



# Valued Paid Recognized

*Desk Review of  
Business Efforts in  
Promoting  
Women's  
Empowerment in  
the Mekong  
Hospitality and  
Tourism Sector*



The **Girls Advocacy Alliance (GAA)** work for the protection of girls and young women against violence and for their economic empowerment. The GAA is an initiative of Plan International Netherlands, Terre des Hommes Netherlands and Defence for Children – ECPAT Netherlands, in cooperation with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The GAA programme runs from 2016 to 2020 in ten countries in Asia and Africa: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda.



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**ASSET-H&C** is a unique network of innovative vocational training centers that promote social and economic inclusion of vulnerable people in Southeast Asia, through training and professional integration in hospitality & catering. It brings together fifteen vocational training centers willing to work hand in hand to better fulfill their common mission of making a positive impact on the lives of disadvantaged youths and adults across Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The network, created by Institut Européen de Coopération et de Développement, promotes hands-on, market-related, and sustainable educational approaches in Vocational Education in Southeast Asia and is integrated by some of the best vocational training centers in the region. It is also a regional player in sustainable hospitality and tourism.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The hospitality and tourism (H&T) sector is a major driver of economic growth and employment in the Mekong Region, with pre-COVID-19 annual international arrivals totaling around 50 million, expenditure up to \$67 billion and jobs provided to around 10 million people.

More than half of those working in the H&T sector in the region are women, often young, low-skilled and lacking in education. The H&T sector, despite being a major employer of women, is characterized by deep-rooted gender inequities, stereotypes, and discrimination, detracting women's opportunities for decent work, equal pay, and representation in decision-making roles. Globally, the sector is not immune to gendered divisions of quality work, however each region has varying levels of success and progress in ensuring equal outcomes for women. Progress and empowerment for women in the H&T sector in the Mekong region are held back by entrenched social norms, unequal economic development and lack of government support or pressure.

It has been widely demonstrated that investing in women and taking strides to ensure their equal participation in the economy and job market not only brings great returns on investment but recoups the lost potential economic contribution of women. Beyond this, there is a clear moral imperative that women should be able to enjoy the same opportunities of men, free from discrimination, unequal treatment, and exploitative work.

The objective of this review is to contribute to the knowledge garnered under the Girls Advocacy Alliance project conducted by Plan International on women's empowerment in different industries in Asia. Specifically, this review aims to provide an overview of the state of business efforts to promote women's empowerment in the H&T sector in the Mekong region. The review itself reflects a major knowledge gap on the private sectors' work to enact change for women. There has been a sheer lack of publicly available data of businesses pro-actively pursuing policies to promote women's empowerment or well-being in the workplace. From the literature that exists, discussions focus on either the challenges or positive practices found globally and for those contextualized in Asia-Pacific, challenges are well-documented but good practices are not.

For the Mekong region, as in other regions, the challenges for women's empowerment in the H&T sector largely lie with the social constraints placed upon women by harmful gender norms and stereotypes that bleed into the workplace. It is found that social norms impact the H&T sector to a greater extent than other sectors as occupations are increasingly assigned with gendered attributes. The similarities to women's prescribed household and domestic duties and the demand for allegedly 'feminine' traits relating to hospitableness are referenced alongside the ease with which young and 'unskilled' workers can enter into jobs in the industry.

Positive examples that the review uncover look at large international hotels' corporate social responsibility initiatives, usually intended to increase the representation of women in senior or executive roles through leadership training. These programs appeared to focus more on talent cultivation rather than addressing deeper constraints such as women's time poverty and child-care responsibilities.

With such limited data, the review sought out, through ASSET-H&C, the insights of non-profit vocational training schools focused on providing marginalized young people with technical and life skills training to enter into the H&T sector.

The training schools each recognize H&T as a sector with great potential for women's empowerment, not only due to the importance of the industry in each of their respective countries<sup>(1)</sup>, but also due to the sector's tendency to employ more women than men. However, at the same, the training schools understand that progression on gender equality and women's well-being requires significant, holistic, and collaborative interventions.

The training schools' approach to empowerment is through equipping marginalized young people with market-relevant skills, which provide greater leverage to secure jobs in top international hotels and restaurants in tourist destinations. Upon graduation, students have great ease to enter into higher paying jobs in international hotels, displaying greater agency and independence in the job market as well as attaining greater income.

To ensure genuine social impact and sustainability, each of the training schools ensures a holistic approach to their curriculum, teaching life skills, gender equality, human rights, women's rights, interpersonal relationships in addition to technical skills. For young women from impoverished and rural backgrounds, such training is transformative in terms of confidence, skills, and well-being as they enter into the workforce.

The interviews also highlighted the persistent challenges that young women face on the path to empowerment. While skills training certainly boosts women's position and confidence to unlock career pathways, there remains significant challenges in creating a decent and equal working environment for women. It was found that cultural factors such as women's responsibilities to raise a family, often in their hometown in rural areas, is a consistent constraint on women's progression in the sector.

Meanwhile, alumni networks run by each school play an instrumental role in promoting decent work and safety from sexual harassment. These networks, backed by the training schools themselves, provide a safe and trustworthy space and help shifting the balance of power towards the worker. These alumni networks also provide a platform that not only allows the alumni to keep in touch with each other, but also for the schools to monitor their career progression and most importantly to identify successful women as role models for future female students to emulate and recognize their own potential.

The financing for programs ran by these training schools is not simple as it requires a combination of grants, revenue generation and philanthropy. In addition, programs' impact depends upon significant community engagement efforts, thus raising the question of whether such model would be replicable for for-profit entities. Indeed, hotels and restaurants see great value in having a steady supply of highly trained graduates. However, whether they are, or can be convinced of the returns of all the dimensions of socially impactful training remains to be explored.

For the H&T sector in the Mekong region to truly include and benefit women at the same level as men, there needs to be far greater pro-activity and dedication to social impact from the private sector, guided in partnership by both government and the non-profit sector to ensure that barriers are lifted and opportunities are seized.

# BACKGROUND



(2) Greater Mekong Subregion Secretariat. 2019. "Overview of the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program". Greater Mekong Subregion. Retrieved from <https://greatermekong.org/overview> on 07 October 2020. Please note, for the purposes of this review, the terms 'Mekong region' or simply 'Mekong' will not include the People's Republic of China

(3) ADB. 2016. "Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Strategy 2016-2025". Asian Development Bank: Manila.

(4) Ibid.

(5) WTTC, 2019, The Importance of Travel and Tourism in 2019

(6) UNWTO, 2019, Global Report on Women in Tourism, November 2019, p.30

(7) Including ASEAN Member States' commitments in the Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and Sustainable Development Goals, and the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan 2011-2025.

(8) Ibid.

(9) T. Baum. 2013. "International Perspective on Women and Work in Hotels, Catering and Tourism". GENDER Working Paper 1/2013, SECTOR Working Paper No. 289, Bureau for Gender Equality and Sectoral Activities Department.

(10) ADB. 2011. "Greater Mekong Subregion: Tourism Sector Assessment, Strategy, and Road Map".

(11) OECD, ASEAN. 2017. "Strengthening Women's Entrepreneurship in ASEAN". Retrieved from [https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/regional-programme/Strengthening\\_Womens\\_Entrepreneurship\\_ASEAN.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/regional-programme/Strengthening_Womens_Entrepreneurship_ASEAN.pdf) on 07 October 2020.

(12) Horizontal segregation refers to the under or over-representation of women in certain roles or sectors, while vertical segregation denotes the under-representation of women in decision-making roles or roles associated with power and their over-representation in the lower levels of the organization. See Meulders, D et al. 2010, Topic Report: Horizontal and Vertical segregation, Meta-analysis of gender and science research, Free University of Brussels, Department of Applied Economics.

(13) World Bank. 2017. "Women and Tourism: Designing for Inclusion". The World Bank Group: Washington D.C.

(14) Op. Cit., p.20.

(15) H.P. Hunter Powell; D. Watson: "Service unseen: The hotel room attendant at work". International Journal of Hospitality Management 2006, 25(2): 309, 297-312.

The Greater Mekong Sub-region is a trans-national region covering six countries that surround the Mekong River: Cambodia, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam<sup>(2)</sup>. Pre-COVID-19 figures for the region recorded over 50 million visitors in 2015, and international visitor expenditures as much as \$66.8 billion in a year<sup>(3)</sup>. In 2015, travel and tourism contributed to GDP growth in Thailand (19.2%), Viet Nam (16.9%), and Myanmar 16.2%<sup>(4)</sup>. In 2019, the World Travel and Tourism Council found that for the South East Asia region, tourism contributed 12.1% to the region's GDP, second in the world only to the Caribbean<sup>(5)</sup>. The sector is also responsible for the employment of over 10 million people, many of whom are young women. According to the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), at least 5 out of 10 individuals in the global Hospitality and Tourism (H&T) sector in 2019 are women<sup>(6)</sup>.

A combination of regional policies and commitments reflects the increasing recognition of the H&T sector's potential to drive both economic prosperity and significant gender equality outcomes for women<sup>(7)</sup>. The ambition of Mekong countries to invest in infrastructure and human capital development to strengthen the growth and sustainability of the H&T sector also presents an opportunity for young women in the region, especially in terms of opportunities for skills development and employment.

Nevertheless, women workers in the H&T sector are more likely to work in vulnerable positions, experience poor working conditions, receive less pay<sup>(8)</sup>, lack equal access to opportunities, and be subject to violence and harassment<sup>(9)</sup>. Few women tend to be in leadership and managerial positions<sup>(10)</sup> and limited access to capital and credit, business knowledge and skills, and support from families impede the competitiveness of women-led businesses in the sector.<sup>(11)</sup>

Inequalities between women and men in the H&T sector are rooted in entrenched social norms, and horizontal and vertical gender segregation<sup>(12)</sup>, as well as limited access to assets and safety nets<sup>(13)</sup>. Women tend to be engaged in 'feminized' roles' that extend their prescribed household duties, such as cleaning and serving guests<sup>(14)</sup>, and which are typically informal, flexible and part-time. Such roles become reliant on the availability of young women with limited qualifications or skillsets and provide employers little incentive to invest in skills development or educational opportunities that enable women to move up the ladder<sup>(15)</sup>. These gender norms also reinforce pressures on women to juggle work and care responsibilities.

The demanding work hours, seasonal variabilities, and geographic distance from residential areas, which have characterized women's work in the H&T sector, further exacerbate the factors cited above. These result in limitations for women in terms of accessing equal opportunities, work-life balance, and decent working conditions – consequences that have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the H&T sector hit hard, joblessness has disproportionately affected young women

(16) Op.Cit, T. Baum, p.23

(17) ILO, 2020, COVID-19 and employment in the tourism sector: Impact and response in Asia and the Pacific, Thematic Brief, 24th April, 2020

(18) UNWTO, 2019, Global Report on Women in Tourism, November 2019, p.36.

workers occupying the low-level and ‘dispensable’ roles<sup>(16)</sup>, much more than men and both men and women employed in other sectors<sup>(17)</sup>.

Despite these challenges, according to both the 2010 and 2019 editions of the UNWTO Global Report on Women in Tourism, the H&T sector presents a significant opportunity for women’s empowerment, as it provides better opportunities for women’s participation in the workforce than other sectors and has a narrower pay gap than other sectors<sup>(18)</sup>. These opportunities are hinged upon successful measures that address the entrenched norms, attitudes and behaviors that have established differentiated opportunities and resources made available for women and men in the sector.

# THE RESEARCH



(19) The Association of Southeast Asian Social Enterprises for Training in Hospitality and Catering is an initiative started in 2016 by the Institut européen de coopération et de développement (IECD) as a network of 15 social enterprises throughout the five Mekong countries to provide high quality training to social and economically disadvantaged youth to enter into the hospitality and tourism sector.

## Rationale for the Research

The Girls Advocacy Alliance is a 5-year program funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs focused on advocating for policy and practice changes that promote girls' and young women's economic empowerment and address gender-based violence. The program is implemented in 10 countries, 2 regional offices in Asia and Africa, the Netherlands, and globally. Under the private sector pathway, the Asia regional program is focused on working with H&T and Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector actors to create and implement policies that promote equal opportunities for women to access decent work.

Conducted by Plan International, in collaboration with ASSET-H&C<sup>(19)</sup>, this desk review has been conducted to scope out good and emerging practices among employers that support women's empowerment in the H&T sector. The findings feed into a working paper that Plan International has also developed, which articulates the business case for empowering women in the H&T and RMG sectors.

## Research Objectives

The purpose of this desk review is to provide a landscape of "good practices" among business-led initiatives for women's empowerment in the Mekong H&T sector. The research is guided by the question: "What good practices have enterprises adopted in the H&T sector in the Mekong region to promote the economic empowerment of women workers, especially young women?"

'Good practices' refer to interventions with tangible and proven benefits to women workers and to businesses themselves. Benefits to women may include paid maternity leave, on-site childcare facilities, skills training, leadership training and mentoring, flexible working arrangements, safe working environments and sexual harassment policies. Business benefits include those with monetary and non-monetary value, for example, improved reputation, productivity, acquisition of skilled talent, among others.

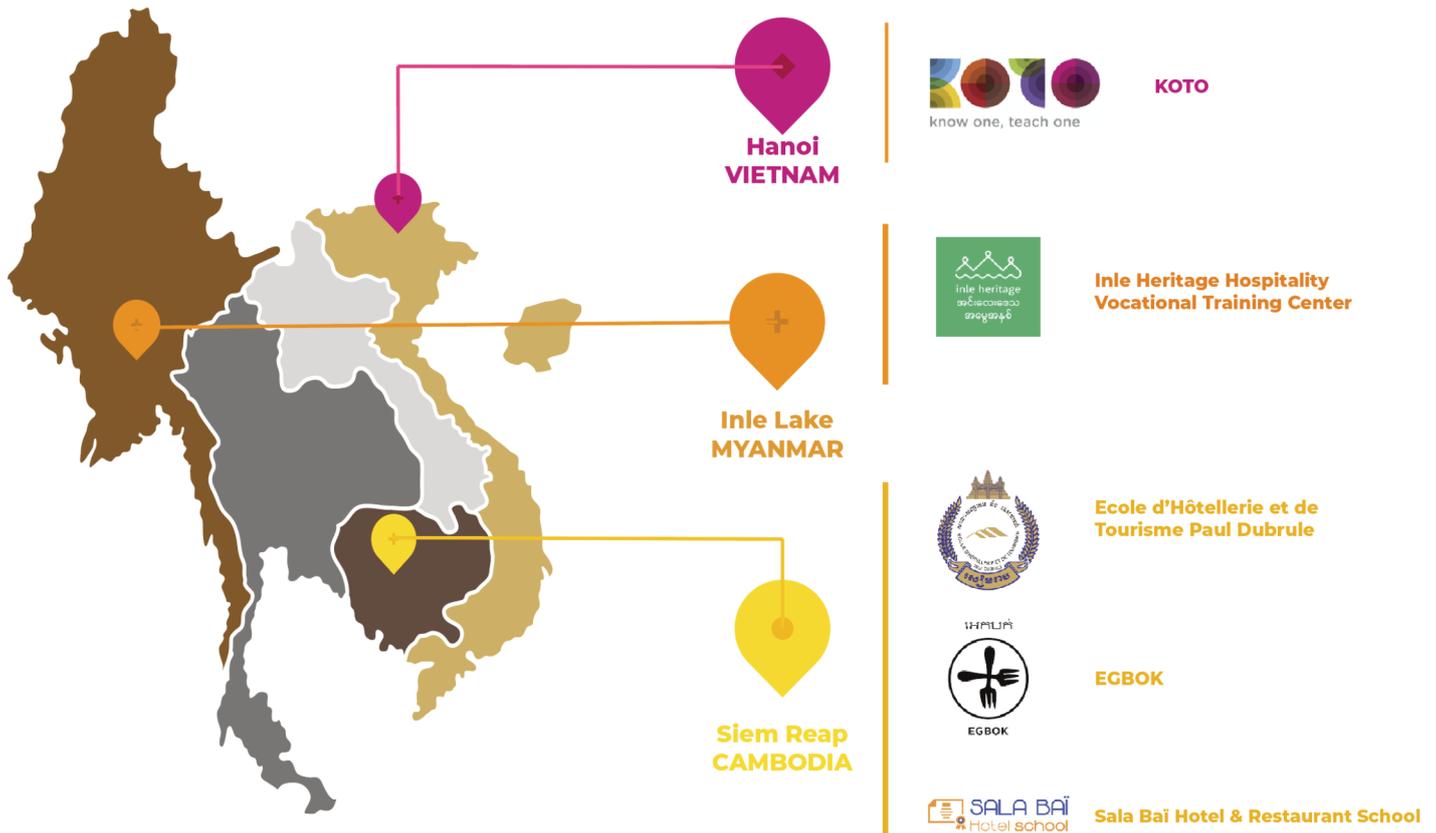
## Methodology

The research draws upon key publications on women's empowerment, gender equality and women's position in the hospitality and tourism sector in general and in the Mekong region. It covers literature from international organizations such as the UN World Trade Organization (UNWTO), the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), as well as academic papers and publications from the private sector from 2010 to 2019.

Insights from key informant interviews (KII) with non-profit vocational training centers in Cambodia, Myanmar and Viet Nam, which members of ASSET-H&C, have also been used in this research. The training schools also operate as social businesses that run restaurants and hotels for the dual purpose of immersive training and source of revenue. The KIIs have also served to augment existing knowledge surrounding the research questions, and to validate initial findings from the literature.

The key informants particularly include representatives of five member schools: three in Cambodia, one in Myanmar and one in Viet Nam:

- Cambodia
  - o Ecole d’Hôtellerie et de Tourisme Paul Dubrulle
  - o EGBOK (Everything’s Gonna Be OK)
  - o Sala Bai Hotel & Restaurant School
- Myanmar
  - o Inle Heritage Hospitality Vocational Training Center
- Viet Nam
  - o KOTO (Know One, Teach One)



Interview questions focus on H&T sector–relevant upskilling and vocational skills training for marginalized young women and young men, the barriers that young women particularly face, and the extent of advocacy that such schools are able to employ in their engagement with private sector partners.

### Knowledge Gaps and Limitations

In conducting this research, efforts have been made to identify knowledge gaps from the existing literature and attempt to address these through key informant interviews with H&T sector partners. Nevertheless, the sheer lack of original research into good business practices in the Mekong H&T sector continues to present significant limitations and knowledge gaps, which are worth noting and are beyond the scope of this paper to address:

- Lack of geographically focused case studies: Gray literature provide industry–relevant and generally acceptable evidence to support discourse in the sector.

But even in main reports, such as the UNWTO's global report on women in tourism, when referring to the Asia-Pacific region, very few select case studies can be found and almost none of them are from the Mekong countries.

- Assumptions on research about business practices: A key challenge in researching positive business efforts or practices on women's empowerment is that such an objective rests on several assumptions: (1) that some businesses have already been convinced of the business case for women's empowerment; (2) that these businesses have enacted policies or made an effort to improve women's progression, safety and equality in the workplace; and (3) that they have measured the return on investment and have produced reports demonstrating such positive returns.
- Lack of documented evidence of women's empowerment initiatives in the H&T sector: The desk review finds a distinct lack of documented efforts or initiatives to improve women's empowerment and well-being in the sector. What is well-covered and much discussed are the various gender-based challenges that women face in the sector. While recommendations are formulated, incentives for businesses or costs and benefits for investing in interventions for women's empowerment are rarely addressed. The onus still remains to be on the development sector and governments with little discussion or evidence of businesses pro-actively taking sustainable approaches to women's empowerment in their operations.
- Extent of COVID-19's effect on the Mekong H&T sector: The entire research was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and measuring the extent of the pandemic's impact on the H&T sector, including on the training schools in the Mekong countries, is outside the scope of this paper. Despite this, the subject of the pandemic did come up briefly in the interviews. The participants commonly shared observations that many of their current students have returned to their families to assist in sustaining their livelihoods, and that digitalizing classes was a significant challenge due to the lack of necessary infrastructure and/or cost of internet services in the student's home areas.
- Available insights are influenced by a social impact motive: The KIIs with training providers from ASSET-H&C have sought to provide some insights into these knowledge gaps. Interviewed participants provided information that reflect strong social impact or value-based motives, which may not completely translate to the profit-driven nature of other H&T businesses. Nevertheless, the findings provide a launch pad for a research and advocacy agenda for future research into the dynamics of women empowering policies in H&T businesses in the Mekong region. The KIIs also provided insights into positive and effective practices that are closely linked to businesses' operations and needs. Moreover, given the lack of relevant evidence about the Mekong H&T sector, they can still potentially guide future conversations on the mutual interests shared between women's empowerment and business growth.

## Analytical Framework

This desk review refers to both women's empowerment and women's economic empowerment interchangeably as the concept of empowerment broadly encompasses inter-related social and economic factors. In subsequent discussions, women's empowerment is understood to refer to the process through which women become increasingly able to make choices across three distinct areas: resources, agency, and achievements<sup>(20)</sup>.

(20) Kabeer, N. 1999, Resources, agency, achievements: reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Dev. Change 30, 435-464.

(21) Hartman, Heidi, 2013, *Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex*, Signs, Vol. 1, No.3 Women and the Workplace: The Implications of Occupational Segregation.

(22) Zaretsky, E. 1973, Ch.7 *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life*, Socialist Revolution, Nos 13,14

(23) UN Global Compact, *Women's Empowerment Principles*,

Numerous elements have been proposed to measure women's empowerment, including autonomy, capacity for action, self-determination, and confidence. Common throughout the discourse is the acknowledgement that empowerment is a process through which an individual or collective gradually acquires the ability to make decisions about their own life and take action to fulfil those decisions. By extension, women's economic empowerment is discussed in the context of micro-finance and/or self-employment and making decisions about the opportunities and the benefits that result from their engagement in these activities.

Some skepticism can be noted around this, particularly from critical thinkers, who argue that waged labor operates within structures that inherently restrict agency through hierarchy and control, and with patriarchal hierarchies factored in, place such control to men. This manifests in the form of gendered occupational segregation and pay gaps<sup>(21)</sup>. These conditions suggest that waged employment contradicts the inherent principles of empowerment, as it is not possible to control one's own resources or time within such work<sup>(22)</sup>.

Given the restricted conditions of agency and power in waged labor contexts, this desk review refers to the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEP) as its framework for analysis. Developed by the UN Global Compact and UN Women, the WEP provides businesses with guidance on upholding empowerment principles for women. These principles draw from international labor and human rights frameworks as a foundation to advocate for the recognition of businesses' responsibility in advancing gender equality, and encompass the issues of equal pay, sexual harassment and violence, skills development, gender parity across the value chain, especially in senior positions and gender-responsive workplaces<sup>(23)</sup>. The WEP, thus, provides a useful foundation to understand how women's empowerment in the workplace can be operationalized and achieved.

Operationally, the desk review has grouped the seven principles into four main pillars of empowerment. As a framework, the following pillars provide reference points to which the literature and KII responses were analyzed:

- Gender parity and responsiveness throughout the value chain, particularly women in managerial or executive positions;
- Women's safety from harassment and other forms of gender-based violence;
- Equal pay; and
- Women's voice, representation and leadership in labor unions or workers' associations.

While they are distinguished from each other, these pillars are best seen to be interrelated. For example, the gender pay gap is often the result of women disproportionately occupying the lower levels of value chains, and similarly gender responsiveness can be interpreted in different ways, including addressing protection from sexual harassment, or the presence of child-care facilities or maternity leave policies. Moreover, wishing to foster greater representation of women leaders in a business also necessitates addressing the social expectations of women to drop out of their career to raise children and provide care for other family members. Initiatives envisioning genuine and lasting impact need to consider this inter-relatedness and address women's empowerment holistically and without separating home life from work life.

# LITERATURE REVIEW



Literature on women's position, marginalization and gender equality in the H&T sector is comprised of a mix of reports by international organizations, non-governmental organizations academia and private sector entities. The majority of literature, which provides a geographical snapshot or focus which includes the Mekong region, discusses the various challenges and barriers that women face, namely, their lack of representation in senior roles, entrenched gender roles and the wage gap.

### Context-specific data and knowledge on women's empowerment in the H&T sector is a major knowledge gap

The latest UNWTO Global Report on Women in Tourism provided, at the global level, some positive case studies of companies taking active steps for women's inclusion throughout the value chain, upskilling and improving mechanisms for addressing harassment<sup>(24)</sup>. There remains a knowledge gap on how these good practices, especially from local employers and partners, have benefited businesses while also achieving gender equality outcomes.

Major research pieces such as the UNWTO Global Report on Women in Tourism, the ILO's International Perspectives on Women and Work in Hotels, Catering and Tourism, the NGO Equality in Tourism's Sun, Sand and Ceilings report<sup>(25)</sup> have focused on the issue of over-representation of women in lower-levels of employment and their lack of representation or participation in management. This reveals that data collected on gender equality in the H&T sector tends to focus on the quantitative side and less on the qualitative aspects of job quality for women. Moreover, there is even less data on good practices which have demonstrated positive returns both for women and the businesses that employ them. Those are often presented as unique and almost anomalous to the major trends in the industry.

The UNWTO 2019 Global Report on Women in Tourism, which segments themes and examines best practices across employment, entrepreneurship, training, leadership, and civil society presents a relatively optimistic view of the sector's potential for gender equality. The report, despite its comprehensiveness, acknowledges the dearth of data and information available on women in the H&T sector in the Asia-Pacific region, especially compared with what is available in other regions. The report also notes the lack of evidence of policies or practices aimed at empowering women in the H&T sector in the region, only being able to point to a few practices in Japan, Nepal and Malaysia, but virtually none from the Mekong region specifically<sup>(26)</sup>.

The 2013 ILO study on gender (in) equality in the hospitality and tourism by Thomas Baum gives a comprehensive overview of the nature of poor working conditions and gender inequality in the H&T sector and the challenges in overcoming them. The report is heavily cited in other literature on women in the H&T sector, perhaps indicating the lack of original in-depth research in this area. The report is also scarce on data from the Mekong region, with data only available from Thailand. The ILO study further notes the topic of gender in H&T sector is well-researched but only in terms of gender disparities and inequalities.

(24) Op. Cit .UNWTO, 2019, p. 38.  
For example

(25) Equality in Tourism, Sun, Sand and Ceilings: Women in the Boardroom in the Tourism Industry, July 2013. Available at [http://equalityintourism.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Sun\\_Sand\\_Ceiling\\_F.pdf](http://equalityintourism.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Sun_Sand_Ceiling_F.pdf)

(26) UNWTO, 2019, pp.97-99

## Social norms and the nature of work in the H&T sector combine to make a challenging environment for women to progress and secure decent work conditions

Socio-cultural factors are given particular emphasis in regard to the Asia-Pacific region when discussing the lack of progress or evidence of good practices of gender equality in the sector. In general, the evidence of marginalization is far greater than evidence of good practices. The sheer scarcity of positive case studies suggests these are exceptions to the norm and not part of a wider strategy for women's empowerment. This is especially true of case studies emanating from the Mekong region, which are not only scarce but usually the result of an NGO, development assistance or women starting their own business. While such case studies do not invalidate their qualification of a best practice, they do not present a case to private sector entities of why they should invest more in women's development and assurance of safe and quality work.

The ILO report acknowledges that, globally, the sector employs more women than men, has, on average, a narrower gender pay gap than the broader economy and provides a quick and relatively easy entry into the workforce for young women. However, women workers are over-represented in the low-skilled and low paid positions, which also tend to be the most labor-intensive, while being under-represented in decision-making positions. It is argued that entrenched discriminatory gender norms create 'vertical' segregation of men and women, with women being constrained in access to certain jobs by their prescribed 'primary' responsibilities at home. This vertical segregation is combined with horizontal segregation to produce a situation of systemic gender discrimination in the sector. Horizontal segregation, as previously mentioned, results from the perception of women's household duties which bleed over into the roles available in the H&T, most notably housekeeping or cleaning roles<sup>(27)</sup>.

(27) Baum, 2013, pp.2-3

## Mixed evidence of a narrow pay gap between men and women in the Mekong region for the H&T sector

One area where the UNWTO report gives an interesting insight is the wage gap between men and women in the H&T sector compared to the broader economy. As previously mentioned, it has been noted that the H&T sector, in general, has a narrower pay than the broader economy, however in the Mekong region this is not entirely a uniform trend. As can be seen in the table below, according to the UNWTO, the pay gap between men and women is only narrower by a significant margin in the H&T sector in Myanmar, while in Viet Nam the gap is 3 percentage points, and in Lao PDR the difference is negligible<sup>(28),(29)</sup>. In Cambodia and Thailand, the difference between the broader economy and the H&T sector is sizeable<sup>(30)</sup>. The report itself provides caution in seeing these trends as a positive for the industry, as on average, both men and women earn less in the H&T sector than in the broader economy, and the data does not include earnings from the informal economy, in which women take up a larger share of the workforce, especially in the Asia-Pacific<sup>(31)</sup>.

(28) (29) It is worth noting that the figures for Lao PDR should be treated with a degree of caution (or wariness or vigilance) due to the persistent gender gaps in education, working hours and share of work, see ADB & The World Bank, 2012., Country Gender Assessment for Lao PDR, Reducing Vulnerability and Increasing Opportunity, Asian Development Bank and The World Bank, 2012.

(30) Ibid., p.39-40

(31) Ibid., p.45

Women's earnings as a percentage of men's earnings			
Country	Broader Economy	H&T specifically	Difference
Cambodia	79.6	65.66	-14.29
Lao PDR	100.72	100.84	0.12
Myanmar	83.74	93.11	9.37
Thailand	99.50	81.56	-17.85
Viet Nam	92.40	95.02	2.62

### Examples of private sector initiatives for women's empowerment are sparse

The report also brings attention to Accor's Women at Accor Generation program to promote gender parity, women's career progression and representation in decision-making roles. However, with regards to concerned countries, the report only gives brief details of a one-day workshop organized in Bangkok that aimed to 'empower women employees'<sup>(32)</sup>. The report does acknowledge the limits of Accor's program, noting that despite the group's efforts, women's participation in decision-making in operations in the Asia-Pacific is very limited, and that in Accor's operations in the region, at the time of publication of the UNWTO's report, there is not one female General Manager (GM).

A White Paper on women in hospitality by Diageo, a major international alcoholic beverage brand, details the barriers to women's empowerment and representation in leadership in the H&T sector globally as well as best practices of several industry leaders and NGOs<sup>(33)</sup>. Diageo has assembled these actors into a coalition aimed at improving cross-sectoral dialogue and collaboratively working towards gender equality. Even on a global scale the white paper finds a distinct lack of available data to statistically support the business case for diversity in the H&T sector specifically, despite there being a widespread belief in the industry that greater diversity does bring tangible benefits. The white paper discusses the business case for diversity in terms of accessing the 'talent' pool and the missed opportunities in only prioritizing men for talent strategy, backing this up with the 2014 McKinsey study which demonstrated that companies with diverse leadership perform better financially, though this did not refer specifically to the H&T sector, nor did McKinsey's data include the Asia-Pacific.

Diageo's white paper on the H&T sector in the Asia-Pacific references the literature previously mentioned, namely the ILO and UNWTO reports, and similarly discusses the challenges, barriers and inequalities facing women, but does not offer anything new. The case studies referenced demonstrating good practices in the Asia-Pacific region include very few examples by private businesses in the Mekong region, with one of the examples being the above-mentioned Accor program. Another example given is Starwood Hotels & Resorts, which through its global diversity and inclusion strategy runs an initiative for increasing global female GM representation. Through this initiative, Starwood conducted a study on the barriers as well as opportunities for women to access GM positions and created a roadmap on how to develop female talent from within their business and extend developmental opportunities to women. As a result of this program, Starwood Asia-Pacific was able to achieve female GM representation in Thailand, Viet Nam, and Cambodia, with five female GMs; prior to the initiative, none of those countries had women as GMs in Starwood hotels.

(32) Ibid., 2019 p.134

(33) Baum, T & Cheung, C., 2015., White Paper on Women in Tourism & Hospitality: Unlocking the Potential in the Talent Pool, Diageo, March 2015

## Entrepreneurship pathways in the H&T sector provide a promising outlook for women in the region, albeit with a number of challenges

Despite the various challenges in empowering women in the sector, there is some acknowledgement that the industry does indeed have great potential, especially for self-employment opportunities. The World Bank, in a 2017 report, states that H&T tends to be more beneficial for women than other sectors, with several countries in Asia, Thailand included, having more businesses run by women than men<sup>(34)</sup>.

Both editions of the UNWTO Global Report have argued that tourism offers strong entrepreneurship opportunities for women, though several challenges do exist. These challenges are usually related to lack of access to financing, business skill training as well as technology needed to set up a viable and sustainable business<sup>(35)</sup>.

Another study argues that the positive outlook that is placed on tourism's potential for women's empowerment is flawed as it claims that due to tourism's high capacity for flexible, informal, and home-based work there are greater opportunities for women. It is argued that, these are the very same factors which lead to a lack of decent work outcomes and equality for women in the sector in the first place and overstates the importance of women taking up a larger percentage of the workforce<sup>(36)</sup>. It is further elaborated that entrepreneurship or self-employment in tourism and hospitality, on a global level, for women is in the form of home-based work or as street vendors, which are also likely to involve female family members in unpaid and unrecognized work<sup>(37)</sup>.

In a section on women in community-based tourism, the UNWTO Global Report provides a snapshot of the Gao Xuan Women's Union which ran a 29-month community-based eco-tourism project and had cross-cutting objectives including conservation, livelihood enhancement and women's empowerment. The project included extensive trainings for women for various different skills including vocational hospitality skills, business management skills as well as basic environmental knowledge. According to the report, the workshops allowed women to access higher income and education and have greater power in local decision-making. Conversely, the report notes that workshops run in the same national park (Xuan Thau) by the provincial government for promoting women's skill development failed to attract many women participants due to their household and childcare duties<sup>(38)</sup>.

It is perhaps indicative of the extent to which harmful gender norms are entrenched in the region that the only case study that can be found of women's empowerment by the UNWTO in the Mekong is beset by a lack of effective outreach of women participants. The lack of effective planning and design that incorporates gender disparities by a local government authority in designing a women's empowerment intervention only serves to show the ways in which a lack of women's representation in decision-making bodies greatly undermines the efficacy and impact of such interventions<sup>(39)</sup>. As the ILO study on women in H&T notes, the pro-poor tourism agenda stands to benefit poor women in rural areas significantly with various opportunities for self-employment and small and medium income-generating activities, however it is emphasized that any strategy would require collaboration between national government departments and ministries, NGOs, local government authorities, trade unions and local collectives<sup>(40)</sup>.

The ILO study further discusses the intersectional challenges in harnessing the potential of small tourism enterprises for rural women by employing a case study

(34) World Bank, 2017., Women and Tourism: Designing for Inclusion, Tourism for Development Knowledge Series., The World Bank Group, 2017., p. 11.

(35) UNWTO, 2010 & 2019.

(36) Alarcon, D.M & Mullor, E.C, 2018., Gender Dimensions in Tourism Work, Contrast Reports, 04 Responsible Tourism, Alba Sud, 2018., p.14.

(37) Ibid., .p.17.

(38) UNWTO, 2019., p.145

(39) According to the UNWTO 2019 Global Report, only 23% of tourism ministers worldwide are women and in the H&T sector, 25.5% of executive committee positions are held by women, p.66-67 and globally represent just one quarter of decision-makers in the H&T sector, p.79.

(40) ILO, 2013, p.31.

(41) Ibid., p.32

in Laos, pointing to the fact that women in Laos are particularly active in handicraft production, food processing and small-scale trading, yet lack access to formal structures of training, loans and credit. It is discussed that structural and entrenched gender inequalities such as lending practices, land ownership laws and women's prescribed social roles prevent poor and rural women's from participating in the H&T sector and enjoying its economic benefits<sup>(41)</sup>. This is followed by a positive case study of a small social enterprise, backed by Fair Trade, which supports the small local economy of silkworm-based handicraft manufacturing, the majority of whose products are sold to tourists. The vast majority of the workers are women who are able to increase their income whilst contributing to the social and environmental sustainability of a local industry<sup>(42)</sup>.

(42) Ibid., p.33

Despite these sporadic case studies, which do not necessarily provide entirely positive examples and in fact only show the challenges to overcome, the literature in general does point in the direction of self-employment and entrepreneurship as an avenue for women's economic empowerment in the Asian H&T sector.

# KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS FINDINGS



Key informant interviews (KII) findings reveal positive examples of how the facilitation of women's empowerment through education and training can bring about positive returns for private businesses. In particular, the interviews provide insight into engagement strategies with large hotel brands, where the advocacy challenges lie, and how they can become more receptive to actively adopting good practices which facilitate women's empowerment and well-being in the workplace. Examples of advocacy asks include providing remuneration to interns, salary increases, policies that promote gender equality and women's empowerment in general.

While the training schools' primary objective is to provide a path to employment in the H&T sector for marginalized populations, with greater priority given to women, they also have multiple 'service' roles which are the result of striving to deliver genuine impact. This model can be particularly beneficial for target populations and potentially driven by their social impact mandate. As a result, the same may not be expected from profit-driven businesses.

Such social services include various kinds of life skills training such as confidence building, inter-personal relationships, and women's rights awareness. As will be discussed, while businesses can see value in having high-quality trained staff, the expense of targeting marginalized women or actively engaging to deconstruct gender norms is less likely to appeal as a business case.

**Barriers to women's empowerment in the Mekong H&T sector are the joint result of socio-cultural norms about women as well as entrenched and outdated perceptions of what hospitality and tourism entails**

Each interview began by asking the participants how they conceptualize the empowerment of women in the H&T sector in their respective countries. This was to establish a baseline of understanding of the main concepts of this review and to observe the uniformity or variance of women's empowerment across different actors within the H&T industry and where they believe priorities lie to achieve empowerment and the strategies needed.

Women's empowerment was understood by all of the participants in terms of gender equality, equality of access to opportunities as men, reduced gaps in representation in senior roles and equal pay. Elaborating on gender equality, one participant noted that empowerment is when women are better equipped to defend themselves and their rights. Another participant emphasized the opportunity for women to be able to continue and build sustainable careers in the same way men are able to. Another participant articulated empowerment of women as women recognizing their value and aspiring to do what society says they cannot do.

Discussions on the concept of empowerment of women in the H&T sector were followed by questions on the barriers that prevent women from benefiting from the industry the same way as men do. For all the participants, the socio-cultural norms were, by far, the most important factor. Naturally, as the training schools are dealing with primarily rural and marginalized communities, they are more likely to enroll students from communities where gender roles and stereotypes are most entrenched and pervasive. Interestingly, they observed that in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Viet Nam,

rural communities have a particularly negative view of hospitality and believe it is not an appropriate workplace for women. In particular, hospitality in cities is equated with working on the street and selling alcohol in informal bars. Moving to a city for such work was also often perceived as an indicator of trafficking by families. The expectation of women to stay at home in rural Cambodia and Viet Nam, contribute to the household income, usually through agricultural economic activity, and to raise a family presented an extra barrier to women's entry into the H&T sector.

To overcome these challenges, training schools in Cambodia and Viet Nam use direct engagement with the families of potential female students to sensitize them in terms of what their daughters could achieve given the chance; that hospitality was different to the established stereotypes and that allowing their daughters to train for a certain period of time would bring a greater return on investment for their household. KOTO in Viet Nam also goes as far as providing a stipend to the trainees to assist them during the two-year study period. In this sense, for such NGOs and training schools, the first step towards empowerment of women from marginalized backgrounds is presenting a business case to their families.

Social norms at the community level evidently represent an additional and major barrier for women to enter the industry. While literature on gender equality and women in tourism focuses on discrimination and harmful stereotypes within the industry itself, specifically the roles that women find themselves restricted to, these interviews revealed the extra length that women have to go to simply enter into the industry.

### **Overcoming barriers and breaking down gender norms requires extensive, comprehensive, and sustained community engagement as part of student recruitment process**

The participants emphasized the importance of community and family engagement as a first step in empowering women from rural areas. A strategy found to be particularly effective was working with successful female alumni as role models to show, rather than tell, both the families and the young women what is possible to achieve with the right training and dispel any myths or negative stereotypes concerning the industry.

The training schools also relied on collaborative efforts for outreach with local NGOs and authorities to ensure their recruitment is targeted and inclusive of the most marginalized populations, largely from rural areas, often recruiting directly from secondary schools and in some cases those who were unable to continue or finish secondary education. The training schools are also able to increasingly rely on their reputation and word of mouth from previous alumni for effective outreach.

Each training school had different requirements for outreach; though all sought out marginalized youth usually from rural areas, they had differing quotas for women, or were specifically targeting women of a certain profile, such as a survivor of domestic abuse or single mothers. The school in Myanmar primarily focuses on high school dropouts and did not prioritize women in its strategy but nonetheless ended up with a majority of women graduates. The focus on high school dropouts for the Myanmar training school was due to the interviewee's recognition that the Myanmar

government does not invest enough in education or human capital and the belief in that such a state, the private sector can be much more dynamic and responsive to society's needs than the government can.

What this reveals for proposing a business case for investing in women by H&T enterprises is that empowering women needs to be intersectional, incorporating ethnicity and socio-economic status, and requires far more action, effort and investment than a business is likely to be willing to provide and certainly goes beyond the scope of human resources policies or mechanisms.

### **Training and upskilling are a major pathway to economic empowerment for women, but it must be accompanied by socially responsible and social value-driven life skills and gender transformative training**

Each training school operates under the philosophy that training young women and men from marginalized backgrounds with in-demand vocational skills is instrumental in lifting them out of poverty and ensuring economic inclusion within an in-demand industry. This premise certainly holds true in a pre-COVID-19 context, and as such, is validated by the fact that each training school is able to boast a 100% success rate in finding jobs for their graduates in up-scale businesses, with higher average salaries and better conditions than enjoyed by those without such training. At the time of writing, the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on such workers and trainees is still unclear.

All of the training schools took a comprehensive and holistic approach to training, focusing on the needs of the graduates, especially life skills which are highly valued by the industry and make them stand out once in employment. At Sala Bai Hotel and Restaurant School, the students take theatre classes for self-expression and to build confidence. This is particularly important for girls and young women as their voices are usually marginalized as they are often discouraged from speaking up in Cambodian society.

At EGBOK, the students, both men and women, undergo comprehensive classes on women's empowerment and gender equality, going into various social and gender issues such as marriage, love, relationships, child rearing and financial matters. For women, this process is greatly helped by the fact that at EGBOK, the training staff and senior staff are mostly Cambodian women, so they have direct evidence of the empowering potential of the classes as well as role models to look up to.

The importance of role models was a common trend throughout the interviews, not only were they key to engaging the families of young women to agree to the training program but also played a significant role in showing young female students that being successful as a woman was possible. For the country contexts this is significant, as all the interviewees emphasized in their respective countries, there is a distinct lack of examples of successful women, especially in male-dominated areas. At the Ecole d'Hôtellerie et de Tourisme Paul Dubrule in Cambodia, they inform their students that they are likely to see virtually only male managers in the workplace, so they purposefully bring in women guest lecturers into both the classroom and career's fairs. The same school runs a diploma in Hospitality Management, which at the time

of the interview is comprised of 26% women, indicating that breaking down the perception that management roles are for men, or indeed breaking down the barriers that prevent progression for women, still requires extensive attention and work. One participant noted that once young women encountered a female supervisor or manager, their perceptions of the industry changed completely as they had previously not even conceived of women in such positions and could then envision building a career in the sector.

At two of the other training schools, it was observed that women students were naturally more pro-active in their desire for learning and achieving success. A participant noted that this was due to an 'innate' sense of responsibility that women have as caregivers for their family, therefore giving them a greater sense of responsibility beyond themselves. Another participant, in Myanmar, noted that women of the current young generation were noticeably more competitive, ambitious and "aggressive" than her own generation or even women between 25 and 35. However, it was also observed that society itself was still rigidly and bureaucratically discriminatory towards women and this can have an effect of creating 'invisible barriers' where women internalize external discrimination to believe they are not supposed to occupy certain positions or spaces.

With this in mind, it is paramount that vocational skills training includes courses or training specialized to sensitizing both men and women towards the practice of gender equality in everyday life and crucially, build the confidence of women so they can realize and fulfill their own potential. Similarly, it was observed by one training school in Cambodia that the self-realization of potential and confidence was also directly linked to the experience of working. While the training was able to cover the concept of empowerment and gender equality, the real life experience allowed women to make the connection that having an income, indeed an above-average income, gave them greater power within their family and were able to play a greater role in household decision-making.

### **Such training schools have a clear value to businesses, yet it remains unclear to what degree hotels benefit from the women's empowerment and social impact elements of such training**

As one participant noted, large hotel brands have their own in-house training programs. It can, thus, be challenging to put a persuasive case forward for private businesses to make such training programs as impactful for women's empowerment as non-profit schools are mandated and able to do. In fact, this was elaborated on by a participant who noted that the life skills components that they provide would not 'marry well' with the for-profit model and immediate needs of H&T businesses. Elaborating that businesses need convincing of the value of socially impactful training where the return on investment is not clearly evident from their perspective. To make this case would require extensive and long-term research-backed advocacy to demonstrate how socially impactful training would bring benefits for businesses.

The majority of the training schools interviewed were funded by a combination of international development agencies, private donors, foundations, and revenue generated by their hospitality services. In terms of hotels and businesses contributing

or paying for the 'services' of the training schools, several participants commented on the difficulty of persuading businesses to contribute almost anything at all. The most common form of a private hotel's contributing assistance was offering internships in their businesses as part of the training course and covering the cost of stipends for the students.

Each of the training schools in Cambodia and Viet Nam commented that engagement and relationship-building was key to engaging with hotels and sensitizing them to worker-wellbeing and gender issues. Due to the high-quality of training that all the schools provide, they are operating with a degree of leverage in terms of their influencing power. For example, the Sala Bai Hotel and Restaurant school in Cambodia, which has been operating for almost two decades, has been a go-to of hotels on the recruitment of human resources. In the context of COVID-19, the situation has changed: students and trainees face particularly precarious situations as the H&T sector reels from the pandemic.

Other interviewees also noted that ensuring job placements for graduates was facilitated by their established reputations and the consistent demand for highly trained graduates. While this is a positive indicator of an emerging business case for investing in such training, it was also noted that the hotels are still only willing to pay for the internships. Another school had experienced resistance to paying the interns but has slowly managed to convince a number of partner companies to do so. In Viet Nam, it was observed that the hotels which do not want to pay for interns' stipends saw the training school as a kind of charity whose aim was social good, while the hotel's aim is simply profit.

The hotels that were willing to pay had been convinced by the quality of the students they received, whereas the hotels unwilling to pay saw the very fact that they are giving an opportunity for training as enough. The interviewee believed this attitude stemmed from certain hotels focusing less on quality of service and consequently on a need for high quality graduates. However, on a positive note, the interviewee believed that by 'winning over' hotels that were willing to pay for interns, hotels reluctant to pay for interns would eventually see that they are lacking access to high-quality staff as the interns are likelier to take up permanent positions in hotels where they completed their internships.

This is the same for one of the Cambodian training schools, particularly in regard to Chinese-owned businesses. These companies focus almost exclusively on mass tourism from the People's Republic of China and essentially serve groups that do not particularly value high-quality service and fine dining. As such, the training school found that such companies are much less likely to pay for interns or even understand why they should. More worryingly, due to the lack of regard for customer service or highly trained staff, the interviewee believed that such companies see hotel staff as largely replaceable and not worth the investment of extensive training, let alone socially impactful training. However, the stark contrast in priorities between these hotels and more established international brands does result in the graduates simply not choosing the Chinese-owned hotels and opting instead for hotels where their

skills are more valued. After completing an internship with a Chinese-owned hotel, the students are able to recognize that having been trained to a high standard, either for food or service, they had a greater choice of where to work and could choose those businesses that not only properly compensated them for their skills but also had greater respect for their well-being.

One school noted that some graduates had even found work abroad indicating the potential for social and economic mobility resulting from the training and subsequent training that they received. It also presents a business case specifically for training and upskilling, which brings benefits both to the employees and the businesses. Such non-profit training schools are able to shift the balance of power in favor of women and marginalized populations by providing them not just with skills, but with high-caliber skills, that are valued in the upper-end of the H&T industry. This is a positive trend as it demonstrates that closing the education and skills gap can act as a major enabler for empowerment by both deconstructing gender norms and equipping young women with skills that increase their value to business and thus make them less 'expendable'.

The training school in Myanmar represents a successful example of a social-value driven business. The Inle Heritage Hospitality Vocational Training Center (IHHVTC) is the only training school interviewed that has been completely self-sustainable for the past seven years. This is due to the school being funded directly by its accommodation, restaurant, cooking classes and gift shop. Inle Heritage further serves as an excellent example of women's empowerment in that it was founded and is ran by a woman hailing from Inle Lake itself. The organization and its school were set up in recognition of the need for 'alternative education' of youth in Myanmar, the potential of tourism and a desire to share the culture and heritage of Inle Lake.

Inle Heritage can be described as a successful example of a self-sustaining and independent social business. The founder, Yin Myo Su, has been simultaneously addressing the lack of investment in human capital and education in Myanmar, challenging gender norms, investing in life-long learning, empowering women, conserving Myanmar and Shan culture whilst generating revenue that allow it to sustain its operations without aid or financial support. The training school otherwise works in much the same way as the other schools, in terms of providing vocational training for hospitality and tourism, life skills, gender awareness, awareness on women's rights, reproductive health and sexual harassment, as well as courses contextualizing the UN Sustainable Development Goals

### **Women in leadership or senior management roles in the H&T sector should be seen as axiomatic to good business and corporate governance**

While not specifically targeting women, Inle Heritage does aim for gender balance, but sees women's empowerment as something that should be such a fundamental value to the H&T sector and that businesses should not need to adopt a corporate social responsibility strategy or policy but rather simply embed in an enterprise's culture.

This philosophy was echoed by the interviewee from Sala Bai Hotel and Restaurant School, which, when asked how best to convince businesses to invest in women's empowerment answered that rather than trying to convince a board room full of men, it is better to empower women with the necessary skills and confidence to break down barriers, take over those executive leadership roles and set the way for other women and enact policies in women's best interests.

Despite the efforts of the training schools and their success in cultivating women's empowerment through skills building, they formed a consensus on the debilitating effects of social norms that bleed into the H&T workplaces in their respective countries in preventing more women from progressing in their careers. In all three countries the expectation of women to leave their job to start a family and look after their young children is still pervasive and, while women who have graduated from such training schools find it easier to enter back into the workforce due to their acquired skills, the career break continues to act as a barrier to career progression.

A further example of how Inle Heritage was able to foster an empowering working environment for women is the organization's support for work-life balance for working mothers, facilities for young children, including a school specifically for children of staff. For Yin Myo Su, the 'business' benefit of allowing working mothers to continue their career was not only greater retention of staff, citing that single and childless women were more likely to leave to pursue further study, but also benefiting from a perceived improved decision-making capacity that only child-rearing can bring. While this is rather a nebulous concept, it should not be discounted when looking at the qualitative and less tangible benefits that women's empowerment can bring to the workplace.

Deliberating further on women's leadership and empowerment in the H&T sector, Yin Myo Su used an analogy of planting many trees to create a forest rather than one large tree holding many branches, to allude to the need of encouraging small and medium enterprises (SME) development in the H&T for true sustainability. This position is based on the success of Inle Heritage and how the school and work environment itself have been able to simultaneously empower women from the bottom up, cultivate entrepreneurial talent, transform the lives of high-school dropouts and build a viable and sustainable business.

### **In terms of reducing the gender pay gap and gender-responsive policies, such training schools face an uphill advocacy effort**

Overall, gender-responsive policies and measures to address the gender pay gap were areas that the training schools had little information on in terms of their private sector partners. However, due to the social impact mandate of each of the schools, they would engage with their partners to either improve standards for women or at least be more conscious of women's needs in the workplace. For example, for graduates' first job placement, Sala Bai Hotel and Restaurant school ensures that female graduates get

the same salary as their male counterparts. Similarly, Ecole d'Hôtellerie et de Tourisme Paul Dubrulle expressed that they encourage their partners for better pay even if room for advocacy is limited. As such, they work to their strengths and choose to work mostly with hotels that pay over the minimum wage, leveraging their supply of highly trained graduates to improve their income above the national average. Reportedly, entry-level salaries for their graduates are around \$140 a month, compared to the \$100 a month that is common among the majority of hotels. There was however no gender disaggregation for these figures. The same interviewee also expressed a rather pessimistic outlook of H&T businesses instituting policies for a good new work-life balance for women in Cambodia, such as onsite daycare facilities, and that she is only aware of one single company in Siem Reap that is offering this benefit, adding that it may be a long time before hotels can be convinced to do the same.

The same school also commented that while western branded hotels tend to be more attune to concepts of gender equality and women's empowerment, wage levels are the result of international corporate policy and so engaging with just one branch in Cambodia does not produce effective results. Two participants also noted the lack of wage laws covering hospitality and tourism workers as well as weak labor governance in general, adding that businesses have little incentive to go beyond national legal frameworks.

Interestingly, the fact that non-profit vocational schools take up the mandate to advocate or influence private sector actors on decent work policies is an indicator that they have filled in a vacuum of labor governance that is left by a lack of government investment or infrastructure.

### **Training schools' alumni network associations fill in the 'protection' gap for women at work**

All of the training schools interviewed made concerted efforts to track the progress of their students, both as a way to measure and assess their own impact in empowering women and young people in the H&T sector but also to ensure their well-being in their workplaces. All of the schools interviewed included classes and instruction from either guest speakers from partner NGOs, social workers, or their own staff to teach the students about labor rights, decent working conditions, and sexual harassment. When on-boarding to a hotel or restaurant, the schools all ensure that the students are properly oriented to the company's human resources protocols and that women are aware of the signs of sexual harassment and how to respond to it.

Through either the schools themselves, social workers affiliated with the schools or an alumni network, the training schools acted as de facto trade unions by serving as a trusted and safe space to lodge complaints, either concerning working conditions or sexual harassment. At EGBOK, there lacked a formal association of alumni but through connections, solidarity, and social capital the school created a safe space conducive to allowing women to report any form of abuse. The interviewee pointed out that

while five star hotels do typically have staff unions, their training school's loose, non-hierarchical association of alumni provided a much more trustworthy space for reporting sexual harassment since the alumni are often not colleagues thus there is less risk of young women feeling too ashamed to forward. To address the power imbalance in reporting sexual harassment or poor treatment, representatives from the school engage with the company in the event of a case being reported to reach a solution and if necessary, support the alumni in finding a new job if the hotel is uncooperative.

KOTO in Viet Nam was particularly successful in maintaining a well-connected alumni community, with around 1,000 members and holding frequent events each year such as reunion dinners or graduation ceremonies. Their alumni network shares internship, job, and work abroad opportunities as well as mentoring support. In terms of reporting sexual harassment or other forms of abuse, the network has a focal point for alumni to refer to who will engage with the hotel to ensure the complaint is taken seriously by the hotel or if necessary involve legal services if the hotel's response is not satisfactory. It was noted that in Viet Nam, similar to Cambodia, trade unions lack power, as well as representation of women, as such NGOs often fill the labor protection gap.

# CONCLUSION



This research has found that there is a glaring lack of evidence of positive business efforts, policies, or initiatives for women's empowerment in the H&T sector in the Mekong region. The literature review discovered that women's empowerment and gender equality in the context of H&T, is, globally, a well-researched topic, with the UNWTO producing the most comprehensive and authoritative publication on this area. Literature which focuses on either the positive impacts or returns on investment for women's empowerment in the sector primarily originates from either European or North American contexts, where sustainability, diversity and inclusion have become common buzzwords for businesses. However, in the Asia-Pacific region, and specifically the Mekong region, positive case studies are rare exceptions to the rule and are most likely to be an example of women overcoming barriers, rather than a business case of removing said barriers. The literature also tends to point to promising developments from SMEs in the H&T sector and women entrepreneurs in terms of empowerment due in part to the reliance on the informal economy for many women in the region but also a concerted effort by the non-profit sector to support women entrepreneurs.

With such an evidence gap, the research objective of this paper cannot be met, however the discovery of this gap and where the current agenda lies indicates that there is an urgent and real need for original research into the landscape of H&T businesses and the extent to which they have enacted policies that promote women's empowerment and qualitative investigation into the behavior change, or lack thereof, of corporate actors.

The KILs with training schools served the purpose of providing insight into an under-researched area. And while the number of training schools interviewed is low and as such the qualitative findings cannot be extrapolated, they do indicate evidence of common trends for young women from marginalized backgrounds in the region. The findings from the interviews demonstrate the journey of empowerment of young women in the H&T sector and the multiple barriers that prevent their entry, progression and enjoyment of benefits, but most importantly the interviews have shown the sheer amount of investment, engagement and time needed to comprehensively and sustainably address said barriers.

What emerged is that inclusive and accessible vocational and life skill training is a fundamental first step to future empowerment of young women entering the H&T industry. With skills mismatch and a serious lack of relevant skills training and certification in the region<sup>(1)</sup>, vocational skill training greatly empowers women by increasing their value to prospective employers, particularly employers in high-end hotels and restaurants. Being armed with a training certificate accredited nationally or internationally and acknowledged by hoteliers, H&T associations, or even European chefs, helps young women from marginalized backgrounds to approach the labor market with greater value and thus helps shift the balance of power between employee and employer. Such graduates are able to choose their employer with greater freedom and seek higher average salaries and, as such, have greater agency and independence in shaping their careers.

The excellent and necessary work of these non-profit training schools does however highlight the extent to which NGOs fill in several gaps left by either the state or businesses in their responsibilities to provide quality and inclusive education, training, gender responsive human resources policies, safe working spaces and effective labor governance. As described by several participants, with their training schools and alumni networks, stepping in to fulfil several roles, businesses are less incentivized

to fulfill their duties for gender equality or decent work. Essentially it is difficult to convince businesses to invest in initiatives which are currently provided for “free” by the non-profit sector.

As all the interviewees emphasized, the socio-cultural factors represent significant inhibitors for young women’s genuine inclusion and empowerment in the sector. Families and communities in rural areas in particular are resistant to young women enrolling in training programs to work in urban hospitality and tourism; it takes a concerted and collaborative effort to raise awareness with these families on what the H&T sector actually entails and how it can be empowering for women. In addition to enacting policies to support women within their operations, businesses should also provide greater financing support for the sustainability of such training programs, the value of the training is clear as companies are guaranteed a highly skilled and locally sourced workforce available.

The example of Inle Heritage provides an inspiring example of a ‘home grown’ social business which places social impact above profit yet has been so far capable of covering costs through self-generated income. It also demonstrates what can be accomplished when social impact and value is prioritized over profit and endless growth, as such social enterprises and SMEs deserve attention in terms of harnessing the inclusive and empowering potential of hospitality and tourism sector for women. At the same time, it can provide a case study resonant with the private sector whereby investing in creating a workspace and culture conducive to women’s empowerment leads to genuine returns and benefits. It should also be noted that such SMEs are naturally very vulnerable to economic shocks, such as COVID-19 and as such require support and favorable policy conditions from their national governments in order to be truly sustainable.

While each one of the schools interviewed demonstrate the extent to which hospitality and tourism can truly provide a vehicle for social mobility, economic empowerment and inclusion for women, the question remains whether there is a business case or potential return on investment for private sector actors to invest in substantive policies which genuinely ensure decent work and empowerment for women.



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