# Attracting and retaining female chefs

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The chef profession is considered a challenging career, with female chefs seeming to be most affected. As such, it is rare to find female chefs occupying the coveted executive chef positions. The aim of this research was to establish if female chefs in Kenya encounter similar challenges to those experienced by female chefs elsewhere.

Previous research shows that female chefs encounter career challenges in hospitality organisations and hence they struggle to make it as chefs; for example, studies by Druckman [1] and Harris and Giuffre [2,3] in the United States, Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons [4] in the United Kingdom, as well as Zengeni et al. [5] in Zimbabwe. This article poses the important question: how can these challenges be overcome?

The study sought to make sense of the lived work experiences of Kenyan female chefs. Baum [6] recommends contextualised research methodologies to explore hospitality issues in non-Western countries. Moreover, Adelowo [7] asserts that lived experiences are better expressed through stories. Therefore, a qualitative approach was employed in this study where 15 chefs working in the Kenyan hospitality industry were interviewed [8]. Ten female chefs told stories of their workplace experiences while five male executive chefs recounted their experiences of working with female chefs.

Despite the different geographical, socio-cultural and economic factors between Kenya and other countries previously studied, female chefs expressed common challenges such as sexual harassment, gender discrimination, unsupportive attitudes towards pregnancy and an unhealthy work environment, as well as hierarchical kitchen structures that they believed discriminated against them. There was an indication of engrained patriarchal attitudes that limit the professional success of potential female chefs. Unfortunately, hospitality employers appeared to support the status quo; that is, a gendering of the chef's profession that privileges men and penalises women.

These findings suggest a trend that must worry hospitality employers. The highly competitive career structures and the male domination that discourages women from making a long-term career in the kitchen [2], coupled with stiff competition for scarce hospitality human resources, support the need to retain female chefs. Christensen and Rog [9] stress that employee retention strategies will only work if human resource managers are fully committed to creating a positive workplace culture that treats all employees equally, regardless of their gender or any other dimension of diversity.

In his study, Orido [8] suggests that the following measures may help to attract and retain female chefs. Firstly, employers should introduce personalised career

development plans. For instance, a female chef who has attained postgraduate qualifications ought to be promoted and remunerated accordingly. This will not only retain female chefs but also enable them to further their career aspirations within the hospitality industry. Secondly, female chefs should be given the opportunity to fully participate at all levels of the kitchen hierarchy, thereby acquiring the necessary skills for promotion in the future to executive chef's positions. Additionally, it will encourage a clear career progression path within the kitchen hierarchy.

Hospitality employers must ensure that employment opportunities as well as employment terms and career progression are not dependant on a chef's gender, but on their qualifications and competencies. By investing in female chefs and, most importantly, keeping them safe from bullying at work, the hospitality industry will not only attract, but retain, these talented professionals in satisfying culinary careers.

If you would like to read the PhD thesis this research is based on you can access it here: http://hdl.handle.net/10292/10626

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