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**Let's Sit at the Table for Women's Empowerment**

We report on *Let's Sit at the Table*, an ongoing series of seven (so far) roundtables launched in partnership by the Dubai based social enterprise Evolvin' Women and The Retreat Palm Dubai MGallery by Sofitel in September 2017. The roundtables were designed to explore best practices in the Gulf region driving women within the hospitality industry to senior leadership positions. Here we focus on one of the roundtables, which took place on February 21st, 2018 and was centered on the topic of empowering women in hospitality through education. The roundtable explored how to encourage women and girls to take up positions in fields where they lack representation, such as in the culinary arts. The roundtable was attended by ten experts in the areas of education and hospitality and revolved around several questions developed in line with the UN's Women Empowerment Principles (<http://www.weprinciples.org/>). To encourage further research we first briefly describe the problem as acknowledged in the academic literature and as experienced by one social enterprise in Dubai.

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## **Introduction**

Gender is a growing area of research among tourism and hospitality academics, yet there remain significant gaps in knowledge. Even though the glass ceiling or vertical segregation has attracted attention from both hospitality and tourism researchers (Clevenger & Singh, 2013; Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2017), analyses of horizontal segregation are often limited to discussions of the feminization of housekeeping departments. In addition to this paucity of research, the academic study of gendered education in hospitality or tourism remains at an incipient stage (Jeffrey, 2017; Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018). Therefore, this commentary is positioned to open scholarly discussion, debate, and research on the role of education in the generation and perpetuation of horizontal segregation within the hospitality and tourism industries.

Previous studies have utilized panel discussions as a method to gain a deeper understanding of female leadership in hospitality and tourism (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018), and this was one of the primary reasons for hosting *Let's sit at the table*, an ongoing series of seven roundtables launched in partnership with Evolvin' Women and The Retreat Palm Dubai MGallery by Sofitel in September 2017. This commentary focusses specifically on the outcomes of the roundtable, which attended to exploring how to encourage women and girls to take up positions in fields where they lack representation such as in the culinary arts,

that took place on February 21st, 2018. The roundtable brought together a range of voices from education and hospitality including university leaders, lecturers, chefs, and students.

### **A lack of women chefs**

Gender segregation both vertically and horizontally has been noted within both the tourism and the hospitality literature (Campos-Soria, et al., 2015; Pinar, et al., 2011). The term horizontal gender segregation refers to the feminization or masculinization of certain occupations, industries or departments (Santero-Sanchez, et al., 2015). In Turkey, for example, it was noted that 74.1% of food and beverage staff are male (Pinar et al., 2011), in Tunisia approximately 70.4% women working in hotels can be found in reception and housekeeping (Karrkainen, 2011). In Spain, it has been suggested that 62% of kitchen, waiting, and room service staff are female, but higher positions in these areas remain in male hands (Santos-Sanchez, et al., 2015). Horizontal gender segregation has a definite impact on the gender pay gap (Campos-Soria, et al., 2015; Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018), as what is deemed as women's work is often valued less than 'men's work.' At least one of the explanations of horizontal gender segregation is gender stereotyping, which potentially explains how women dominate those areas often thought of as 'women's work' or the 'housewification of labor (Santos-Sanchez, et al., 2015).

While gender stereotypes appear to explain horizontal gender segregation, one area of the hospitality industry contradicts this contention, the kitchen. One of the most basic gender stereotypes that appear to travel across cultures is that a 'woman's place is in the kitchen,' and yet it certainly is not in the commercial kitchen. A recent study estimated that around 80% of head chefs are male in the Republic of Ireland (Allen & Mac Con Iomaire, 2016) and in the United Kingdom approximately 23% of chefs are female (Office for National Statistics, 2018). The media reports that only three women made it into the Top 100 chefs in the World

in 2017 (AlMunajjed, 2017). In 2014, Bloomberg reported that at 15 well-known restaurant groups in the USA only 6.3 percent of chef positions were held by women. Furthermore, only 10 out of the 172 Michelin-starred restaurants in the world have female head chefs.

In practice, this has been experienced by Evolvin' Women, a social enterprise in Dubai that provides free education, networks and the opportunity for international work experience within the hospitality industry to women from developing countries. The social enterprise found it curious that out of 13 students only one decided on a career in the culinary arts. This experience became the impetus for the roundtable as the social enterprise began to question why the women were not enticed to work in this area. Some of the barriers women face when attempting to gain leadership positions in the hospitality industry include work-life balance, organizational commitment, inadequate support systems/mentors, systematic barriers to advancement, and a lack of female role-models (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018). The same study noted that women might feel that they do not belong in a male-dominated environment.

Based on the literature concerning barriers for women desiring female leadership positions in the hospitality industry (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018), the WEPs and Evolvin' Women's experience, four questions were posited to the panel: Are you aware of any good educational practices in the region to encourage female students to take up non-traditional career trajectories, such as the culinary arts? In your opinion, what educational programmes and policies might encourage young women to enter non-traditional employment sectors, such as the culinary arts? Are there any practices you can think of that would help to retain women employees in the commercial kitchen environment? What role could mentoring, role models and networking play in this? The next section reports question by question on the findings of the roundtable.

## **Existing good educational practices in the region**

Interestingly, even though participants working in educational establishments felt that there were many current educational opportunities for adult women, the women chefs in attendance could not name any. One chef suggested that cookery could be incorporated at a younger age for girls and boys:

*I really think a proper cooking class to be integrated into the weekly schedule even if only two times a week, similar to the old home economics but more focused on food, should really help. It is always a good idea to raise awareness and do hands-on training from an early age. They may discover a passion for it and also get better and more confident by the time they are in senior school.*

One of the higher education institutions cited their female/male enrolment ratio as 60/40. One of the women chefs acknowledged this, but she highlighted there might be a problem with how women are taught:

*There aren't such practices yet that encourage women to join the tough culinary industry today (...) yes there are culinary institutions, but I don't feel that they encourage women enough to join the industry or prepare them for what is to come ahead of them.*

Overall, the discussion suggests that there is not enough awareness of courses aimed at adult learners, but that focusing on adult learners may be too late. Also, the existing educational opportunities might not be encouraging women into the kitchen. Perhaps, gender segregation (Santos-Sanchez, et al., 2015) and socialization are implicit in the current educational

opportunities, so that rather than challenging the stereotypes they are being reinforced.

### **Potential educational programs and policies**

When asked about educational programs that might change the current status quo, participants were particularly creative, and many called upon the innovative use of role models. One chef suggested that an awareness building imitative must take place in schools where educators should:

*Let them know the nature of the work, the career path, the benefits, and encourage new-age girl to focus on this career by teaching free classes, or a new recipe cooking contest.*

One of the male chefs suggested that the issue is 'A real tough nut to crack I believe!' and that there may be dissonance between a desire for work-life balance and the lifestyle and work environment of chefs. Yet, he also acknowledged that role models might help 'invite alumni, who can talk firsthand about a "Local Women in a Professional Kitchen." Two of the female chefs were in accordance that formalized mentoring might help, but one suggested this might specifically help in the area of work-life balance:

*The mentor and mentee practice really caught my attention, as that is something I would love to do (...). In the male dominating industry it is important that women also have a role and a chance to succeed in the kitchen. Women need the proper support and encouragement to motivate them to get into a fast pace kitchen and help them live the life in the kitchen as well as at home where they will be needed at some point in their life. This can work out if they have particular timely schedules which will help*

*them have a balanced life at home as well as at work. Sometimes (they) may not join this industry due to the pressure that it put upon a person.*

Finally, it was suggested that first ‘*Women need to answer themselves first, if culinary or kitchen is their passion,*’ which again links back to awareness building.

### **The role of mentoring, role models and networking**

Building on the preceding section, and as previously noted in the literature a lack of adequate mentoring programs (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018) or role models (Gretzel & Bowser, 2013) might be a barrier to achieving gender parity in leadership positions or masculinized departments. When asked about what role these could play in encouraging women to take up positions in the commercial kitchen, the panel of experts was almost unanimous in the opinion that it would be a positive measure. Experts suggested that it ‘will boost their morale and gain self-confidence’ and some highlighted the importance of new media ‘*Role models and social media are quite influential with younger women. If we use it effectively, I believe we can convince women to come in this field.*’

However, there were also some reservations, suggesting that we must tackle gender stereotypes before proceeding one panelist commented:

*‘I also think this could have a very damaging effect if not managed correctly if a young local lady was to ‘shadow a commis’ for a day??? You have to start at the bottom and work your way up...life is not a given, and this thinking, way of life is still very much in play in a professional kitchen...’.*

Networking was highlighted as particularly important:

*'It is also important to have contacts today in this industry. One must have a broad and good networking circle who can help them succeed or lend a helping hand when needed. This can help with investors and provide with good financial support if it is a strong and reliable plan or help fund the education of those who cannot afford it.'*

Finally, when asked what practices there are or could be to retain women employees in the commercial kitchen environment, most participants found it difficult to answer. The male chef responded *'Better maternity conditions possibly? I think we have to be a bit careful/realistic here, when does 'Equality Kick In'?'.* This comment highlights how maternity and parenting and still very much stereotypically female activities and how equality might be problematic in the workplace. Perhaps if both men and women working in the kitchen received better 'parental conditions' this could be better incorporated to create an even playing field.

## **Conclusion**

Interestingly research on gender segregation in the hospitality and tourism industries has tended to focus on the feminization of the housekeeping departments, which is often explained by gender stereotyping. The kitchen is one area of the hospitality industry that appears to contradict this contention. One of the most basic gender stereotypes is that a 'woman's place is in the kitchen,' and yet it certainly is not in the commercial kitchen. In addition to exploring potential reasons why this might be the case, this paper has also added to current debates on the study of gendered education in hospitality. Commenting on *Let's sit at the table*, a roundtable attended by ten experts in the fields of education and hospitality



there appears to be both barriers and opportunities for women's inclusion in the culinary industry.

The first finding is that there may be a lack of awareness of both the opportunities available to women in the kitchen and culinary education. Cookery lessons at a younger age might help to bridge this gap, but future research should analyze how gender stereotypes are being reinforced or challenged in hospitality education. A lack of work-life balance was identified as one of the potential reasons why more female students are not choosing this profession. Role models and mentoring were identified as potential practices that encourage more women into the kitchen, but also as a practice that could help individuals to balance both work and life. The provision of better maternity conditions was suggested to retain female chefs, along with a hidden warning that we need to be careful of what we mean by gender equality.

The results of the roundtable would tend to suggest that there is a gap between current hospitality educational practices and the industry, as many chefs were unaware of the educational offerings. There is also a gap between research and industry, future research could focus on women chefs and students, and their career decisions to ascertain why they are/not choosing the culinary industry. Head chefs could also become the focus of research to find out what they understand by gender equality and how they can empower women chefs under their supervision.

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