

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 ON HOTEL SERVICE PROVIDERS: WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES AND WHAT STAKEHOLDERS CAN DO TO FILL THE GENDER GAP AND REBUILD THE TOURISM INDUSTRY AND SUSTAINABLE DESTINATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The tourism and hospitality industry struggles with the consequences of the pandemic that had crashed headlong into it, forcing many businesses in this sector to close doors until further notice, after sending many workers and owners of businesses that depended on it home. Among these victims, women, who make up most workers in the industry, pay the highest price because of gender imbalances that limit their career opportunities and the development of their families, communities and countries. This paper reports on a study of women's perspectives on the impact of the Covid-19 on hotel service providers in Kenya. Drawing on data from 50 women we interviewed, the findings illustrate the persistent gendered obstacles women experience as they try and negotiate careers in the tourism and hospitality businesses where they are clustered by the iron glass ceiling in low-skilled or unskilled jobs, with no opportunity to sit at decision-making tables where their voice can be heard, deprived of business opportunities, and exposed to all kinds of risks. The pandemic had shed more light on these inequalities, and given a wonderful opportunity to stakeholders in the industry to correct this unacceptable situation. Social Corporate Responsibility programs are a useful tool that businesses in the sector can use to connect women's potential to possibilities in the tourism and hospitality industry and help them overcome gendered barriers to progression. It can also help to rebuild the collapsed tourism industry and sustainable destinations as well because, when these women who play a significant role in this industry are ready and equipped with the right tools, and are given opportunities, they deliver better results and contribute to creating a safer and healthier environment that today customers and travellers crave.

Key words: Covid-19, Hospitality, Tourism, Gender Imbalances, Sustainability, Social Corporate Responsibility, Glass Ceiling.

INTRODUCTION

The fight against Covid-19 is not finished. The virus continues to circulate and the pandemic continues to affect and kill people around the world, forcing governments who had been prudently and slowly deconfining to recombine in order to curb the stubborn and deadly virus. In these conditions, it is very difficult for the tourism and hospitality industry, a sector

that is suffering greatly because of the sanitary crisis, to resume, recover and continue playing the important role it has in boosting economies and fighting against poverty that affects millions of people around the world, women and girls especially (Aghazamani, 2018).

Indeed, and before the coronavirus, many women were making a living thanks to their involvement in this industry as employees or business owners. They provided specific services to the tourism sector: farming, organic farming, husbandry, fishing, craftswomen, tour guides, tour operators, vendors, kitchen helps in hotels and home stays, housekeepers, hotel owners, grocery shop owners, and restaurant owners. They were empowered thanks to their jobs, financial independence, improved social skills, self-confidence and ability to make stronger decisions in their businesses, lives, homes, and played important roles in their families, communities and countries (unresearch). But the pandemic crashed headlong into many of these women, stealing their jobs and landing them and all the people who depended on them for their upkeep into abject poverty. To understand the violence of the impact, we conducted a survey of fifty women hotel service providers in Kenya. Otieno was the owner of a small catering business that used to serve food to hotels in Nairobi for their guests. Her business also used to help hotels organize events like weddings, graduations and baptisms. In March, she was fixing tents in the yard of one of these hotels for an exhibition when the government declared the complete lockdown in the entire country. The hotel owner told her to dismantle everything, what she did and went back home where she still is up to date.

As for Wambui, she owned a successful laundry business that offered laundry and cleaning solutions to hotels in and out of town. Tumiso, a mother of four young children, had rented a restaurant in a hotel and was successfully running it, making good money. She had a nanny who took a very good care of her children and her home. Now, she faces an increase in her already unequal share of unpaid domestic and care work as services such as education, childcare, and healthcare have been interrupted during the pandemic. Nyongo'o had a travel agency specialized in catering for the needs of Christian travelers (Reliefweb). Her partnership with some hotels in the country allowed her to organize successful tours for the hotel guests. Mathenge was the happy owner of a business that offered transportation and babysitting solutions and children's activities to the guests of many hotels in town. Chege had a poultry and fish pond and supplied hotels with her products. Torolupe, Ndungu, Njonjo, Wangari, Njeri and many others were hotel employees: housekeepers, waitresses and cleaners.

They lost their jobs overnight due to the lockdown and travel restrictions, and with it were gone their financial autonomy, the interaction with others and with tourists, their self-esteem and the possibility to get out of their homes. They also saw how domestic violence rose, turning their lives into a daily nightmare (WTTC, 2020). Ten out of those fifty women were pregnant and told me it happened during the confinement. And yet having babies wasn't on their list of priorities. In order to put food on the table and also escape violence at home, some of them decided to ignore the "Stay at home" instruction and go out to buy and sell produce, or sell tea and chapati they had made, exposing themselves to the virus. Others went back to their villages as soon as the government lifted the lockdown where they could at least have food from their relatives. Some others took to roundabouts where, with an increasing

number of other women, they sit and wait for customers to hire them for the day as house helps, which doesn't always happen.

Will they get their job back after Coronavirus is gone? Nothing is sure because many hotels and resorts have issued closure notices until further notice. Some others have closed their doors for good. Would these women like to go back to the tourism and hospitality industry if they were given the opportunity to do so? Many would love to continue working in the industry but not for someone else, and not in the same conditions like before the Covid-19. Torolupe says: "I wasn't earning that much and the crazy hours we had made it difficult for me to balance work and family life. In addition, having to go back home late in the night exposed me to all kind of risks. One night I was gang-raped by street children. I don't want that to happen again. But I would like to continue working in the industry supplying fresh produce that I have grown directly to hotels and restaurants. If someone can help me do that, that will be very helpful. I will make good money, suppress the risk of being attacked in streets at night and have quality time with my family."

We need our industry back and soaring like in the past and even better than in the past because of the unquestionable and important role it plays in the fight against poverty and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. For this to happen, collective efforts from all the stakeholders are required from the governments to businesses to individuals. And women should not be overlooked in this enterprise. Indeed, tourism cannot recover and soar without women who make up most workers in the sector, and without gender parity. Discrimination against women is real and tourism isn't an exception. Here women are an important component of the industry's workforce. They make up almost half of the formal sector yet they are far more likely than men to be found in lower-paid, unskilled jobs. The feminization of roles is real in the industry and the iron ceiling a palpable reality, preventing lots of them to access important positions where decisions are made and where women's voice can be heard. But to effectively and actively play their role in tourism recovery and in achieving the SDGs, women need a strong support.

SO, HOW CAN WE SUPPORT THESE IMPORTANT ACTORS?

By changing the way we think and do tourism and hospitality, and putting community's real and local people, nature and equality at the heart of all that we do. By actively involving and including these communities, youth and women in this process. In other words, by fully embracing and marrying sustainability. Many businesses were still dragging their feet, not wanting or willing to make that important move despite the many benefits sustainable businesses are making customers and employees' loyalty, for example. Now, it is going to be the criteria that will have customers get out of their homes, spend their scarce resources and be loyal to a brand because with this Coronavirus, customers are going to care more and more about their health, safety, security and nature.

Businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry can and should play an important role in rebuilding the tourism industry and sustainable destinations through women hotel service providers empowerment. Their Corporate Social Responsibility programs will

successfully help to achieve this goal. Many women who lost their jobs in the industry won't get their job back because of the wider economic conjuncture. Some have found other ways to feed their families because, in times of peace or in times of war, people need to eat. Some of them have embrace farming, and are now producing and selling produce and organic produce. But because of intermediaries, they aren't making good money from this new activity and continue struggling to meet their needs and that of their families (UNWTO, 2020). Hotels and restaurants can successfully help to improve their situation by encouraging and contributing to create cooperatives of hotel service providers and by training its members to produce and deliver quality and healthy produce to hotels at good price thanks to the negotiation skills they have learned. This move will eliminate the intermediaries between women farmers and consumers.

Organizations like Equality Tourism are already supporting women farmers to organize themselves into cooperatives and enjoy its benefits. Hotels can support this kind of organizations and effectively contribute to rebuild the tourism industry and to the sustainable destinations recovery. By empowering women hotel service providers through their training and support to their cooperatives, hotels will better serve their customers who are only going to do business with people who care about their health and safety, take care of Mother Nature when farmers are trained, they know how to farm in a sustainable way; they don't load produce with chemicals and don't poison the soil and the environment, and give back to the communities where they live and operate. Such move can be and will always be a good marketing tool to attract and win customers' heart to their destination and improve people's lives, the lives of the communities they live in and do business with. Governments must also create conditions for women in the hospitality and tourism industry to bounce back by integrating a gender dimension into tourism policies and solutions to the Covid-19 because the crisis isn't affecting men and women, and women in the industry the same way. Women in the tourism industry have specific problems created mostly by gender imbalances and solutions provided by governments will not yield the expected results if they do not take into consideration the ways in which inequalities have made women more vulnerable to the impacts of the crisis.

Kenya has already dedicated US\$5 million to fund the nation's tourism recovery plan following the pandemic, a move we salute. Nevertheless, and because of gender imbalances that make women and especially women in the tourism industry more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, the country should make sure that each of its post-Covid-19 plans and measures, recovery package and budgeting addresses the gender impacts of the pandemic. This is the way to build a bright future for tourism and our economies. Failing to do so means women and especially women entrepreneurs in tourism, who face a higher risk of business closures and bankruptcy because their access to financial and non-financial services that their businesses need to survive in this crisis time, will leave the business arena and sink into poverty as the result of the fall in incomes due to job losses and business closures in tourism.

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