in resorts. Their families pressured them to forgo the intention, and it took a while for their families to agree with their intention. P6 also mentioned that not only their immediate family but also the extended family opposed her working in the resort, and they were confident that working in a resort environment is not fit for women.

Family is one of the most important contextual influences on career decision-making (Vautero et al., 2021). Parents' role in influencing their children's career path can yield positive or negative outcomes depending on the relationship between parents and child (Angwaomadoko, 2023). Strong parental support has a significant positive effect on their children's career decisions. Conversely, parents can be a hindrance to their children's career progression. In the case of Maldives, parents are often the loudest dissenting voice of a woman's decision to work in a resort, thus hindering them from partaking in this career path.

#### 4.2 Barriers that deter women from pursuing and progressing their careers.

##### 4.2.1. Theme 1: Working environment.

The participants initially found the working environment challenging due to being away from family and friends in a remote setting. P1 and P2 shared their struggles adjusting to the isolated location, highlighting the difficulty of transitioning from familiar surroundings to an unfamiliar one, while P5 struggled with social interactions due to being new and young. However, as participants acclimated to the environment, they found the working conditions enjoyable and supportive. P3 emphasized the friendly and collaborative atmosphere, noting the camaraderie among colleagues and the absence of gender-specific challenges. The positive work environment was described as accommodating, with everyone working towards common goals and providing mutual care.

Additionally, participants appreciated the resorts' efforts in providing facilities and recreational activities for staff, enhancing engagement, and fostering a sense of community. P6 mentioned organized events like sports and parties, contributing to heightened staff morale and creating a supportive work culture. While this research identified the initial barrier to the working environment for women in the industry,

participants believed that these challenges could be overcome with time and support. Freund and Hernandez-Maskivker (2021) suggested that partaking in associations can empower women and ultimately help transform their members and society.

#### *4.2.2. Theme 2: Inadequate skillset, training, and mentorship.*

Several participants in the tourism industry identified a lack of skill and training as potential barriers to women advancing their careers. P1 highlighted the limited training opportunities, especially external ones in her organization. P2 emphasized the industry's technology-driven nature and the importance of language skills. P3 noted the gradual increase in women's participation in the industry but highlighted the time needed to develop skills and competence for their career progression. Interestingly, P5 and P7 highlighted that a positive mindset and willingness to strive are more crucial than possessing additional skills (such as technology). All participants, however, have similar opinions on language skills. They emphasized that language proficiency is essential, and having third and subsequent language proficiency is desired.

P2 highlighted the value of mentorship from influential figures in the industry. According to Khalid et al. (2021), programs like training and mentoring are essential for empowering women in the workplace because they foster self-development and business growth. Training opportunities and mentoring are vital in equipping women with the skills and support needed to become empowered leaders in the tourism sector.

#### *4.2.3. Theme 3: Work-life balance.*

Demanding and inflexible work environments often force women to choose between family and professional careers. In many cases, most choose to forgo their career over their family, mainly to raise children or to look after their parents. P1 stated that local women working in the industry often leave permanently after marriage. P1 further deliberated that women usually find it challenging to maintain a work-life balance, especially when they become mothers. P2 and P3 discussed that progress and success in the tourism industry require a lot of sacrifices. P4 expressed a similar belief by stating that although there is an increase in Maldivian women working in the tourism industry, many do not stay long-term, and P3 and P5 share a similar sentiment. Nagar (2021) argued that female managers observed dual roles: one as a primary caregiver for their family and two as managers in their workplace, and due to the responsibilities towards their home and family, it is harder for married women to maintain a work-life balance. Kim (2023) posits that while people in different stages of life experience different patterns of work-life conflict, women consistently experience similar conflict as they strive to balance their work and family demands. In many instances, women must make rigid decisions about whether to progress in their careers or forgo them altogether due to family commitments.

### *4.3 Recommendations on how obstacles can be addressed on an organizational or national level.*

#### *4.3.1. Theme 1: Ensure safety and security.*

International Labor Organizations have acknowledged violence and harassment as a significant threat to the safety and health of workers. A practical legal framework needs to be formulated to prevent, address, and remedy violence and harassment at work (ILO, 2020). In this research, participants did not specify violence and harassment as a barrier to their career progression. However, participants P2, P3, and P6 stressed that resorts must ensure they are genuinely safe for employees. P6 also added that a good culture with zero tolerance for harassment and bullying is needed when working in a resort environment. The participants highlighted that ensuring that the resort environments are safe and secure for women could help increase the participation of women in the industry.

#### *4.3.2. Theme 2: Structural change.*

Participants highlighted that the tourism industry needs structural changes to help increase the career progression of women in the industry. P3 shared views such as re-evaluating policies to allow couples to work together in the same resort. Participants also highlighted that more flexibility is needed in leave days, particularly extending maternity leave for new mothers. P3 and P6 also stated that changes are needed in the hiring policies, as they can ensure more equality in the tourism workforce. They also stressed that women must become more involved in making policies, especially those relevant to women.

#### *4.3.3. Theme 3: Increase women's participation.*

One of the participants (P4) stated that work needs to be done at the government level, particularly by formulating policies to decrease the gender gap between men and women within the industry. P4 and P6 stated that if women had more representation in planning and decision-making, it could help increase female participation in the tourism industry of the Maldives by creating more inclusive working environments. According to the United Nations (2022), women still require proactive and transformative policies from various global stakeholders, including governments, companies, employers' and workers' organizations, and civil society.

## **5.0 Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations**

This study revealed that although the participation of local women has improved recently, women in the tourism industry are still significantly underrepresented. It is also revealed that women are stigmatized, and socio-cultural perception, working environment, inadequate skillset, training, mentorship, and work-life balance could act as a barrier towards career progression for women in the tourism industry. To improve the participation of local women, it is suggested that resorts ensure safety and security in the workplace and provide more opportunities for local women to work in the tourism industry. Reforms from the organizational to the governmental

level are proposed to remove the barriers. Organizational reform, such as providing family accommodation, and governmental reform, such as having more women representation at the decision-making level, are suggested. The limitation of this research is that none of the participants have children. Therefore, it is recommended that this research be replicated to include working mothers working in the tourism industry as it may yield different results. Furthermore, data was only collected from local women; hence, for future research, it is recommended that foreign nationals be incorporated as participants. Lastly, a comparative study can also be conducted on the perception of barriers to career progression between local women and female expatriates working in the tourism industry.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research provided focus on the role of women in the tourism industry, particularly in Maldives. It highlights the challenges faced by women in advancing their careers and the importance of female employment in driving economic growth and empowerment. In Maldives, there are efforts to empower women in the tourism sector. "Women for Prosperous Tourism" was launched in 2024, with the aim to increase women's participation in the tourism industry and provide opportunities for career growth. This research shed light on the importance of female participation in the tourism industry, the challenges women face in career advancement, and the potential for tourism to empower women economically and socially. This research significantly contributes to the relatively scarce literature on the challenges local women face in progressing their careers in the tourism industry in Maldives.

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