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Through the Glass Ceiling: Challenges Faced by Women Working in the Resorts of the Maldives

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ABSTRACT *Tourism is a pivotal economic sector globally, contributing significantly to the socio-economic development of many countries. However, gender disparities in tourism employment remain a critical issue, and women are often concentrated in lower-paid, lower-status jobs, facing significant barriers to career advancement. While tourism is the leading economic sector in the Maldives, only 2% of local women work in resorts, highlighting a stark gender disparity, despite an almost equal gender split in the population. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by local women while working at resorts across the Maldives, examining it through the Gendered Institutions Theory and Glass Ceiling Effect. The study employs a phenomenological narrative approach, using semi-structured interviews with nine female employees at Maldivian resorts selected through purposive sampling. While the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings, the in-depth narratives provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of these women. Content analysis of the interviews revealed dominant challenges including gender stereotyping, discrimination, workplace harassment, biased recruitment and promotion practices, cultural constraints, and conflicts between family responsibilities and work. These findings align with global literature on gender issues in tourism and suggest that such challenges significantly hinder women's career development and progression. Although evolving gender ideologies and increased access to education are beginning to challenge inequality in the sector, the low representation of women in resort employment underscores the need for more effective empowerment strategies in the Maldives. The findings could lead to better policy and strategy formulation to address the institutional, cultural, and interpersonal barriers persistent in female employment in the resort sector.*

Keywords: *Gender Disparity, Resort Employment, Maldivian Resorts, Glass Ceiling Effect, Women in Tourism*

Introduction

Gender equality is a core principle of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), making gender-related issues a top priority in economic sectors such as tourism. Over the years, there has been a substantial increase in women's employment in tourism. However, the representation of women in leadership and C-level roles (executive level roles) remain low, with only 10% of CEOs and 15% of senior management positions held by women (Botelho & Abraham, 2017). In addition, countries in Asia and the Middle East still face significant challenges in overcoming gender disparities in tourism employment, such as gender gaps in leadership and pay, cultural barriers, and occupational segregation.

Gender issues in hospitality and tourism are multifaceted and influenced by several factors. One of the most prevalent issues is gender stereotyping, which manifests through various roles and expectations assigned to men and women, reflecting deep-rooted societal norms. (Bouhmid, 2023). Although the industry comprises of a significant number of women in the workforce, they are often relegated to lower-paying, service-oriented positions, while men dominate leadership roles, resulting in vertical and horizontal segregation (Silva & Couto, 2023). This segregation is underpinned by societal stereotypes that associate women with nurturing roles and men with leadership and physically demanding tasks. Additionally, global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have forced women to leave their jobs, and focus on family responsibilities following the lockdown (Çoban, 2021). Such events further contribute to the employment precarity among women. Although there are recent shifts in workforce dynamics that challenge traditional gender roles, such as digitisation of tourism services, work-from-home opportunities, and job flexibilities, there remains significant work to tackle gender inequalities in the hospitality and tourism workforce.

This global context sets the stage for examining the gender issues in tourism employment in the Maldives, where despite an almost equal gender split in the population, only 3% of local women work in resorts, highlighting a significant gender disparity exacerbated by the enclaved tourism concept. While global tourism trends indicate higher female participation in hospitality sectors, this stark disparity suggests unique structural and socio-cultural constraints within the Maldivian context. Despite recognition of gender inequality in tourism globally, there remains limited research examining the specific barriers that prevent Maldivian women from accessing resort-based employment. This study therefore, seeks to investigate the underlying factors contributing to the persistent underrepresentation of Maldivian women in resort tourism. Addressing this issue is critical not only for advancing gender equity but also for strengthening the tourism industry's domestic labour force, promoting inclusive economic development, and enhancing national socio-economic sustainability.

Literature Review

Gender bias in hiring, promotion, and wage gaps

Gender bias in the tourism and hospitality workforce is evident, with women often being guided into traditional roles and facing significant disparities in job assignments, hiring practices, pay, and career advancement opportunities. Despite women comprising of over 54% of the global tourism and hospitality workforce (UN Tourism, 2023), they are often relegated to lower-paying, service-oriented positions, while men dominate leadership roles (Silva & Couto, 2023). Such inequalities are influenced by cultural stereotypes and organisational practices that favour male attributes, creating barriers for women seeking career progression.

A study of the Filipino hospitality sector shows that women face bias in hiring and promotion opportunities, which also reflects in significant wage disparities (Darroca et al., 2024). The study further found that unconscious biases and lack of mentoring in the workplace hinders women's career progression in the industry (Darroca et al., 2024). Similarly, the Portuguese tourism sector has more than 60 % of male representation in senior and managerial positions (Costa et al., 2017).

This has been attributed mainly to the availability of women and flexibility to work overtime (Carvalho et al., 2019). These examples highlight how structural and cultural barriers continue to limit women's advancement in hospitality and tourism.

Hiring and promoting women in the industry is often scrutinised as 'unfair', particularly in contexts where there is a perceived bias against men. Researchers have found that perceptions of fairness, referred to as procedural and distributive justice, can significantly influence whether individuals view promotion processes as gender-discriminatory (Russen et al., 2021a). Such beliefs are often rooted in unconscious bias and the notion of reverse discrimination, where some individuals perceive men as victims of unfair treatment in the evolving workplace. Consequently, even when organisations implement fair and equitable hiring practices, these perceptions may persist, leading some to assume that women are promoted solely based on gender, thereby reinforcing existing gender gaps. Interestingly, Russen et al. (2025) also found that women exhibited greater sensitivity to perceptions of reverse discrimination, possibly indicating heightened awareness of gender-based biases in promotion processes and a deeper understanding of how gender dynamics shape perceptions of fairness. This is particularly significant, as initiatives designed to address gender imbalances, such as increasing the number of women in leadership, may be misinterpreted by some as discriminatory towards men, potentially undermining the very goals of equity and inclusion.

Another study revealed that gender stereotypes, discrimination, and bias continue to impede women's advancement in the workplace, with male employees reporting significantly higher retention rates than their female counterparts (Lijster & Hajal, 2023). Additionally, Fashakin and Babalola (2023) found that gender stereotyping contributes to the concentration of women in lower-level roles, while men disproportionately occupy leadership positions. In the EU, women hold less than 40% managerial roles and are concentrated around the non-financial economy and temporary employment (Obadić, 2016). These findings underscore how persistent gender biases not only limit women's career progression but also influence team dynamics, thereby perpetuating traditional gender norms within organisational structures.

Gender inequality within tourism and hospitality workforce is further evidenced by the significant wage gap between men and women. Studies report a gender wage gap ranging from 14 to 31% across various sectors of the industry (Obadić, 2016). This disparity has been attributed to multiple factors, including the overrepresentation of women in lower-paid positions and establishments, as well as occupational segregation and gender-based discrimination. These structural and systemic barriers continue to reinforce wage inequality and limit women's economic advancement in the sector.

In addition to wage disparities, women in the tourism and hospitality workforce also contend with hostile work environments that further impede their career progression. For instance, women in hospitality and tourism employment often face sexual harassment and workplace bullying, which hinders their involvement in employment and career progression. Encountering sexual harassment from supervisors, colleagues, employees, and customers complicates their professional

experiences, while lacking the support and advocacy needed to battle such cases (Reguera & García-Izquierdo, 2021). The pervasion of sexual harassment and lack of support deters women from pursuing hospitality careers and career advancement due to the impact on their performance, health, and well-being (Alrawadieh et al., 2022). Therefore, increasing awareness on sexual harassment issues and advocating gender and human rights are crucial for negating the gender inequality within the hospitality and tourism workforce.

Gender stereotyping

Studies have shown that women are frequently perceived as incapable of possessing leadership qualities, while symbolic attributes associated with males—such as assertiveness and authority—are more readily linked to leadership roles (Carvalho et al., 2018; Mooney, 2020). As a result, women are often required to work harder than their male counterparts to prove their competence. Additionally, prevailing stereotypes suggest that women should be more family-oriented and are inherently less capable than men in professional settings, which further undermines their credibility and limits their career progression.

In many cultural contexts, women who challenge traditional gender norms by aspiring to leadership roles or high-level positions are often perceived as disrupting established societal expectations (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Mooney, 2020). Such beliefs and norms create resistance to women's professional advancement, particularly in societies where female ambition is discouraged or undervalued. Women leaders are also frequently misidentified or overlooked, with limited opportunities to demonstrate their true competencies due to prevailing gender stereotypes (Carvalho et al., 2018). These biases often permeate recruitment and promotion processes, where hiring managers unconsciously anchor their decisions to traditional notions of women's societal and familial roles.

The persistence of ingrained gender biases also requires women to exert greater effort than their male counterparts to prove their competence and legitimacy in professional roles. Preconceived notions about women's abilities, social roles, and expected behaviours frequently position them as followers rather than leaders within organisational hierarchies (Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2024). Certain symbolic attributes of men are associated with dominant leadership, whereas women are considered incapable of leadership qualities (Carvalho et al., 2018; Mooney, 2020). In male-dominated hospitality establishments, this manifests in the form of increased competition, discriminatory remarks, and diminished professional recognition (Elhoushy & El-Said, 2020), all of which undermine women's confidence and progression in their careers.

The persistence of gender norms is especially pronounced in regions such as the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. In many majority-Islamic societies, for example, women are symbolically regarded as the 'mothers' of society, with primary responsibilities for child-rearing, elder care, and domestic work within patriarchal structures (Carvalho et al., 2019). Importantly, these expectations are largely cultural rather than religious in origin, and emerging perspectives within these societies increasingly recognise the value of women's contributions across all sectors of society, including the economy (El Feki et al., 2017). In this context, the tourism and hospitality industry presents important opportunities for women's

career development and economic empowerment, challenging conventional gender roles.

However, the benefits of such employment are not universally realised. In some cases, such as in Guatemala, women's participation in tourism has led to increased exposure to exploitation, unpaid labour, unfair working conditions, and domestic violence (LaPan et al., 2024). Beyond workplace-specific issues, women also face socio-cultural challenges that limit their ability to fully engage in employment. These include difficulties balancing work with family responsibilities, limited time availability, resistance from partners, and pressures associated with job transfers or mobility, often due to a lack of trust or feelings of jealousy from spouses. These examples illustrate that despite shifting societal attitudes, significant structural and cultural barriers remain. Achieving genuine employment equality and freedom for women in the tourism and hospitality workforce will require not only changes in perception, but also the implementation of robust protections and support mechanisms within the industry.

These gendered perceptions and structural disadvantages often take root early, even during educational and training phases. For instance, a study in Bali found that while female students are predominant in hospitality management programs, this trend tends to reinforce traditional gender norms by steering women towards service-oriented and care-related career pathways (Byomantara & Arifuddin, 2022). Although this representation reflects improved access to higher education for women, it simultaneously reproduces occupational segregation based on gender stereotypes. Adnyani (2023) argues that strategic interventions are necessary to address these disparities, including equal access to skill development and training opportunities, flexible working environments, and supportive community engagement. Without such measures, educational parity alone may be insufficient to disrupt entrenched gender biases within the tourism and hospitality workforce.

Gender issues in the work environment

While structural and cultural barriers present formidable challenges to women entering and remaining in the tourism and hospitality workforce, issues within the work environment itself further compound gender inequality. Even when women secure employment in the sector, they often encounter hostile workplace dynamics that compromise their well-being and professional development. Studies have consistently reported high incidences of gender-based harassment and bullying in hospitality settings, particularly in customer-facing roles where women are frequently objectified or subjected to inappropriate behaviour from both customers and colleagues (Opoku et al., 2024). These challenges are exacerbated by informal organisational cultures that tolerate or normalise such behaviour, leaving women with limited avenues for redress.

In addition to harassment, women often face verbal abuse and exclusionary behaviours that isolate them from decision-making spaces and team cohesion (Mooney, 2020). The emotional toll of such experiences contributes to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and higher turnover intentions among women employees. Furthermore, the absence of structured mentorship and professional support further marginalises women in the workplace. Unlike their male counterparts, women are less likely to be included in informal networks or receive guidance from

senior leaders—an issue that significantly hinders career advancement (Pécot et al., 2024). Without visible role models or supportive supervisory relationships, many women find themselves navigating their careers in isolation, reinforcing existing gender disparities in leadership representation.

Female employment in the resort sector of the Maldives

Given the history of tourism development in the Maldives for over 50 years, the continued gender disparity in resort employment remains striking. Although the overall proportion of women employed in resorts reached 12% in 2020, this figure declined slightly to 11% in 2022 (MBS, 2020; MBS, 2023). More notably, the participation of local women remains extremely low, accounting for only 3% in 2020 and decreasing further to 2% in 2022 (MBS, 2020; MBS, 2023). The underrepresentation and drop in female employment reflects deep-rooted structural and socio-cultural barriers within resort employment. Consistent with global trends, the Maldivian tourism industry continues to experience gender inequalities in labour force participation, wage disparities, discrimination, objectification, harassment, and limited opportunities for career progression (Laidey & Imthinaan, 2024; Nasheeda et al., 2025). These patterns highlight the need for a deeper examination of the underlying institutional, organisational, and socio-cultural factors that continue to shape women's employment and career trajectories in resort-based tourism.

However, there have been positive developments in tourism employment outside the resort sector. Introduction of tourism in the local islands has created new employment opportunities and stimulated economic activity, particularly for women and youth (Mohamed, 2026). In addition, there are deliberate efforts put forward by employers to increase female participation and representation within the resort sector (Shiyar et al., 2023). Despite these initiatives, research indicates that societal pressure, religious and cultural expectations, gendered household roles, unfavourable working conditions, and workplace discrimination remain significant barriers to women's participation in tourism education and employment (Pappayah & Ahmed, 2017). While policy and industry efforts are emerging, these ongoing challenges suggest that substantial gaps remain in understanding how structural and cultural constraints influence women's access, retention, and advancement in the Maldivian resort sector.

Theoretical frameworks: 'Gendered Institutions' and the 'Glass Ceiling Effect'

The current literature available on gender issues within the global tourism industry denotes various discussions on the issues of career progression issues. One such ideology presented by Joan Acker in 1992, explored how gender was perceived over the years and how it has evolved into a "patterning of difference and domination through distinctions between women and men that is integral to many societal processes" (Acker, 1992, p. 565). The 'Gendered Institutions' theory by Acker revolutionised the way gender was acknowledged in institutions. Traditionally, institutions also had gendered processes, which constructed different roles for men and women in the workplace, whereas Acker's theory suggested a list of five gendered processes that negated the disparities, ensuring equal opportunities for both genders. Acker continued to develop the theory during later years, and it

was widely accepted and highly acclaimed by different scholars (Knights, 2019; Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019).

Another prominent and enduring issue within gender discourse is the glass ceiling effect, which continues to shape women's experiences in the tourism and hospitality workforce. The concept originated in the United States with the establishment of the Glass Ceiling Commission, which was tasked with investigating barriers that hinder women's career advancement (Bazazo et al., 2017). Johns (2013) defines the glass ceiling as a set of invisible barriers that prevent women and minority groups from progressing into executive or managerial roles, despite possessing the qualifications and experience to do so. Similarly, Cotter et al. (2001) emphasise that the glass ceiling is not merely a reflection of overt gender or racial inequality; rather, it represents a subtle and complex form of institutionalised discrimination that obscures the mechanisms through which inequality is maintained. This includes the unequal distribution of power within organisations and systemic obstacles that limit career advancement for marginalised groups.

In the context of the tourism and hospitality workforce, the glass ceiling is often reinforced by organisational norms and perceptions surrounding women's ability to manage work-life balance, restricted access to promotion and training opportunities, biased performance appraisal systems, and a lack of flexible working arrangements (Wijethunga et al., 2023). While the specific manifestations of the glass ceiling may vary across sectors, regions, and cultural contexts, several recurring patterns emerge in the literature. These include the overrepresentation of women in lower-tier service roles, persistent wage disparities, entrenched societal beliefs about gender roles, and hostile or unsupportive work environments. Together, these factors underscore the multifaceted and deeply embedded nature of gender inequality in the tourism and hospitality workforce and point to the need for systemic change at both institutional and industry levels.

Methodology

Research question

As discussed earlier, local female representation in Maldivian resort employment is substantially low. Given that the resort sector makes up for over 60% of the Maldivian tourism industry (MBS, 2024), understanding the challenges faced by Maldivian women working in the resort sector is pivotal to address the gender disparity that exists in the tourism and hospitality workforce. Thus, this study addresses how organisational structures, workplace cultures, and socio-cultural norms contribute to the underrepresentation of Maldivian women in senior positions within resort-based tourism.

Study setting

The study is set in the context of the Maldivian tourism industry, focusing on the resort sector. This study will include local women who are employed at various departments and levels of local resorts.

Type and design of the study

This study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore the challenges experienced by women employed in Maldivian resorts. Phenomenology is

particularly well-suited for examining the lived experiences of individuals and gaining in-depth insights into how they interpret and make sense of their realities. The study was underpinned by a constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed through the dynamic interaction between the researcher and participants. A qualitative mono-method approach was employed, involving open-ended, in-depth conversations conducted through three focus group discussions, each comprising three participants, resulting in a total of nine participants. Focus groups were chosen for this study due its interactive nature that can uncover shared patterns, collective perspectives, and social dynamics that may not emerge in individual interviews, thereby enriching understanding of the structural, cultural, and organisational barriers women face. Homogeneous purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, whereby the researcher drew on prior knowledge to identify local women employed in resorts. The study prioritised richness of narrative and thematic depth, and the sample size (nine participants) was considered adequate once thematic patterns began to recur. Importantly, participants represented multiple organisational levels and areas, which strengthened the breadth of perspectives despite the small sample. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and shared with the participants for validation and accuracy checks. The data were analysed using narrative analysis, which allows to examine the stories and experiences shared by participants, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the meaning they ascribe to their challenges in the resort sector. This, along with an inductive coding process, allows for the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and meanings within participants' accounts.

Participant profile

Table 1. Participant profile

Participant ID	Department	Level
P1	Food and beverage	Entry level
P2	Food and beverage	Supervisory level
P3	Kitchen	Entry level
P4	Kitchen	Supervisory level
P5	Sales and marketing	Executive level
P6	Front office	Entry level
P7	Guest services	Entry level
P8	Guest services	Supervisory level
P9	General administration	Entry level

Ethical considerations

Prior to data collection, participants were presented with the ethics approval of the study, along with a comprehensive information sheet, detailing the aims of the study, data collection methods, and procedures for data storage and use. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with no form of coercion or obligation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study

at any stage without any consequences. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants prior to the commencement of data collection, including consent for audio recording of the sessions. Participants were assured that their identities would remain strictly confidential and that no identifying information would appear in the final report or any dissemination of findings. To further safeguard privacy, all participants signed a confidentiality agreement, affirming that the content shared during the focus group discussions would not be disclosed outside the session.

As the study involved individual professionals rather than organisational case studies, gatekeeper access was not deemed necessary. However, there was one instance where participants' employers expressed concerns, and gatekeeper consent was negotiated by clearly explaining the purpose, scope, and ethical assurances of the study. The research posed no physical or psychological harm to participants and adhered to ethical standards for conducting research involving human participants.

Ethical considerations extended beyond confidentiality and informed consent to include reflexivity and awareness of potential researcher bias. Given the researcher's familiarity with the tourism sector, conscious efforts were made to minimise power imbalances and avoid imposing preconceived interpretations on participants' experiences. Participants were assured that there were no right or wrong responses and that their perspectives would be represented authentically. Strategies such as reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were used to enhance transparency, credibility, and trustworthiness in the research process.

Findings

The analysis of focus group discussions revealed four overarching themes that illustrate the gender-based challenges faced by Maldivian women working in resorts: (1) Gendered Workplace Norms and Bias, (2) Cultural and Religious Constraints, (3) Family Expectations and Work-Life Balance, and (4) Mentorship and Career Development.

Gendered Workplace Norms and Bias

Participants described persistent gender stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes that framed resort work as unsuitable for women. These included assumptions about physical weakness, emotional fragility, and inappropriate motivations for career advancement. Participants noted that:

"Some of my colleagues actually said to my face that I got the promotion because I am a girl, not because I am capable." (P2)

"If it is physically demanding and needs a lot of time, people say females won't be able to do the job." (P6)

Women also reported being subject to sexual harassment, sarcastic remarks, and bullying, which further reinforced the perception that the industry is male-dominated and unwelcoming to women.

"if a female is handling a situation and sometimes the guest will take the person as weak and be more rude, rather than if it was a male employee who is handling the situation." (P8)

“One reason for that is it is a very challenging thing to work in the industry, in a kitchen for a girl. There is stereotyping too, whether we say it or not bullying is also definitely there.” (P3)

Cultural and Religious Constraints

Cultural norms and religious beliefs were significant barriers to women’s participation in resort employment. Many participants shared that their communities associated resort work with moral compromise, particularly due to the sale of alcohol and perceived exposure to inappropriate behaviour.

“Like it is said, in our religion, resorts sell alcohol and all that, so you are going into wrong doings.” (P5)

“Community doesn’t accept their daughters to go to a resort, even though it is very close by.” (P2)

Despite these challenges, some participants noted a gradual shift in societal attitudes, with increasing awareness of the professional opportunities available in the tourism sector.

“People are becoming more aware of the opportunities within the industry and recognising that it is a safer environment to work in.” (P1)

Family Expectations and Work-Life Balance

Participants highlighted the tension between professional aspirations and traditional gender roles. While some families were supportive, others expressed scepticism or disapproval, particularly regarding women leaving home or delaying marriage.

“The taboo is still there, women should be at home.” (P9)

“When are you coming to the island? Are you getting married soon?” (P6)

Balancing work and family responsibilities was also a challenge, especially for women with children. However, some participants shared strategies for maintaining family connections and emphasised the importance of partner support.

“By planning the day, I get time to call and talk to my family; I can visit them on off days.” (P7)

“My partner is very understanding... he is also working in this industry.” (P8)

Mentorship and Career Development

Experiences with mentorship varied widely. Some participants felt unsupported by supervisors, particularly older or female colleagues, while others described positive relationships that fostered growth and confidence.

“To become successful in this industry, women need proper mentors to guide them and show them the way.” (P1)

“Female supervisors are a source of motivation... they are very patient and always guide even when operations are busy.” (P7)

Participants also emphasised the need for strong mentorship, resilience, and self-belief to overcome structural and cultural barriers in the industry.

“actually, to work in this area you will have to have a very thick skin because, you will be working not only with people from your organisation, you will be working with a lot of people from other organisations and usually these people are not very considerate about what they are saying.” (P3)

“because if you have the passion and dedication to work in that area, and you want to work in that area, it will be very possible and they can do it.” (P4)

“If you want to do it, you can, and you have to follow your goals. For me example, I can do everything, I go diving, excursions, others are not doing it. So I can say I am better than guys in my department and they see it now too.” (P7)

The findings reveal a complex interplay of gendered norms, cultural expectations, and institutional practices that shape the experiences of Maldivian women working in the resort sector. While some women are beginning to challenge traditional roles and find support through mentorship and family, many continue to face systemic barriers that hinder their career advancement. These insights underscore the need for targeted interventions at both organisational and societal levels to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in tourism. The following discussion will explore these findings in relation to existing literature and consider their implications for policy and practice.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the gender-based challenges faced by Maldivian women working in the resort sector, a context where tourism dominates the national economy but where female participation remains disproportionately low. The findings reveal a multifaceted landscape of barriers shaped by institutional norms, cultural expectations, and interpersonal dynamics. These challenges were analysed through the dual lenses of Gendered Institutions Theory (Acker, 1992) and the Glass Ceiling Effect (Bazazo et al., 2017; Cotter et al., 2001; Johns, 2013) for this study. Both theories provide critical frameworks for unpacking the structural and symbolic dimensions of gender inequality in the tourism and hospitality workforce.

The narratives of participants underscore the persistence of gendered assumptions within resort environments. Women were frequently perceived as physically or emotionally unsuited for demanding roles, particularly in kitchens or guest services. These perceptions mirror global findings that associate leadership and competence with masculine traits such as assertiveness and authority (Carvalho et al., 2018; Mooney, 2020). In contrast, women are often expected to embody nurturing or service-oriented roles, which limits their access to decision-making positions.

This aligns with Acker’s (1992) assertion that institutions are inherently gendered, not only in their formal structures but also in their informal norms and everyday practices. The current belief that women are “too soft” for leadership or “too weak” for physical tasks reflects what Acker describes as the “invisibility of gender” in organisational logic, where male norms are treated as neutral and female attributes as deviations (Acker, 2009; Costa et al., 2016). These assumptions are both discriminatory and self-reinforcing, as they shape hiring, promotion, and training decisions in ways that systematically exclude women from advancement.

Another significant finding was that some women were told they received promotions “because they are female” rather than on merit. This echoes broader discourses of reverse discrimination, where such perceptions diminish women’s professional achievements and frame gender equity initiatives as unjust advantages rather than necessary correctives to systemic imbalance (Ghaderi et al., 2025; Russen et al., 2025). In the heavily male-dominant resort sector of the Maldives, where women already struggle for recognition and legitimacy, these narratives can be especially damaging. They reinforce existing power structures, foster resentment, and shift attention away from the structural barriers women face, ultimately undermining both individual confidence and broader efforts toward inclusion.

Cultural and religious norms emerged as powerful forces shaping local women’s access to resort employment in the Maldives. Participants described how working in resorts was often associated with moral compromise, particularly due to the perceived liberal social environment, which includes exposure to behaviours such as alcohol consumption. These concerns were especially pronounced for women who wore the hijab or came from conservative island communities, where reputational risks and community scrutiny are heightened.

However, it is important to recognise that such environments are not exclusive to women. Both men and women are exposed to the same social settings and potential influences. Yet, women are disproportionately judged for their presence in these spaces, while similar behaviours among men are often overlooked or normalised. This double standard reflects broader patterns of gendered moral regulation, where women’s behaviour is more closely monitored and policed in the name of preserving cultural or religious values (Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022). In this context, women are not only navigating professional challenges but also managing the social expectations that position them as the bearers of communal morality. These dynamics place an additional burden on women and contribute to the stigmatisation of their participation in the tourism workforce.

While these constraints are often framed in religious terms, especially in the Maldives and other Islamic societies, the literature suggests that they are more accurately understood as monolithic, cultural interpretations of religion (Ghaderi et al., 2025). In many Islamic societies, women are symbolically positioned as the moral guardians of the family, and their participation in mixed-gender or liberal environments is seen as a threat to communal values (Tadesse Zenebe et al., 2025). This symbolic role limits women’s mobility and professional autonomy, even when legal or institutional barriers are absent.

The findings also reflect the intersectionality of gender with religion, geography, and class. Women from more remote or traditional islands faced greater resistance, while those with supportive families or urban backgrounds reported more freedom to pursue careers. This suggests that gender inequality in the Maldivian resort sector is not monolithic but varies across social and spatial contexts.

The tension between professional aspirations and familial responsibilities was a recurring theme in participants’ narratives. Many described how traditional gender roles, where men are expected to earn and women to care, shaped their career decisions and limited their mobility within the industry. In the context of

Maldivian society, which reflects many characteristics of collectivist cultures, these expectations are often reinforced by strong social norms that prioritise family harmony, conformity, and adherence to traditional roles. In such contexts, where interpersonal harmony and conformity are highly valued, traditional gender roles tend to be more deeply entrenched (Carvalho et al., 2019). Studies have also shown that women often face personal struggles such as strained family relationships and societal judgment, when pursuing careers that challenge these norms. Notably, some women experience what is commonly referred to as the “motherhood penalty,” where caregiving responsibilities and assumptions about maternal roles negatively impact their professional advancement (Carvalho, 2021). These cultural and structural pressures collectively reinforce the gendered division of labour and limit women’s full participation in the workforce.

This reflects the symbolic violence of gender norms, where women’s choices are constrained through overt coercion and deeply ingrained expectations around what is appropriate or respectable (Babic & Hansez, 2021). The emotional labour of negotiating these expectations, such as convincing parents, managing guilt, and maintaining long-distance relationships, adds an invisible burden to women’s professional lives.

The Glass Ceiling Effect is particularly salient in this context. As Cotter et al. (2001) argue, the glass ceiling is not just about formal barriers but also about the subtle, cumulative disadvantages that women face over time. The assumption that women will eventually leave the workforce to raise children, or that they are less committed to their careers, leads to fewer opportunities for training, mentorship, and promotion (Russen et al., 2025). These assumptions become self-fulfilling, as women are excluded from leadership pipelines and then blamed for their underrepresentation.

However, the findings also reveal resilience and adaptability among local women working in the industry. Some participants described supportive partners, flexible work arrangements, and strategies for maintaining family ties as supportive factors towards their careers in resort employment. This supports calls in the literature for family-inclusive policies, such as on-site childcare, flexible scheduling, and spousal accommodation (Adnyani, 2023). These narratives challenge the binary between work and family and suggest that with the right support, women can thrive in both domains.

The role of mentorship emerged as both a barrier and an enabler in participants’ professional journeys. While some described inspiring supervisors who actively nurtured their growth, others recounted experiences marked by indifference, judgment, or even sabotage, often from older or female colleagues. This ambivalence highlights the complex dynamics of gender solidarity in male-dominated environments, where women may feel compelled to conform to masculine norms or distance themselves from other women to gain legitimacy in the workplace (Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2024). These divergent experiences underscore the dual-edged nature of mentorship in gendered workplaces, revealing how it can either reinforce exclusionary norms or serve as a powerful tool for empowerment and solidarity.

Mentorship is also crucial for identity formation. Seeing women in leadership roles helps younger employees envision themselves in similar positions, breaking the cycle of underrepresentation. The lack of visible role models in the Maldivian resort sector reinforces the perception that leadership is a male domain, discouraging women from aspiring to higher positions.

The absence of structured mentorship programs is another significant concern. As Pécot et al. (2024) observe, informal networks and sponsorship are critical for career advancement in the hospitality industry, yet women are frequently excluded from these influential spaces. Without access to consistent guidance, constructive feedback, and active advocacy, women are often left to navigate their careers in isolation, which heightens the risk of burnout and attrition. However, this particular theme did not emerge from the findings of this study. This could suggest that networking and mentorship may not yet be widely recognised or utilised as career progression strategies among women in the Maldivian hospitality sector, possibly due to limited exposure, cultural norms, or the early stage of professional development structures in the local context.

Interestingly, participants' sentiments on having a "thick skin," showing "determination," and "not listening to what others say" reflects an individualisation of responsibility. This is a common theme in neoliberal empowerment discourses (Laruffa & Hearne, 2024). These narratives suggest that female resort employees in the Maldives are prepared to take ownership of their career trajectories and cultivate the resilience needed to succeed. However, while resilience is commendable, it should not be a substitute for institutional change. As Acker (1992) reminds us, true gender equity requires transforming the structures that produce inequality, not just helping individuals survive within them.

On a more positive note, some participants noted a gradual shift in societal attitudes, with increasing awareness of the professional opportunities available in tourism. This aligns with global trends toward greater gender inclusivity in the tourism and hospitality workforce, where women are becoming more visible and valued contributors (Schmitz & Gabel, 2023). Research also suggests that as gender dynamics evolve, organisations are beginning to recognise and respond to the distinct needs and strengths of a more diverse workforce (Je et al., 2023). These developments suggest a promising trajectory for women in the Maldivian tourism sector. However, for this momentum to be sustained, it must be supported by institutional efforts such as inclusive recruitment practices, gender-sensitive workplace policies, and public awareness campaigns that reinforce the legitimacy and value of women's participation in the industry.

Taken together, these findings offer a nuanced understanding of the gendered realities faced by Maldivian women in the resort sector. They reveal the persistence of structural and cultural barriers together with the emergence of agency, resilience, and shifting norms. As the tourism industry continues to evolve, these insights provide a critical foundation for shaping more inclusive policies and practices.

Recommendations

To advance gender equity in the Maldivian resort sector, a multi-level approach, that simultaneously addresses institutional, cultural, and interpersonal barriers, is

required. At the institutional level, it is crucial to develop structured mentorship programs that connect junior female employees with experienced professionals, particularly women in leadership roles (Mistry et al., 2024). Such initiatives can foster career development and support identity formation. Additionally, implementing gender-sensitive human resource policies such as transparent promotion criteria, anti-discrimination protocols, and regular gender audits can help identify and dismantle systemic biases (Russen et al., 2021a, 2021b). Family-inclusive workplace practices, including flexible scheduling, on-site childcare, and spousal accommodation, are also vital to support women balancing professional and caregiving responsibilities (Singh & Vanka, 2020). Therefore, sustainable and holistic HRM practices are vital at the institutional level to tackle the career challenges faced by women in the resort sector.

In addition to the above, cultural and community engagement is equally important to ensure women's career progression in resort employment. Public awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes and highlight successful female role models in tourism can help reshape societal perceptions (Russen et al., 2025). Moreover, engaging community and religious leaders in dialogue can promote more inclusive interpretations of cultural and religious norms, thereby encouraging broader acceptance of women's participation in the workforce.

Finally, capacity building and education play a foundational role in long-term change. Targeted training and leadership development programs for women, especially those from remote or conservative communities, can build confidence and equip them with the skills needed for advancement (Pécot et al., 2024). Integrating gender equity modules into tourism and hospitality education curricula can also foster inclusive mindsets among future industry professionals, laying the groundwork for a more equitable sector.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the gendered experiences of women in the Maldivian resort sector, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to a specific group of women working in selected resorts, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across different islands, resort types, or employment levels. Second, there is a potential for self-selection bias, as participants who chose to share their stories may have had particularly strong views or experiences, potentially skewing the findings toward more vocal perspectives. Third, due to the sensitive nature of topics such as religion, morality, and gender roles, some participants may have withheld or softened their responses, which could have limited the depth of certain insights.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Expanding the sample to include a broader range of stakeholders such as male colleagues, HR managers, and community leaders would provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in the sector. Longitudinal studies could also be valuable in tracking changes in attitudes and career trajectories over time. Additionally, evaluating the impact of specific interventions, such as mentorship programs or policy reforms, would offer practical insights into what strategies are most effective in supporting women's career advancement in the tourism industry.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex and layered challenges faced by Maldivian women working in the resort sector, a space where global tourism intersects with deeply rooted cultural, institutional, and gendered norms. Drawing on Gendered Institutions Theory and the Glass Ceiling Effect, the findings reveal how structural inequalities, cultural expectations, and interpersonal dynamics collectively shape women's career trajectories, similar to global findings from literature. However, unlike studies conducted in other contexts, issues related to professional networking did not emerge as a significant barrier among participants in this study. From discriminatory assumptions about women's capabilities to the moral scrutiny they face in the work environment, the barriers are both visible and invisible, formal and informal.

Yet, the narratives also point to resilience, adaptability, and signs of progress. Women are not only navigating these challenges but also actively reshaping their roles within the industry, supported by evolving societal attitudes, emerging support systems, and a growing recognition of their contributions. However, while these shifts are promising, they are not sufficient on their own. Achieving meaningful and lasting gender equity in the Maldivian tourism sector will require deliberate, sustained efforts from policy reform, workplace innovation, cultural transformation, and community engagement. For example, flexible working hours, strategies supporting work-life-balance, and creating awareness on gender inequality could provide a more conducive work environment for women.

By centring the voices of women in this study, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the gendered realities of tourism work in the Maldives and offers a foundation for more inclusive and equitable practices. It is hoped that the insights and recommendations presented here will inform future research, guide institutional change, and inspire continued advocacy for gender justice in the tourism and hospitality workforce.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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