


 An illustration on a red background showing a man in a dark suit and white shirt walking up a wide, white, three-dimensional staircase. To the right, a woman in a dark blue business suit stands on a smaller, white, three-dimensional platform. Both the man and the woman are positioned in front of a white, rectangular door that is slightly ajar, revealing a bright white light behind it. The overall scene suggests a metaphorical journey or a path towards a goal, with the man and woman representing different stages or levels of a career or organizational hierarchy.

Mind the gap

At first glance the travel and tourism industry appears to lead the way when it comes to gender equality, with the hotel sector, in particular, making a concerted effort to keep men and women on an equal footing. Despite these efforts, however, the number of female employees still drops precipitously the higher up the ladder you climb. Elly Earls speaks to hospitality consultant **Aradhana Khowala**, Kerten Hospitality CEO **Marloes Knippenburg**, and Accor's VP of diversity and inclusion, **Anne-Sophie Beraud**, to find out why so few women are in top leadership positions and asks what changes are required to make further progress on gender diversity.

Aradhana Khowala hasn't let being a woman stop her from rising to the top of her field. As well as owning a hospitality consultancy group, Aptamind, which provides advice to leaders in government and ultra-high network investors, she serves as chair of the advisory board for one of the world's most ambitious tourism initiatives.

When it is completed in 2030, the sprawling Red Sea Project in Saudi Arabia will comprise 50 brand new hotels. The ambitious initiative, part of a broader mission to diversify the kingdom's heavy reliance on oil and gas, is set to have a 30% net positive environmental impact on its 28,000m² site over the next 20 years. Unfortunately, Khowala is the exception rather than the rule. A recent report produced by Aptamind, in concert with the World Tourism Forum Lucerne, showed that while the travel and tourism sector appears to be leading the way when it comes to gender diversity – with women representing 50%

of employees across the sector – there is a different story hidden in plain sight. In fact, female representation falls to 40% at mid-management level and 33% at senior executive level, above which there is a seemingly impenetrable glass ceiling between senior management and the c-suite. Around 19% of c-level roles are filled by women, while only 5% of firms have a female CEO and there are only six female chairs.

The hotel sector performs better than the overall hospitality sector, due to a concerted effort by major hotel groups to promote more women to senior positions. However, the number of female employees still drops precipitously the higher up the career ladder you climb. In mid-level management, women represent 43% of the workforce, down to 32% at senior management level and 21% in the c-suite. Every major hotel chain has at least one female c-level executive, yet only one woman – Alison Brittain of Whitbread – sits at the helm.

“Most businesses want to do better but it’s important for them to acknowledge that what they’re doing is not good enough. That’s the first step to fixing things,” Khowala says. “Yes, we have seen progress and there’s a lot of awareness of gender imbalance but the needle in the c-suite and boards hasn’t moved. It’s inching up, but breakthroughs are not happening.”

This is despite research from IBM, and many other organisations, showing that more women in decision-making roles means not only better financial performance, but stronger innovation, as well as customer and employee satisfaction. As Khowala stresses, the latter has never been more important in light of the recruitment epidemic prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Celebrating differences

Marloes Knippenburg is the CEO of Kerten Hospitality, a company that wasn’t featured in Aptamind’s report because of its relatively small size. Kerten operates under a different business model to the typical hotel group. Its mixed-use value proposition creates lifestyle destinations in a single building or development space combining its mix of brands, which include serviced office, hotel, F&B and wellness concepts. Under her leadership, Knippenburg’s executive team is almost 100% female, the result, she says, of leading by example. She has also noticed that the brand’s focus on environmental and social responsibility tends to attract young women, who she then gives a large amount of responsibility to early on in their careers. Ultimately, Knippenburg believes it’s important to celebrate what separates men and women, and then work with those differences.

For example, when a job post is put out, she has noticed that many women may look through it, focus on one point they can’t fulfil and decide against applying, something their male counterparts are less likely to do. “When women sell themselves, it’s never perceived as a good thing, but if it comes from men, it’s normal and kind of a given,” Knippenburg says. “Women are much better at selling each other and promoting each other, [rather than themselves].”

She believes real progress on the gender diversity front will come from women recruiting women or women promoting and motivating other women into certain positions. “It’s like when you climb over a wall first and then help the rest to climb up too,” she explains. “I don’t think you can necessarily change the whole system and say, ‘Now we need to recruit more women and hopefully they will just apply’. We as women have quite a big responsibility in driving this change, as much as men.”

Many large hotel groups, including Accor, have launched mentorship programmes to help bridge the gap between the highest echelons of leadership and

the women coming up behind them. A large part of Accor’s RiISE gender diversity network, which was set up in 2012, is focused on knowledge sharing through a mentoring programme and the promotion of female talent to senior positions. Today, there are 26,000 members in 100 countries, with specific programmes in different regions. The ‘For Women By Women’ mentoring programme in the UK aims to support victims and survivors of domestic abuse, whose employability options have been limited by the impact of Covid-19, by building up their skillset and creating fair and inclusive opportunities.

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For Khowala, the important thing with these sorts of initiatives is to be able to define success in clear and concrete terms. “You have to hold people accountable for getting women promoted into leadership roles and then you have to toe the line on that,” she stresses. “If part of the business was underperforming, we would do a deeper dive, we would measure, track, give responsibility to people and set refined targets. We need that same mentality to fix gender equality.”

Forcing change

Knippenburg agrees that concrete targets and even legally enforced quotas are essential to force the change that needs to happen. It’s only when buddy systems or mentorship programmes are combined with mandates, such as a 50-50 split when shortlisting for a position, she says, that people will really start to take the issue seriously.

“If you look at sustainability, when there were no laws, we weren’t talking about it as much. Now governments have put measures in place, potential investors are asking ‘What are you doing on this front?’ Unless you force something, there will be a very small percentage of people wanting to change.”

This is borne out by figures from the Gender Statistics Database from the European Institute for Gender Equality, which Khowala and her team analysed as part of another project she is launching. FiveEightTen, which is named after three of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – Gender Equality, Decent Work & Economic Growth and Reduced Inequality, is a tool for hospitality companies to track diversity and inclusivity data. Recent research the organisation carried out tracked the progress of more than 200 companies in the travel and tourism space between 2010 and 2020 and found that the

40%

The percentage that female representation falls to at mid-management level, falling to 33% at senior executive level.

The Washington Post

-4%

The percentage of pay gap between men and women working at the same job level at Accor in 2017, this was reduced to -2.2% in 2019.

Accor

countries that had set up binding legislative gender quotas, such as France, Germany, Italy and Belgium, showed more impressive progress than those with soft measures. They saw a 27% increase in women on boards over ten years, as opposed to 15% for those with soft measures. Anne-Sophie Beraud, VP of diversity and inclusion at Accor, believes that concrete objectives within companies can support the progress of women into senior and executive positions.

The group has committed to having at least 35% women as hotel managers by the end of 2021, 40% of women in Senior Leadership and 30% of women on the Executive Committees by 2022. "Sometimes it is not attainable to reach the same level in different countries, and commitments must be aligned with local needs, these acts of mobilisation must continue in order to create an equal future," she says.

Setting better targets

Before hotel groups can measure and improve, however, they must know what needs fixing. "If you don't know what you're doing, whether it's working or not working, and whether progress is meaningful, you can't make any changes. You need to be tracking the right sorts of data and the right metrics," Khowala says. She hopes FiveEightTen can step in to help. By aggregating data on all inclusivity, diversity and

equity measures, including gender, the idea is that the platform can give hotel firms a snapshot of how they deliver on targets and help them track their progress over time. Accor is already using data collection to improve their understanding of gender gaps and assess gender specific disparities. In 2019, for example, to help close the gender pay gap, they analysed base salary and target total cash, covering 35 countries and 5,300 employees. "Thanks to these analyses, based on an annual base salary for a full-time activity, the pay gap between men and women working at the same job level at Accor was reduced to -2.2 % in 2019, compared with -3.1% in 2018 and -4% in 2017," Beraud says.

Kerten is also trying to set better internal targets, rather than relying on the usual KPIs that have been there for "a gazillion years". "If we can [improve in this area], it means the time and effort can be spent on making the next moves towards, say, building communities," Knippenburg hopes. "By this we mean things like bringing leading female entrepreneurs together in Jordan or connecting female food entrepreneurs in Italy. These things are super difficult to measure and it's something we're working hard on."

At Kerten, ESG is at the heart of the business, an approach Khowala hopes becomes more widespread. In her words: "Groups need to treat gender equality as if business survival depends on it." ●

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