

REDEFINING POWER PERCEPTIONS

Giving women a seat at the table displays a company's gender-inclusive approach, even while it stands to benefit from their soft power in business

BY VINITA BHATIA

The pandemic has slammed the brakes on corporate India's slow march towards gender diversity, equality and inclusivity. A recent McKinsey analysis showed that women's jobs are 1.8 times more susceptible to falling prey this crisis than those of men.

While women make up 39% of global employment, they accounted for 54% of overall job losses as of May 2020. The report also cautioned that if immediate actions were not taken to reverse this backsliding effect, the global GDP growth could be \$1 trillion lower in 2030 than if women's unemployment ran parallel to that of men in each sector.

Interestingly, Goal 5 of the 'UN Sustainable Development Goals' aims at gender equality. Amruda Nair, Founder, Araiya Hotels and Resorts tells Vinita Bhatia that the Indian hospitality sector is well poised to achieve this milestone. The reason? The country already has a number of women entrepreneurs leading hospitality companies.

Moreover, several female general managers, revenue managers, sales heads and even chief engineers are managing hotels in the country. So, while top brands in India's hospitality sector have demonstrated that they are torchbearers for gender inclusivity, there exists scope to ensure more women-balanced teams across the spectrum.

Is there any reason behind the low percentage of well-educated women entering India's hospitality workforce?

I do not find a difference in the education levels between men and women entering the hospitality workforce. Instead, I believe the reluctance is primarily due to the working hours in the industry. This is usually extends beyond the regular 9 to 5 job, and includes working during weekends and holidays, which are the busiest times for hotels and restaurants.

Research shows that inclusive and diverse workplaces promote good business and greater profitability. Have you seen this theory play out in your professional life?

Earlier in my hospitality career I worked in the international hotel consulting space in Singapore. Most of the projects that we managed were spread throughout Asia - primarily Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, China and Japan.

As a regional office, we could leverage local relationships and language skills while providing our clients access to global data, benchmarks and best practices. This helped us give our clientele the best possible advice.

In Asia, particularly Singapore and Hong Kong, we were often dealing with female hotel owners and CEOs as well as business development heads. Having such a diverse gender mix helped establish comfort and build trust.

How can having women at key management positions bring an alternative voice in the boardroom and ensure better relationships with customers?

Having female board members brings an additional perspective, since they represent 50% of the customer base as well as the workforce. Women need a seat at the table to ensure that gender equality extends beyond policy on paper, and to show that it is implemented in an effective and practical manner.

Moreover, any cause needs to be driven and what better way to promote gender equality than starting at the top by giving women professionals more opportunities at the board level. In my personal journey, mentorship played a key guiding role in my career choices.

My first job after college at the Mandarin Oriental New York led

HOW HOTELS CAN DEVELOP A SAFE AND PRODUCTIVE WORKING SPACE FOR WOMEN:

- The HR should help employees connect to one another, so that they collaborate instead of compete.
- The HR team should present the organisation's mission through the perspective of their female workforce, which will engender trust in the company and its processes.
- This approach may sometimes clash with regional or local cultural bias, especially in far-flung locations. However, the established process must be communicated in a clear and lucid manner. It should also address the key safety concerns that are likely to crop up.
- It is critical to conduct regular trainings to ensure that the recruitment tone and language to articulate ideas and decorum is maintained during meetings and company social events. Organisations used to do this earlier when employees were transferred to overseas locations and had to be familiarised with local customs and biases, to prevent conflict.
- A Complaints Committee under the POSH Act should be set up to assuage any concerns.



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me to change tracks and pursue real estate and finance. Seeing more women in leadership roles can inspire younger women to aim higher.

How can you building long-term recruitment and retention goals for women at Araiya, since it is a woman-led organisation?

For us, the key has always been to ensure that the recruitment process is gender agnostic, and to exhibit the values of trust, equality and fair practices across the process chain. This extends from recruitment, on-boarding, performance evaluation and rewards.

The major shift in most companies is to restructure the interview questionnaire. It is designed to be more respectful of privacy and more professionally directed at understanding the candidate's suitability as required by the job scope. The local social norms also affect the candidate's appropriateness in certain roles to ensure smooth functioning.

How can hotel brands devise tangible strategies for inclusive HR practices that integrate diversity into their hiring practices?

There have been several interesting shifts to ensure a fair and ethical workplace to all employees. But most importantly, companies are now actively fostering an environment of fair play.

So, they are structuring the process to rule out gender bias, which may creep in due to the influence of local and/or regional social conditioning. Moreover, they are putting in place checks and balances to weed out any discord that may arise due to the

inherent biases.

How can companies build the right attitude about gender inclusion and diversity across teams?

Primarily, the culture build is to ensure that everyone in the group is shown the same amount of respect, without any prejudice. This has to extend to team members, team leads, supervisors and managers. All opinions should be given the same weightage as merited, irrespective of the person giving the opinion.

Additionally, appreciation and stricture or reproach should be given equally, as required, without the bias of gender creeping in. This should be done in a manner that is professional.

How can a company's leadership build the right values about gender equality so that it percolates down the chain?

Diversity encompasses both inclusion and equity across the board. Diverse inputs add value, emotional quotient (EQ) as well as a new dimension to a solution or situation requiring a solution.

The leadership can demonstrate this by ensuring a fair and equitable treatment for all employees. This should be irrespective of the unit or corporate office level positions.

They should also regularly meet with the unit heads to discuss key issues concerning gender biases. This will give them an inkling for any biases creeping in, intentionally or otherwise. All interactions by the leadership at all levels need to demonstrate this attribute of inclusion and diversity. 