

## ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OF FEMALE EMPLOYEES AT THE HOTEL INDUSTRY IN SABAH: A POST COVID-19 INVESTIGATION

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### ABSTRACT

*The hotel industry is one of the industries that was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the global shut down of travel and tourism throughout the pandemic. This inevitably affected the hotel industry and the numerous employees in the female-dominated industry. The impact of COVID-19 on the hotel industry and female employment in the industry is likewise observed in Sabah, a touristic state in Malaysia. This study aimed to investigate the issues and challenges faced by female employees to remain in the hotel industry in Sabah during the pandemic. In addition, the study also revealed the future prospects for women in the hotel industry following the pandemic. In order to uncover the insights of female employees in the hotel industry, a qualitative research design was employed. Purposive sampling was used to recruit respondents who worked in the hotel industry when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the nation and when the hotel industry started to re-open in Malaysia. A total of 12 female employees in the hotel industry in Sabah were interviewed to investigate their experiences as hotel employees. The data were then transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed the issues and challenges faces by female employees included the bleak outlook for the industry, having to achieve work targets, and managing team members. The findings of this study contributed to gender studies of the hotel especially in the midst of crisis and provide ideas for elevating women in the hostel industry.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The hotel industry is highly dependent on a sense of peace and stability whereby people have the freedom to travel for business and leisure. When the COVID-19 pandemic was announced by the World Health Organization in 2020 (WHO, 2020), the health crisis led to a significant impact on travel and tourism-related services (Baum et al., 2020). The subsequent airport and hotel closures, flight cancellations, and travel bans to the public caused devastating losses to the hotel industry's income and employment. It was reported that tourism sectors lost an estimated 100.8 million jobs globally (Statista, 2020).

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Tourism is a major source of income for many ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member states including Malaysia with a record of 25.8 million tourists in 2018 (ASEAN, 2020). One of the key contributors to Malaysia's revenue and economic development is tourism in the state of Sabah (Sabah Economic Development and Investment Authority, 2018). According to Sabah Economic Development and Investment Authority (2018), the increase in revenue from RM6.52 billion in 2015 to RM8.34 billion in 2018 in Sabah's tourism sector was an indication of promising progress. The COVID-19 pandemic made a drastic impact on tourism in Sabah as the total number of tourist arrivals decreased sharply from 4,195,903 in 2019 to 977,460 in 2020 (Sabah Tourism Board, 2021).

The chain of impact due to the pandemic includes the hotel industry and its hotel employees especially women who make up a major part of the hotel workforce. The Malaysian Association of Hotels (2021a) estimated that the hotel industry lost over 6.5 billion Ringgit in revenue for 2020 and 9 billion Ringgit for 2021. It was reported that more than 100 hotels in Malaysia had ceased to operate since March 2020 and this

directly affected more than 7000 employees (Malaysian Association of Hotels, 2021b). Travel and tourism sectors have nearly twice as many employed women than other sectors (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019) and the careers of women in the hotel industry suffered greatly given the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hotel industry (Chen, 2020). When female employment increases, poverty can be reduced and economic growth can be sustained (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019). It is therefore pertinent to uncover employee-related issues and challenges especially among female employees in the hotel industry during the COVID-19 pandemic and establish a way forward for women as the industry recovers from the pandemic's effects.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The aims of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate the issues and challenges faced by female employees to remain in the hotel industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To explore the future of work for women in the hotel industry after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The hotel industry is highly vulnerable to predicaments that can lead to a decline in tourism, travel, and hotel services. The 9/11 attack was a catastrophe in the 2000s that led to a sharp reduction in hotel occupancy (Kosová & Enz, 2012). The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was a health crisis that caused share prices in the hospitality industry to drop severely (Chen et al., 2007). The West Africa Ebola epidemic that began in 2013 led to a decline in travel and tourist activities across the entire African continent (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic was another health crisis that brought a severe impact on the economies of the ASEAN member states, with Malaysia projected as one of the member

states with the sharpest drop in real gross domestic product (ASEAN, 2020).

More than half of tourism business in Asian nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand are managed by women (World Bank Group, 2017). Female employees may be terminated when a crisis strikes causing demands for hospitality services to decrease (Baum, 2013). A report that assessed the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods across ASEAN similarly stated that a high number of women were likely terminated from work during the pandemic (ASEAN, 2020).

The hotel industry's flexible work schedules, job availability and low entry requirements (Baum, 2015) may make it a desirable workplace especially for women. Hospitality-related tasks also correspond with the conventional roles and duties carried out by women (Obadic & Maric, 2009) making the hotel industry a sought-after career for them. Despite these advantages, the careers of female employees in the hotel industry are not without certain challenges. Women are considered less successful than men in the hotel industry as they are less represented in executive management roles in comparison (UNWTO, 2019). Tension may arise when women have to balance work shifts and domestic duties (Mooney, 2009). Women in the hotel industry tend to encounter work and family-related conflicts compared to men (Garcia-Cabrera et al., 2018). As such, female employees are likely perceived as more stressed than men caused by having to fulfill work demands at the hotel and family demands as a wife and mother. Work-family conflict is linked to psychological effects such as burnout and the desire to quit (Mansour and Tremblay, 2018).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach since the aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences faced by female employees in the

hotel industry. A qualitative approach provides a detailed explanation of the phenomenon of interest based on participant feedback (Tharenou et al., 2007). This research method can be used to collect or learn about complex information regarding phenomena like feelings, cognitive processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about using more traditional research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants in this study because interviews are well-suited for eliciting information on one's attitudes, values, beliefs, and motivations (Smith, 1975). By posing preset or open-ended questions, participants are prompted to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences (Yin, 2011). Data saturation is established, and researchers may stop collecting information when they hear similar comments from interview respondents (Grady, 1998). As such, the number of interview respondents in this study was determined when sufficient data were collected to arrive at conclusions.

For participants selection, this study employed a non-probability sampling method based on Lincoln and Guba's (1986) purposeful sampling technique. The sampling strategy for qualitative studies should be decided by the research's goal and context (Patton, 2002). As such, the purposeful sampling strategy was selected based on this study's aim to engage with female employees in the hotel industry in Sabah. The main participant selection criteria in this study were women who worked in star-rated hotels when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the nation as well as when the hotel industry re-opened during the recovery period from the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study consisted of 15 female employees who worked at star-rated hotels in Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah. The registration of hotels and their classifications are mandatory and managed by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) and nearly 50% of the star-rated hotels in Sabah are located in Kota Kinabalu. In 2019, 11 hotels in Sabah were

classified as 5-star, 17 as 4-star, and 50 as 3-star in Sabah (MOTAC, 2020).

**Table 1: Participant Profile**

No.	Label	Hotel Star-Rating	Position
1	K1	5	Assistant Director of Human Resources
2	K2	5	Senior Sales Manager
3	K3	5	Assistant Front Office Manager
4	K4	4	Front Office Manager
5	K5	5	Commercial Manager
6	K6	5	Housekeeping Service Manager
7	K7	4	Sales & Reservation Manager
8	K8	4	Executive Housekeeper
9	K9	5	Assistant HR Manager
10	K10	3	Senior Sales Manager
11	K11	5	Human Resources Manager
12	K12	5	Chef De Partie (Pastry)

The interview sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Thematic analysis was employed as the data analysis method to generate themes after coding the interview transcripts. To ensure that the data were coded systematically, this study adhered to the six steps of thematic analysis as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step involved reading the transcripts repetitively to familiarize with the data. The subsequent step required the researchers to code interview excerpts that represent meaningful data. The third step of thematic analysis involved collating the codes into potential themes. The next step was the reviewing of themes and in relation to the codes. The fifth step then involved refining the themes to ensure that they are specific and relevant to the study. In the sixth and last step of thematic analysis, the researchers conveyed the findings using the themes and selected extracts.

## FINDINGS

### Issues and Challenges Faced by Female Employees to Remain in the Hotel Industry During the COVID-19 Pandemic



**Figure 1: Issues and Challenges Faced by Female Employees to Remain in the Hotel Industry During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

#### *Bleak Outlook for Hotel Industry*

The respondents felt that the public had a negative perception towards the hotel industry and that people tend to shy away from working in the industry after the COVID-19 pandemic. *After the pandemic, family will say how stable is the tourism industry. because just with 1 hit from the pandemic it close most of the tourism business.* – K2

*We have a sister company which offers hotel management courses but no one sign up for it because they're afraid like another pandemic happen. Parents worry if they send their children to the course end up paying thousands, but their kids do not end up in the hotel industry.* – K8  
*Those youngsters who want to venture into tourism are told not to.* – K9

### *Fear of COVID-19 Resurgence Leading to Job Instability*

The respondents spoke about the fear of the COVID-19 pandemic's resurgence which could lead to job losses and unstable employment in the hotel industry.

*Forced from the family to look for another job because if something like the pandemic hit again they will lose their job, will have no money again, struggling become anxiety and so on... not just my family also my friends. – K2*

*To stay in the hotel is not easy because everybody in their head will there be another wave of this pandemic. Even now there is are rumors saying there is a second virus coming to Kota Kinabalu. This will not only affect hotels but also schools that offer hotel management courses. – K8*

*Their fear of it happening again, I guess stability at the end of the day. At the end of the day we did try to call back some, you know when business is booming again, to call back some of them to come back but a lot of them are shying away from the industry because of this situation, how bad it hits us and therefore they do not want to come back. – K11*

### *Achieving Work Targets*

The findings of this study revealed the competition among the hotels to secure businesses in an already trying time led to pressure on the employees.

*Looking for business to retain our own position because economy right now is up and down. We are currently selling 1000 rooms. We are just in the kind of situation we still depending on domestic. You know the mindset of the domestic looking for cheap price. That's one of the challenges to achieve our own budget. – K2*

*It was difficult for me to plan strategy for the hotel to generate revenue. Although it's not on*

*you but the burden for me is there because my department is the one who help the hotel to generate revenue. – K5*

*Sale rejection and price war were my key challenges, other hotels are dropping their prices to attract customers. – K10*

### *Team Management*

The respondents who were in managerial positions had to worry about managing their teams and providing support during the pandemic.

*It's not easy because you have to protect your team as well. You have to be able to show them as a leader what are you going to do. Are you gonna support us or just push us like the management push you. I have to think yes the management push me to this but should I as a leader push them how management push me. For me I have to remember the management pushed me because I'm in this position. for my team they are waiting for my instruction, they're waiting for my plan and they will do according to plan we have discussed. – K2*

*At first there was not enough staff, but i was there with them helping them to do check in and out. I want to lead by example showing to my team that even though we are having salary cut we still do our very best. – K4*

### *Managing New Employees*

The respondents mentioned the struggle of having to train and manage new employees during the pandemic. It appeared that the task was more difficult due to the generation gap. *Last time my team is very independent and less supervised before the pandemic. maybe they are like baby boomer they can things just tell them, and they will do, perfect. Now I don't have my old team, only a few. It's all a new team, so it's like starting back to zero. So, you to teach them like common sense, and when to teach them have to tell them repeatedly. It's like you give them one*



*job, need to double check and to follow up. – K3*  
*Young generation of employees are very difficult to train and they act differently, aggressive, do their own way, they want more empowerment despite no relevant background in hospitality services, lack of proper ways to handle and service guests, I ended up with many guest complaints and have to do service recoveries so that I don't lost the customers and business. – K10*

### *Resistance to Career Change*

The respondents were not keen to search for new jobs and change their careers although the COVID-19 pandemic caused huge losses to the hotel industry.

*I will not change because I know my strength is in the hospitality especially in the operation, admin is not my strength. But one day I need to change my career path to housekeeping things because so interesting for the housekeeping. I will stay in the hotel industry, because for me it's too late to learn new things for me because now is slow to pick up things. – K3*

*I don't know what else to do because I don't have any other skills. Actually, it's okay because what we learned in the hotel, we also can adapt to other places but it also up to us whether we want to change our fields or not. – K5*

*I stay because I know that hotel is gonna last longer even though it's pandemic they only close for a while but still can operate again after. This is because people like to travel, you can't stop people from travelling. – K8*

### *Financial Independence*

The need to be financially independent and secure was a reason for women to remain employed in the hotel industry.

*This is my personal view, women not necessarily need to be a home maker, women also must work to be independent because we have our own need, we have our needs that we*

*want to buy with our own money. No need to ask money from husband. When we can buy for ourselves we buy for ourselves. – K8*

*For me, why I still survived in the industry, apart from the salary is the commitment to prove to my family that working in the hotel industry is not too bad and low standard. I prove to my family that I managed to support and have a good income by working in the hotel industry although my academic qualification is not really excellent. – K12*

### *Balancing Work and Family*

The need to balance work and family was a critical aspect for female employees in the hotel industry. The respondents noted the importance of having family members who understood their work and allocating sufficient time to spend with their family members.

*You have to work harder and you have to go out to look for business and then you have to go home and then you got very tired, you go home to look after your son somemore. You don't have enough rest and then you stressed out, your anxiety is there, you have to think a lot of things, your mental health. – K2*

*Luckily the kids and family also understand because I've been working in this industry for so long. – K4*

*I planned properly to balance work and spending time with my daughter. I will arrange when to meet people and have at least two or three days to go home at 4 pm. – K5*

*For the challenge is when you have a family and then if you don't have a good support from your partner it's not easy because in this hospitality industry we have working shift. However, for the manager it's like we don't have shift we had to stay longer to help and supervise the team on their work. If you don't have a good support from your partner, it will be very challenging. – K6*

*To remain in this industry, for married couples they must have an understanding partner. If our partner is not seeing eye to eye is very difficult, I've had cases also like this where the spouse does not understand the wife's work and a lot happened. Their problem affecting their work. if your passion is there and your family supports you then it's not a challenge. If not then that is going to be a problem for you. – K9*

*Issues such long hours, going back late after work is normal. Luckily, my family is very understanding and also fortunate that my husband is also working in the hotel industry. – K12*

### The Future of Work for Women in The Hotel Industry after the COVID-19 Pandemic



Figure 2: The Future of Work for Women in The Hotel Industry after the COVID-19 Pandemic

#### Work Flexibility

Moving forward, there appeared to be transformations in the hotel industry whereby female employees have increased flexibility to choose their shifts and work from home.

*There is flexibility of time given to female to choose the timing of work, also flexibility in terms of utilizing annual leave and unpaid leave to take care of children. – K1*

*Moving forward we have all our technology which is getting higher and higher. Working from home is a very good option for them because they also have time to spend time with their children. women as leader, you have to communicate with your team most of the time, your team will on the ground. so if lets says those women who have career, if they are working at home also can, no problem. – K2*

#### Work-Family Balance

The strive for balance between time for work and time for family remains a recurring theme for many female employees to choose to work in the hotel industry.

*We need to be together with the family and we to be also in work. When you work from home, none of them will go to the office then they be saving electric bill and so on. We only need when the person to be in contact with you is like now we are having Google Meet. That will be easy, you can still see me and I still can see you, I can give my feedback to you, my opinion or whatever brainstorming. -K2*

*Some of the women who have been work from home are not willing to come back to normal working hours because of the family demand especially those who have just given birth. Some also are not used to working already as they have spent most of their time at home. -K4*

*Women can still have a good future in this industry. I think I saw that male showed their appreciation for women. I think the pandemic has shown them what women have sacrificed to maintain the family at the same time at work. – K9*

*There are still good opportunities for women to work in the hotel industry, the set back is when they get married, the commitment to the family will become a big hurdle for them to move upward. – K12*

### *Job Opportunities*

Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hotel industries, the respondents mentioned that ample job opportunities are available for women.

*There are a lot of opportunities to grab especially in the operation department because there are so many vacancies. It's the time to enter the industry, because the industry is recruiting back. – K1*

*I see more women in hotel industry as women are more suitable for the job such as sales, marketing, front office. The duration of maternity leaves is an attractive factor as well. I see more additional jobs given to women, like my case, I have to do HR jobs as well. – K10*

### *Managing Hotel Industry Expectations of Female Employees*

Women who choose to remain in the hotel industry will still need to contend with the expectations imposed on their gender such as maintaining a certain appearance. Another struggle for women who work in the hotel industry is that they are perceived to have less physical strength to carry out tasks when they age.

*For women to remain in the industry is hard especially when you reach certain age, need to keep energetic, healthy and maintain grooming as it is operation work where require you to be active. So, women have to look after their appearance. -K4*

*For women to work in the hotel industry is not for long term. I don't really suggest women to work in the hotel industry for a long time. As women, we must have a target because women's physical will change as they grow older as compared to men. So our strength will not be so strong like when we are young, it is okay if women working in the office but not in operations which needs more physical labour. Maybe ideally up to 50 years old women can still work in the kitchen. – K12*

### *Opportunities for Women to Lead*

The respondents in this study revealed that there are various opportunities for women to taken charge as leaders and apply for managerial positions.

*My hotel is all about women leadership, they give equal opportunity to women. I mean to be in the leader position. It just depends on the person if they want to grab the opportunity or not. They do a training program where you get to get partner with other leader, women leader. And you can talk about how to be a women leader and how to balance work life. They give opportunity and transfer. – K5*

*In this industry you can reach a position that is very high because nowadays there are women holding the position of vice president, there also general manager position. – K6*

*There will be more successful women in this industry. We women dare to take challenge, we are brave. What men can do we women also can do, in terms on decision making also. My boss is also a woman. I think women will grow in this industry. – K7*

*For me I think future will be very good. In the past, hotel manager is always men but now you can see a woman hotel manager. H Hotel, their hotel manager is a woman. L Hotel also, she is my friend. – K8*

*I think it depends on how far you are willing to go in this industry. I don't think it's a problem when the people around you. Nowadays we have women general manager but that is not a problem they must have a strong support. – K9*  
*For my company personally, we are promoting women in leadership. We used to that prior, and now that we are booming back. Women leadership is something we want to encourage. We are supporting female growth, support how they are holding many roles for example mother, sister, a wife, a daughter but they also have that intention to climb the career ladder, so we are*



*providing them with support emotionally for them and physically for them to climb the ladder with confidence and comfort. – K11*

### *Multi-skilled Employees*

The findings of this study revealed the importance of hiring employees who possess multiple skills and can multi-task in the labor force.

*Market segment and travel behavior are changing, need to know more other jobs not just stay within your job scope, upskilling and more training is needed, for example how to handle positive COVID-19 guests, introduce new quarantine package. – K10*

*What the pandemic taught us is that sometimes women rely on single income, sometimes no income at all they rely on family at home with agriculture and opening shops, pop up shops because they need to survive. Moving forward, you must equip yourself with additional skills. If you don't have additional skills, when things hit and if you only know that one thing only, things will be very tough. – K11*

## **DISCUSSION**

The bleak outlook towards the hotel industry and the fear of the pandemic's resurgence were concerning the female employees. In Malaysia's hotel industry scene, the sense of hopelessness was caused by the repeated implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) throughout the pandemic. In 2021, the hotel industry in Malaysia suffered another blow when various states were subjected to another MCO by the government (Malaysian Association of Hotels, 2021c). This came after the hotel industry had already suffered a great loss in the previous year due to MCO. The sense of neglect rooted in the tourism and hotel industry (Malaysian Association of Hotels, 2021d) might have contributed to the bleak perception towards the industry. On the whole, these affect the

industry's recovery rate in the future and the employment rate in the travel and tourism sectors. A COVID-19 assessment report by ASEAN stated that unemployment may be long-term for certain sectors such as tourism (ASEAN, 2020).

Employees who remained in the industry had to help their hotels attain business in a bizarrely competitive period. The pressure of having to achieve work targets and compete with other hotel businesses were more distinctive as a result of the pandemic. This was likewise observed in hotels in Indonesia that had to adjust their service level and delivery to a lower price as well as offer more economical hotel packages during the pandemic (Japutra & Situmorang, 2021). Female employees who remained at work also had to manage existing team members and new staff in the hotel industry, contributing to additional challenges in an already trying time.

The COVID-19 pandemic's effects were detrimental to the hotel industry but seemed to expedite changes in three areas. Firstly, the manner of work has been transformed with increased flexibility in some aspects such as selection of work shifts and working from home. It was acknowledged that although some sectors including tourism may suffer long-term impact as a result of the pandemic, employment changes may occur through remote work, e-commerce, and increased application of technology to manage work (ASEAN, 2020). Secondly, this study revealed that the hotels were eager to train women as leaders and women are welcome to apply for managerial positions in the Malaysian hotel industry. This is a positive transformation since previous studies indicated that women were less likely to be appointed to managerial positions (World Bank Group, 2017). Thirdly, this study demonstrated the value of multi-skilled employees in the labor force, proving that employees should be well-equipped to perform more tasks. The need to retrain workers for new jobs such as online retail

or provide additional training in terms of technology and digital skills have become more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (ASEAN, 2020). Hotel managers in Indonesia also noted the importance of employing people who can multitask and have multi-skills as this increases the employees' dependability and reduced the hotel's labor costs (Japutra & Situmorang, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

This study revealed the issues and challenges faced by female employees in Malaysia throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. By revealing the issues and challenges, the industry will be better prepared when another health crisis strikes in the future. This study also revealed the future of women in the hotel industry. Despite the bleak perception towards the industry, there remains employment opportunities and high-ranking positions for women to work in hotels. The move towards elevating female employment in Malaysia will lead to poverty reduction and economic growth thus helping the nation to recover promptly from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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