

GENDER (IN)EQUALITY AND WORK-LIFE (IM)BALANCE IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY LABOUR: PERSPECTIVES OF TOURISM ORGANISATIONS IN PORTUGAL

Abstract

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Purpose – This research note explores the perceptions of key stakeholders in tourism organisations regarding gender equality and work-life balance in the Portuguese tourism and hospitality industry.

Methodology/Design/Approach – Eleven key stakeholders representing tourism organisations in Portugal were interviewed to obtain qualitative data. A content analysis was then conducted to uncover themes and sub-themes.

Findings – The results show two main themes, including sub-themes: Gender inequality (partial gender equality, lack of gender salary equality, lack of women in higher positions, and gender inequality in career advancement) and work-life balance (the difficulty of balancing work and personal/family life and the need for better conditions for women accompanying children).

Originality of the research – his study highlights gender equality and work-life balance in the tourism and hospitality industry from the perspective of managers of the leading tourism organisations in Portugal. The study also provides critical implications and future directions based on the findings.

Keywords Gender equality, work-life balance, tourism and hospitality labour, inequality, tourism organisations, Portugal

Research note

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INTRODUCTION

All tourism and hospitality (T&H)-related sectors comprise over 6% of total employment in the European Union, with accommodations and food and beverage companies being the primary labour providers (Marques Santos et al., 2020). However, the T&H industry, while being one of the most crucial sectors contributing to economic growth and employment globally (Seyitoğlu & Costa, 2022), faces challenges related to the labour force, such as poor working conditions, low levels of unionisation, harassment, low wages, precarity, gender inequality, and work-life balance (Robinson et al., 2019).

Gender-related studies, such as gender equality and women's empowerment, are significant topics in T&H labour literature (Kabil et al., 2022). Inequality in the T&H labour market has been researched from various angles, including gender, income, and discrimination. Gender discrimination leads to income inequality in the T&H labour market (Tian & Guo, 2021). Gender-based inequalities are prevalent in the T&H industry due to horizontal and vertical job segregation (Costa et al., 2017a). According to the report of ILO (2017), women are often in lower-paid and low-skill tasks, with under-representation in more skill-required jobs like kitchen work, engineering, security, and managerial roles. In Portugal, female employees in tourism agencies are paid less due to gender discrimination (Santos & Varejão, 2006). To avoid women's withdrawal from jobs due to family burdens and childbearing, and thus reducing recruitment costs, they are preferred for back-house tasks, such as cleaning and secretaries, that do not require intense experiences or skills (Casado-Díaz & Simón, 2016). Additionally, due to gender discrimination in the industry, women's income is generally lower than men's (Tian & Guo, 2021). In this regard, it is pointed out that the average wage of male workers in the U.S. hotel industry is higher than that of female workers (Janta et al., 2011).

Work-life balance issues also create challenges that T&H employees confront in the industry. It is stressed by ILO (2017-November) that the sector includes additional challenges for both women and men in reconciling work and family responsibilities due to structural characteristics. In this vein, the significance of providing high-quality work experiences to T&H employees that enable work-life balance was pointed out by scholars (e.g. Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). Long working hours and high stress in the T&H industry can negatively impact work-life balance, leading to employees leaving the industry (Deery & Jago, 2009). Work-life balance affects well-being, work satisfaction, performance at work, and life satisfaction (Sun et al., 2020).

It is undeniable that scholarly works are increasingly concerned with gender equality and work-life balance in the T&H industry because of the increasing strength of the women workforce. Therefore, it is vital to explore gender equality and work-life balance in T&H labour to provide beneficial implications for the future of the T&H labour market. In this regard, due to the lack of studies on gender equality and work-life balance in the T&H workforce in Portugal from the perspectives of policymakers responsible for T&H organisations, this study aims to fill the cavity in the literature.

1. METHODOLOGY

As part of a more comprehensive study on T&H employment in Portugal, the present qualitative case study answers this research question: What are the perceptions of key stakeholders representing tourism organisations towards gender equality and work-life balance in Portugal's T&H labour? Qualitative approaches are proper to comprehensively unveil individuals' opinions about a subject or topic (Seyitoğlu et al., 2023). Case studies are suitable qualitative approaches to analyse a detailed description of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). In this research note, Portugal was chosen as the case study area, and the leaders of Portugal's most important tourism organisations were the target participants.

In qualitative data collection, scholars primarily focus on interviewing key stakeholders who play a role in determining actions or strategies (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). We followed this approach and selected key tourism organisations' leaders in Portugal as research participants to obtain unique perspectives to shed light on the subject. Data was collected from 11 Portuguese key stakeholders representing regional and national T&H organisations between April and July 2022 through online semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese and later translated into English.

The participants are five female and six male representatives of 11 tourism organisations in Portugal (AGIC-Portuguese Association of Tourist Guides and Tour Managers, APECATE-Association of Congress, Tourist Entertainment and Events Companies in Portugal, SNATTI-National Union of Tourist Activity Translators and Interpreters, ADHP-Association of Hotel Directors of Portugal, AHRESP-Association of Hospitality, Restaurants and Similar Services in Portugal, FESAHT-Federation of Agriculture, Food, Beverages, Hospitality and Tourism Unions of Portugal, Turismo Centro de Portugal-Tourism Centre of Portugal, APEBC-Portuguese Association of Casino Employees, and AHP-Portuguese Accommodations Association). After the content analysis, the themes and sub-themes emerged through the independent coding process of the authors.

2. RESULTS

Data analysis illustrates two main themes and six sub-themes, presented in Table 1. The direct quotations related to the themes and sub-themes were presented by referring to the participants' numbers.

Table 1: Gender inequality and work-life balance in T&H labour in Portugal

Themes	Sub-themes
Gender inequality	(i) Partially gender equality (ii) Lack of salary equality between genders (iii) Lack of women in higher positions (iv) Inequality between genders in career progression
Work-life balance	(i) The difficulty of balancing professional and personal/family life (ii) The need for better conditions for women to accompany children

2.1. Gender inequality

Gender inequality for T&H employees includes the sub-themes of (i) *partially gender equality*, (ii) *lack of salary equality between genders*, (iii) *lack of women in higher positions*, and (iv) *inequality between genders in career progression*.

First, the results revealed that gender equality in the T&H industry does not exist in all sub-sectors. Relatedly, one of the participants (P3) claimed that there is partial gender equality regarding T&H employment in the industry because society is still sexist. He (P3) further states, "... In our sector, many event directions are already made by women, but in tourist animation, not so much. Because the outdoors part is culturally more linked to man. There are starting to be more female guides than men on the hikes. The change happens naturally...In the direction of tourist entertainment companies, it is still predominantly male..." Furthermore, policymakers believe there is a *lack of salary equality between genders* and a *lack of women in higher positions* in the T&H industry. In this respect, P8 points out that for the same professional categories, there are wage differences between female and male employees. In addition, P9 purports that women overwhelmingly dominate in some lower positions, such as housekeeping. This highlights the increasing gender inequality in higher positions. Direct quotations below provide more opinions.

“...our organisation participated a few years ago in a project with the CGTP, the international labour organisation, the CIT and the ACT...the idea of the project was to understand whether there were salary inequalities between men and women for the same functions... One of the project’s conclusions was that we did not have this inequality, but we had something else, which is also very worrying. Women hold almost 99% of the lowest professions, which has another issue, in the top professions, we had a minority of women...They were mostly maids...floor maids, and here we had a huge discrepancy... Some companies cause obstacles and do not facilitate the advancement of women... We have a lack of women at the top of organisations... We have to speed up this issue; I do not know how because it is a cultural issue that is deeply rooted....” P7

Finally, P8 pointed out that *inequality between genders in career progression* exists in the T&H industry. She (P8) explains that “...Although there is a progression in this matter, there are differences between men and women in career progression...”

2.2. Work-life balance

The findings disclosed that the work-life balance category for T&H employees contains sub-dimensions such as (i) *the difficulty of balancing professional and personal/family life* and (ii) *the need for better conditions for women to accompany children*. *The difficulty of balancing professional and personal/family life* is also a component of work-life balance for T&H employment, and it is due to the excessive work hours and seasonality. For instance, one of the policymakers explains, “It is difficult to make the profession compatible with family life. Thus, the guides work when everyone is on vacation... Given the seasonal characteristic of the profession, they must work when there is work...to fill the season that there is not. They work 40/50 days non-stop and are used to this work regime because it is necessary to have a “financial cushion” that allows in winter, and when there is no work, to meet current expenses....” Another representative of a tourism organisation in Portugal (P8) stressed that the lack of work-life balance in the T&H sector leads to high employee turnover rates. P4 identifies the lack of work-life balance as a weakness that needs to be addressed by T&H organisations.

Associated with the work-life balance, P3 mentioned *the need for better conditions for women to accompany children*. P3 states in more detail, “In the younger generations, it is less noticeable, but in the older generations, there is still the traditional family, and the lack of a woman at home is a problem... We have to provide conditions for women to accompany the children... We may not have the ideal, but we are moving towards it....”

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research note was designed to investigate gender equality and work-life balance in Portugal’s tourism and hospitality labour from the perceptions of key stakeholders representing tourism organisations in Portugal. Accordingly, gender inequality for T&H employees emerged as (i) partially gender equality, (ii) lack of salary equality between genders, (iii) lack of women in higher positions, and (iv) inequality between genders in career progression. Furthermore, the work-life balance for T&H employees revealed (i) the difficulty of balancing professional and personal/family life and (ii) the need for better conditions for women to accompany children. This study will contribute to the literature by providing the perspectives of key stakeholders of the T&H industry because qualitative studies focusing on interviewing key stakeholders who shape the main actions or strategies can potentially provide valuable results (Hamilton & Finley, 2019) for practitioners, managers, and policymakers.

First, the literature also supports that gender-related inequalities (e.g., lower payments, being given low-skill tasks and back-house tasks such as cleaning and secretaries that do not require high experience or skill levels) are frequent in the sector due to gender discrimination in the T&H industry (Costa et al., 2017a; Costa et al., 2017b; Tian & Guo, 2021; ILO, 2017; Casado-Díaz & Simón, 2016). In this sense, it is revealed that women employees working for tourism agencies in Portugal have lower salaries (Santos & Varejão, 2006). However, the claim of one of the participants (P7) that the reason for the lack of women in higher positions in the T&H industry is based on the country’s culture emerged as a new result. Although no study in the literature asserts that the cultures of countries indicate the existence of women in higher positions in the T&H industry, previous theories and research illustrate that cultural variability determines the valuing of equality (Kinias & Kim, 2012). In this context, power distance, which varies as a function of culture (Hofstede, 1984), may support this situation because it is explained as the extent to which less powerful individuals accept their place in society.

The work-life balance of T&H employees is crucial for the industry because it is tied to work satisfaction, work performance, well-being and stress, performance at home, and life satisfaction of labour (Sun et al., 2020). In this regard, high stress levels in the work environment and long working hours are barriers for employees to have satisfactory family and social lives (Deery & Jago, 2009). Enabling work-life balance in work environments is a critical factor for T&H employees to have high-quality work experiences (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023), which may also positively influence the service quality of service providers.

Our study will provide insight into the gender inequality and work-life balance of T&H labour in Portugal and other European destinations. In line with the findings, we provide significant implications for managers, practitioners, and policymakers in the T&H industry to develop related actions, strategies and policies. Regarding the micro level, T&H organisations should be aware of employees’ needs related to gender equality and work-life balance. Gender equality should be ensured in all sub-sectors of

the industry; the salaries should not be according to gender differences but the skills and experiences; the positions should not be labelled to gender (e.g. housekeeping is for women); and in career upgrades, the gender differences should not be considered. Related to the work-life balance, excessive working hours should be eliminated. Furthermore, seasonality issues should be overcome by creating alternative tourism types that help spread tourism activities and attractions throughout the year. Finally, working conditions should be well-designed for women employees who must accompany their kids.

Considering the macro level implications, the service providers in the T&H industry must re-examine their working models, and if necessary, they should establish innovative solutions or adjustments in terms of their working models to eliminate gender inequalities and work-life balance. For instance, “hybrid” or “distant” working options can be provided for some employees. In this regard, allowing employees to work also from home for some days of the week may enable them to obtain a satisfactory work-life balance. Moreover, some administrative tasks can be done remotely. Also, technological tools such as robotic services can be used for dirty and dull tasks (i.e. cleaning, carrying heavy, repetitive tasks) to use the human workforce more efficiently in the T&H services (Seyitoğlu et al., 2023). In this way, excessive work hours of T&H employees can be reduced, and superior services can be provided to consumers.

Though the present study has the potential to benefit other destinations in developing gender equality and work-life balance policies in T&H labour, it also highlights the lack in the literature that can be overcome through future research endeavours. As this research note focuses on one European country (Portugal), and respondents come from one European country only, the results are generalisable only in these contexts. Nevertheless, future attempts may focus on other European or non-European countries as gender equality and work-life balance are crucial subjects for the future of T&H labour. Future research can also concentrate on neglected stakeholders (e.g. tourism employees and companies) to provide multi-dimensional perspectives. Our results suggest investigating the relationship between culture and women’s lack of representation in higher T&H positions in Portugal and other European destinations.

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