Scientific Paper

Women chefs’ experience: Kitchen barriers and success factors

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ABSTRACT

Despite the numerous examples and testimonies in the Internet, few researches are made on challenges and success factors for women chefs. This study aims to identify the barriers women face and how they succeeded to achieve the chefs’ position. It also evaluates the entrepreneurial path, its motives, and the advantages it offers to them. The authors selected a qualitative approach. They organized a couple of structured interviews and two focus group sessions with eight entrepreneurial women chefs who shared and discussed their experiences and their points of view, based on pre-selected topics. From their perspective, women’s main barriers are: masculinity, gender perceptions to their skills and capabilities, and work-life balance. To face them, they had to be resilient, to keep learning, and to prove their competence. They also worked on acquiring management and leadership skills and were completely dedicated to their careers at the expense of family and social life. Those who aimed for better balance moved to other niches of the profession or followed the entrepreneurial path. The latter, offered them better time management flexibility and opportunities for professional evolution. Studying women in management position in this Haute Cuisine field is particularly interesting because of the dichotomy of the cooking task, considered female in the domestic sphere and male in the professional one. This article provides a basement for later qualitative and quantitative research in order to research gender barriers and success factors for women to leadership positions.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s context, researchers are increasingly stressing on the importance of gender variables and the feminine approach in social sciences. Hurley (1999) emphasizes that considering gender relations and building new organizational theories that are not male dominated could ‘produce changes at societal level’ (1999). She argues that early studies of entrepreneurship during the nineteenth century were mainly about men and that it is necessary to include case studies of women. Orser and Leck (2010) add that ‘both personal- and organizational-level factors influence success outcomes’ and insist on the need to examine ‘gender as a moderating variable’ of these outcomes.

Due to the gender unequal distribution of jobs in certain occupations and in decision-making positions, many authors claim that promotion criteria are gender sensitive. Starting from the fact that men benefit of ‘higher wages and faster promotions’, Eagly and Carli (2007) found that women have less record of experiences in higher hierarchical levels, that there is a ‘resistance to women leadership’, and that there is an issue of leadership style for them. In addition, women face more difficulties managing work-life balance and they under invest in social capital.

In this research, we selected ‘Haute Cuisine’, a domestically female field (Meah and Jackson, 2012; Supski, 2011) but historically a male professional domain, and we have searched the rationales behind the low number of women chefs as well as how they were able to achieve the chef position. We found that the academic record on this situation is rather scarce though there are numerous examples and testimonies in the Internet. We adopted a feminine approach and we assessed the gender variables that could stand behind it. The paper will be structured in three parts. First we will proceed with a short literature review, second we will expose the findings of the interview and the focus group studies and, finally, we will discuss the different findings and present our main conclusions.

STATE OF THE ART

As it has been mentioned there are certain scarcity of literature concerning women discrimination in ‘Haute cuisine’. However, we will discuss in this section what academic literature offers in this respect.

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Workplace experience and needed skills

In ‘Haute Cuisine’ like in any men dominated field, women face the challenge of being an outsider who has to ‘fit in homogenous work environments’ (Harris and Giu, 2015). According to Harris and Giu (2015), women chefs are ‘encouraged to lean in at work and to find ways to fit within current occupational arrangements’. They are also required to demonstrate their physical and mental strength by adhering to workplace work rules and culture such as ‘working long hours’, ‘refusing help’, ‘learning to avoid any forms of feminine emotional displays’, and proving that ‘they will not be disruptive to the masculine culture’.

While these integration strategies may be valid for ‘a percentage of women at work’, they remain a restricting factor to others and they reproduce the established masculinity and gender inequality, very powerful in male-typed environments in general (Harris and Giu, 2015). Interestingly, these criteria have been characterized as none ‘sufficient’ without ‘willingness to take risks’ and the ability to ‘size opportunities’ (Bartholomew and Garey, 1996).

Elite women chefs reported that in order to achieve success in the culinary field it is important to be dedicated and committed, to sacrifice, to have a passion for food, to have a mentor, to be ambitious, and to be focused (Bartholomew and Garey, 1996). Interestingly, these criteria have been characterized as none ‘sufficient’ without ‘willingness to take risks’ and the ability to ‘size opportunities’ (Bartholomew and Garey, 1996).

Leadership and mentoring

Many studies showed that women and men are associated to different traits and that male traits are more linked to leadership requirements. Different perceptions and stereotypes about gender roles and expectations were much behind it. Men for example perceived themselves as better political leaders and business executives (Kiser, 2015).

According to Heilman and Haynes (2005), gender stereotypes consider women as ‘caring’, ‘relationship-oriented’, ‘not forceful’, and ‘not achievement-oriented’. As a result they are perceived as ‘deficient’ in male typed tasks, which impacted their performance expectation and evaluation. Women skills are also considered more suitable for ‘lower level jobs’ (Burgess, 2003).

In another study run by Eagly and Carli (2007), they found that ‘female leaders were somewhat more transformational than male leaders especially when it comes to giving support and encouragement to subordinates. They also engaged more in the rewarding behaviours’. On the other hand, men were more transactional as leaders who took ‘corrective and disciplinary actions that are either active or passive’ (Eagly and Carli, 2007). However, they argued that the transformational style is more effective challenging leadership effectiveness stereotype (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Tins et al., 2011).

In the ‘Haute Cuisine’ field, women chefs have to ‘acknowledge their differences and to find ways to capitalize on their strength as chefs and potential leaders’. Acting like a man, can bring them criticism and query of authenticity (Harris and Giu, 2015). Even though they occupy a leadership role and they match the ideals of the best worker, women chefs still can face ‘scrutiny to their performance’ and could be discriminated because of their ‘gender skill’ (Harris and Giu, 2015). That’s why some female chefs chose to ‘cultivate their female traits’ and to challenge the shared stereotypes about women not being ‘strong’ or ‘tough’ as leaders. Their response was to ‘focus on consensus building’ and ‘nurturing of staff’ instead of reproducing the ‘confrontational and bullying behaviours’ (Williams Christine and Dellinger, 2010). As a result, they were more successful creating and utilizing ‘their own management style’ (Bartholomew and Garey, 1996). Drawing on other success strategies for women in management positions, we found that in hospitality industry, women had to be ‘very diplomatic and tough to succeed’. They also had to create consensus between ‘personal’ and ‘occupational identity’ and to manage their ‘sex’, ‘gender’, and ‘authority roles’ (Purcell, 1996). Leadership as a result has different complexities and subtleties for women, much of them are informal. How can aspiring female leaders learn about them?

Mentoring could be in this context very important for women to advance in the hierarchy in the restaurant workplace (Harris and Giu, 2015). It is considered as ‘vital’ and ‘constructive’ to help women cope and adapt in male dominated occupation (Martin and Bernard, 2013). Women chefs could contribute to challenging the ‘gender dynamic of the gastronomic field’ by mentoring other female chefs or cooks (Harris and Giu, 2015). In the same extent, mentors could play an important role in facing gender inequality by introducing mentees to new contacts from the work place and outside of it. They can share with them the ‘informal ropes about norms, roles, relationships and subcultures’ as well as facilitating their access to ‘relatively closed networks’ (Harris and Giu, 2015). Ibarra et al. (2010) attempted for example to identify why men are more promoted to higher senior position then women and they focused on mentoring programs that were implemented to close the gap. They found that although women were more involved in mentoring activities, they

Barriers and facilitators

In the ‘Haute Cuisine’ field, women chefs face various barriers to evolve to the position of a chef and they have a lot of difficulty balancing work and family, which becomes even harder in Michelin starred restaurants (Bartholomew and Garey, 1996; O Brien, 2010). By overcoming challenges, being successful, and reaching public recognition and achievement, women in men dominated occupation are assured about their skills, stay motivated and remain in their jobs facing the different obstacles (Martin and Bernard, 2013).

Women chefs are bended by household responsibilities and had to accommodate their personal and professional choices by ‘delaying childbearing’, ‘leaving the kitchen work’ or ‘adapting either work or family to make the two roles compatible’ (Harris and Giu, 2010; Bartholomew and Garey, 1996). In order to encourage more women into the profession, additional social policies should be adapted in both kitchen workplace and governmental levels to help both men and women cope with the demands of the profession and their families (Guerrina, 2002; Harris and Giu, 2015). Based on the findings of Glauber (2011) who pointed out that flexibility in gender-mixed work environments is better achieved than in ‘male- or female-dominated field’, an increased women presence in the restaurant’s kitchen would impulse more rational work time schedules. Finally, ‘traditional beliefs about the different family roles’ should be challenged in order to achieve improved allocation of household tasks, enhanced work-life balance and as a consequence ‘happier union’ (Harris and Giu, 2015).

Promotion is also an important factor female chefs can get advantage of in order to increase their visibility and to ‘promote their work’ (Harris and Giu, 2015). At the macro level, media could boost women chefs’ notoriety and recognition, which can come also from other ‘agents on the culinary field such as James Beard Foundation’ or the Michelin Guide (Bartholomew and Garey, 1996; Harris and Giu, 2015). This is typical of more advanced gender culture such as in the USA with the best chef female awards (Childers and Kryza, 2015).

At the individual level, according to Eagly and Carli (2007), self-promotion could impact negatively women to leadership positions. Starting form an earlier conclusion that women are in general linked to ‘communal qualities’ and that men are linked to ‘agentic qualities’, they argue that self-promotion is not ‘communal’ and that women are expected to show modesty. As a result men and women cannot promote themselves the same way. ‘While men can use bluster to get themselves noticed’, women cannot although ‘it can convey status and competence’. This may join the masculinity culture shared in the kitchen. Women as a result should make their work more visible and take credit for it (Heilman and Haynes, 2005).
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