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Quality of Work and Sustainable Hospitality Human Resources Management

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Abstract

The hospitality industry has three persistent problems: the challenge of providing decent work, a toxic workplace and thirdly, the inability to retain good employees. These challenges not only affect women chefs and their multiple life roles and responsibilities, but all hospitality employees alike. This study aimed to develop and evaluate strategies to transform the future hospitality workplace. A constructivist grounded theory methodology was employed, collecting data from three sets: electronic diaries and in-depth interviews with women chefs, to formulate strategies. The Delphi Technique was used to determine the feasibility and desirability of 52 strategies. These strategies were sent to hospitality management experts. The findings highlighted that organisations need to be more employee-centric as good employees are a competitive advantage. Secondly, organisations need to actively engage in DEI and belonging. There is a call for consequences of employee misbehaviour and promoting self-care by acknowledging work-person-life balance.

Keywords: Quality of work; DEI, work-life balance; microaggression; discrimination; hospitality

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Introduction

This report only scratches the surface of the challenges and complexities experienced by hospitality employees, but globally, there are millions of hospitality employees who love their jobs. The industry works non-standard hours, is physically demanding and experiences a poor reputation as an industry but is also considered an entry workplace for women, the youth and migrant workers (Castro, 2024). There has been a marked increase of women in hospitality, but few are in management positions (Russen et al., 2021). Many of them are still found doing jobs classified as 'women's work', for instance, housekeeping, food and beverage servers, cleaners or at reception. These are also considered low-status jobs and are often seasonal or low paying (Kokkranikal et al., 2024). There is a reluctant acknowledgement that woman have both paid and non-paid work, with multiple responsibilities, not only to their families but also to the elderly and their communities (Risman & Fleming, 2022). As a ripple effect, questions on how she achieves a satisfactory work-life balance (WLB) and adequate self-care, are asked (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Huang & Tsai, 2024). The verbal abuse from customers and managers is regularly reported and often the victims are women and minority groups. Perhaps if we resolve some of these challenges or as some authors label them wicked problems (Baum et al., 2024), then we can facilitate adaptations of future work culture by improving employee well-being and reducing turnover. There is a lot of literature about retention within hospitality (Dagsland et al., 2024) but perhaps we need to fix the working environment (Baum et al., 2020; Castro, 2024; Giousmpasoglou, 2024; Huang & Tsai, 2024) which requires us to relook how the industry does quality of work to move towards achieving more sustainable hospitality human resources in general. Therefore, this paper interrogates how the quality of work and sustainable hospitality human resources management can be improved to achieve adequate flexibility to assist hospitality employees to achieve better WLB and greater job satisfaction.

Literature review

The concept of quality of work and sustainable hospitality human resource management

The hospitality industry has always been a difficult industry to work in, but current South African legislation is focused on improving diversity, equity and inclusion, which has allowed women and minority groups, to progress into management positions but this has been slow. The industry has many passionate employees, but there is trouble with retention. Quality of work (QoW) has been a discussion point for a while. In the 1960s, there was a drive to create more jobs to reduce unemployment and then closer to the 2000s, there was a focus on job quality. QoW is a multifaceted concept which is defined as a measure of employee satisfaction, wellness and support. An aspect of QoW is providing job security which helps develop a trust between both employee and employer. Job enrichment allows the employee to continue to grow and develop, preparing for more responsibility and assisting to improve skill. These development opportunities allow for career growth, which contributes positively and negatively to aspects of QoW (Agboola & Yotsumoto, 2024). Open communication is necessary between the employee and the employer so that each are heard but also opinions are appreciated and acknowledged. This then leads to greater employee participation both as a team member and as a co-creator in competitive innovations and in decision making (De Bustillo Llorente & Macias, 2005; Saraji & Dargahi, 2006; Xu et al., 2022). There has been a marked increase in work-from-home post-COVID-19, but this is not possible in hospitality and workers are subsequently asking if there could then be more flexibility in work times so that other life responsibilities can be attended to. Lastly, careful consideration of reward and recognition should be taken to ensure fair, deserving and transparent allocation. In 2025, we are attempting to strategise towards

sustainable hospitality human resource management (SHHRM). It is a broader concept and has benefits to both employer and employee. For the employee, this includes a liveable wage with promotional and growth opportunities. The work environment is considered conducive to maintaining physical, emotional and psychological well-being. These aspects would be considered as contributing to an improved quality of life and greater life satisfaction. For the employer, there would be an overall boost to the hospitality industries' overall competitiveness due to employees delivering service excellence, with agility to adjust to changing market trends and customer demands.

Workplace environments

Workplace culture refers to how diverse teams can work together, respecting each other's generational, religious and ethnic differences, able to work in constructive teams and promote equity willingly (Dawson et al., 2023). The acknowledgement of differences, highlighting their strength and problem-solving capabilities, is of vital importance to the sustainability of any organisation. An organisation that resists diversity, indirectly encourages bullying, sexually deviant behaviour, verbal abuse and discrimination (Gvion & Leedon, 2019; Jenkins et al., 2018). Burrow et al. (2024) explain that the suffering endured in the kitchen is a global characteristic of the industry's identity, deriving an understanding of who the chefs are. Although the hierarchy in the kitchen and F&B has always been a part of maintaining discipline, the present employees are looking for a much flatter structure, indicating that working with other chefs during a busy time encourages teamwork (Jung et al., 2023). A positive teamwork experience is felt when each member of the team has a sense of belonging, resulting in greater productivity (Hossain et al., 2021; Mooney, 2020). This means that the individual feels acknowledged and that they can work, contribute and grow with fellow members encouragement (Du Toit-Britz, 2022). For the organisation, this means that the individual can work autonomously, functioning positively within the group and aims to improve productivity individually and within the group. The benefits of having diversity within the workplace are well documented but there needs to be equity and inclusivity also practised, with greater financial rewards (Russen et al., 2021). The concept of inclusion has become part of the strategic advantage of an organisation. The successful diversity, equity and inclusivity (DEI) programmes that are implemented into the organisation, requires a certain flexibility to satisfy the needs of the varying persons in the organisation. The benefit of this success creates a workplace that is free from bias, stereotypical thinking and discrimination. Such workplaces celebrate differences and value the inputs of all employees to make decisions that will create more flexible and resilient organisations (Gvion & Leedon, 2019) and move the organisation forward into the future.

Hospitality employee retention

The quest for sustainable hospitality human resource management is beneficial to both the organisation and the individual employee. The organisation benefits from employees who are productive and deliver service excellence. They are also agile, with the confidence that they can decide and that management will support them. This agility allows the employees to adjust to changing market trends and customer expectations. This in turn boosts the hospitality organisations; regardless of size, capacity or financial stability to remain competitive. For the employee, the benefits are a liveable wage, promotional and growth opportunities, a conducive work environment with flexibility that encourages a work-life balance and satisfactory quality of life. Ghani et al. (2022) conclude that employee retention is dependent on employee satisfaction, which includes open communication, favourable workplace environment and possible growth. In summary, there is a link between employee performance, employee satisfaction, guest satisfaction and service quality. An employee who feels valued will perform better and interacts more positively with guests. The resultant data identified areas that challenge current non-compliance of QoW principles and contravene sustainable hospitality human resources management (SHHRM).

Methodology

This exploratory constructivist grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Seyfi & Hall, 2022) collected three sets of data. The interviews and electronic diaries were collected from women chefs, with a minimum of two years of kitchen experience in South Africa. The Delphi Technique questionnaire (Heuzenroeder et al., 2022; Ponting & Billette, 2023) was distributed to managers within the hospitality industry, to determine feasibility and desirability to implement transformative strategies. All data was loaded, coded and analysed using Atlas.ti. This thematic analysis confirmed aspects of quality of work and characteristics of decent work. The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of work-person-life balance (WPLB) of women chefs in the hospitality industry, but the interconnectedness of the QoW and decent work theme speaks for all hospitality employees. The terms of credibility and trustworthiness suggest that the findings are convincing enough to be considered worthwhile. The model of trustworthiness (Guba, 1981) and the work of Krefting (1991) were used to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Ethical clearance was granted by the institution. No data was collected from participants younger than 18 years old, from vulnerable groups and identities have been protected.

Demographic information of participants

The inclusion criteria for the sample were women chefs with a minimum of two years of hotel experience. Six in-depth interviews were conducted, and 13 electronic diary participants were maintained for a period between four and 12 weeks. After analyses of these two data sets, strategies were developed and distributed to a Delphi panel of hospitality experts. These experts were required to indicate whether the strategies were feasible and desirable. Table 1 details the demographic information of all the participants, including length of service and positions held by participants in the hospitality industry. These three data sources provided a rich and nuanced view of working in hospitality, and particularly in the kitchen. Open-ended questions do

not restrict answers and are useful in exposing additional ideas (Roestenburg, 2021), which are essential in constructivist grounded theory, and were asked in all three data sources. The Delphi panel included both men and women, in varying management roles, so these questions provided the panellists an opportunity to comment as they needed. The questions were open and not restricted to the themes. Regardless of the discipline in which the Delphi technique takes place, the method allows for the confirmation, the feasibility and desirability of strategies because of the consensus that is reached. The reliability is afforded because of the uninfluenced participation and anonymity of the industry experts (Day & Bobeva, 2005).

Table 1: Summary of the data sets (researcher's own)

	Interview Participants	Electronic diary (ED) participants	Delphi Panelists
Number of Participants	6	13	35
Gender and jobs	Women chefs	Women chefs	Hospitality experts
Experience	One chef had between 10 and 15 years of experience and the other five participants had more than 15 years of experience.	Five participants had less than 5 years of experience, 6 had between 5 and 10 years, 1 had between 10 and 20 years, and lastly, 1 had more than 20 years.	The panelists had an average of 21 years, with the minimum being three years and the maximum 51 years.
Location	This cannot be determined as these interviews took place using MS Teams. Only one was in-person.	This cannot be determined as the data was collected using WhatsApp with daily questions posed to participants.	Most participants were South Africans (88.5%), with experts from the United Kingdom (8.6%) and lastly 2.9% from the United States
Positions held	Executive chef, Private chef, Education and skills development expert, and Junior sous chef	Executive Chef, Head Chef, Executive Sous Chef, Breakfast/Café chef, Commis chef, Junior Sous Chef, Kitchen manager Private chef, and 3rd year trainee	Human Resources directors and managers, Executive chef / CEO, Academic operational experts, Senior managers in hotels; for instance, Food and Beverage managers or operations managers Directors and General Managers
Other life demands	All participants had either a life partner, children (one or more), an elderly relative, and/or a relative in poor health	All participants had either a life partner, children (one or more), an elderly relative, and/or a relative in poor health	The Delphi panelists were not asked this question
Labelled in reporting as	I1-6	ED1-13	P1-35

Findings and discussion

The data revealed that the employees would like to fulfil their responsibilities as workers and the demands placed on them as family and community members. The nature of grounded theory studies results in the collection of more data, and there is a call to investigate strategies to promote diversity, equity, inclusion and a more intentional sense of belonging, implementing an improved work-person-life balance. These experiences can be used to facilitate adaptations of future work culture by improving employee well-being and reducing turnover. The hospitality industry is plagued by both persistent issues. A summary of findings revealed that putting employees before profits will result in a sustainable future, with employees being able to achieve and prosper in the difficult hospitality industry. The women chefs, especially the executive chefs, opened each discussion with how much they enjoyed their jobs but also how hard they had worked to get to their positions. 'I really love my job so sometimes I wish to be always at work.' (ED9). 'When I resigned from the medical industry, … I just wanted to fulfill my cooking passion' (I3). They agreed that they had missed many family celebrations and parents' evenings but were grateful for their partners' assistance. 'I missed a lot of events and special occasions with friends …Unfortunately, I haven't been good at planning for my personal time but there are two things that are great - date night with my husband and family backyard picnics' (ED7). ED1 noted that she needs 'support from my husband and kids … he contributes very much and is present more than I am'. '[A]nd he used to help me so we we've really worked together as a family.' (I1). These women share how they are happy to give up their day off, to clean, shop and prepare the next couple of meals to reduce their stress when they are back on duty. 'We never had someone help us in our home, cleaning or anything. When I was off, I also would do washing, and they would do the ironing, and I would tell them just clean your rooms when I'm off, I would clean the whole house' (I1). The findings agree with the authors (De Bustillo Llorente & Macias, 2005; Saraji & Dargahi, 2006; Xu et al., 2022) regarding the necessary to interrogate how QoW can be improved, particularly in South Africa. This will not only improve job security but also encourage career growth.

The chefs explained the necessity of the team and how they felt responsible for each member. No kitchen can operate successfully without teamwork, with each person having a function to fulfil and a place in the kitchen. To satisfy the job requirements and for all the work to be completed, the team needs to be organised. 'Basically, with me, it's all about the team. It also depends on how quickly we get work done' (I1). I2 carries through her connections to other departments and managers in the hotel so that they can all strive for the same goals. Developing these relationships to reinforce teamwork between managers. I6 is no longer an executive chef but stated, 'I miss the personal connections that you have with building and developing individuals'. They describe how schedules could be juggled to accommodate and make life fairer and easier for all. '[W]hat I used to do is make sure that my staff are looked after. So, I very seldom had my staff work overtime … very seldom did I have staff members who work more than 8 hours a day ... [or] people who had to do split shifts or double shifts or things like that. And the minute you started valuing other people's time and their rest periods … my life in kitchens became very easy' (I6). 'This is my fourth day doing a split shift, started at 6 am took a break at 10 am, I came back at 4 pm then knocking off at 11' (ED4). 'Giving me two consecutive days off instead of split or one day off. And I would appreciate a weekend off or 2 a month' (ED11). The chefs expressed a concern for the fairness of the scheduling and highlighted that the shifts and weekend work was unavoidable but expressed a desire to schedule it more fairly. This confirms work shared in the literature review where authors described a flatter hierarchy, to encourage teamwork (Jung et al., 2023), flexibility (Gvion & Leedon, 2019) and autonomy, aspects all intertwined resulting in job satisfaction (Bouzari & Karatepe, 2020).

The chefs expressed a willingness to learn and grow but felt that mentoring for future promotions was limited. 'Keep learning and growing, caring about guests, putting people first' (ED6). 'I was my only responsibility, and I had a high drive, I wanted to be an executive chef … when you stay at work, you get to learn more, so I think you also benefit from it' (I4). 'It all comes down to learning... for perfecting your skill' (I3). 'I had a black book in my pocket, and I used to write everything down, and I always told myself they might be thinking that they are punishing me … but they are training me. I was learning' (I1). In the hospitality industry, there is a leaning towards a more employee-centric and considerate environment, not only to address retention, but also happier employees are more productive (Barkhuizen et al., 2022:8; Russen et al., 2021:4). Although the participants focused on aspects of decent work, this has a consequence on WLB because the employee feels valued and taken care of and will therefore experience less stress. The emphasis on relooking shifts, schedules and improving productivity within the work hours allows for the chef to enjoy or relax more when they are off duty. The three persistent themes that emerged were fair-work practices, flexibility and employee-centricity. An interesting 'conversation' develops in the responses because the participants indicated that more skill would result in greater productivity. 'Employment of skilled hospitality professional' (P8) and '… enough capable team members …' (P9). Another participant suggested '… effective planning of time while at work' (P7) may result in reduced additional hours. Others suggested that there should just be more chefs employed, but this has significant financial implications. 'Increased staff complement to allow some time off over weekends/family times' (P15) and 'appropriate staffing level so everyone can ensure their functional job duties are completed on time' (P16). Scheduling is a recurring comment as shifts and weekend work have presented a challenge for many years because it has an impact on family time. 'Compressed work weeks, maybe relook scheduling to allow for balance' (P4) and 'improvement to scheduling' (P13). Participant 3 calls for 'companies actually have to start caring for staff and not just saying that they do'. In many of these responses, a shift in thinking about all hospitality employees is acknowledged because of the nature of hospitality work. 'The difficulty is the nature of the industry - work is busiest during the times that 'balance' is found in life.' (P30)

As mentioned earlier, a couple of participants indicated that adequate staff numbers would contribute to a less stressful environment but also adherence to schedules, allowing employees to balance their lives better. 'I think a smarter and more empathetic approach to staffing and rostering is a change that may have the most impact; however this comes with cost implications.' (P30). 'Purely sticking to the hours and schedules, as well as working a fair and lawful number of hours per week' (P25). Beyond scheduling, there is also mention of double and split shifts. Reduction of double and split shifts by careful rostering of staff, ensure all staff have equal rest days and promote that those off days are respected and adhered to, understanding and support of single parents, staff who care for their elderly family members, initiating support in these instances, actively work against discrimination of these groups (P26). 'Adjust Work Schedules: Transition from a six-day workweek to a four-day workweek, allowing employees to spend three days with their families' (P81). For quality of work practices, there should be fairness across all hospitality divisions, departments and positions for better motivation. 'Fair promotion and career pathways to encourage development and motivate staff' (P13). One participant suggested that prices should be increased so that employees get paid more. '… charge client base higher price[s] and increase salaries' (P5). P23, 24 and 25 refer to increased and equal pay. '… getting paid fairly, being paid for overtime is also a necessity' (P25). 'Implement policies to ensure equal compensation across all genders' (P81).

Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging are all mentioned. Unfortunately, in most cases this indicates that attention needs to be paid to these areas which agrees with most of the authors in the literature review (Burrow et al. 2024; Dagsland et al., 2024; Gvion & Leedon, 2019; Jenkins et al., 2018; Kokkranikal et al., 2024). Castro (2024) highlighted the need for gender inclusion and equality, especially in leadership, where there is a noticeable gap. 'Create better working environments' (P5). 'Implement SOPs [standard operating procedures] that instil fair and ethical work practices' (P92) or 'enhance working conditions. Improve the working conditions in our kitchens to be more inclusive and welcoming, particularly for women and minority groups. Foster a work culture that values everyone's input in kitchen operations' (P81). 'Ensuring that there is diversity in leadership so that the decision makers also understand the challenges that different employees face' (P57). One participant mentioned that 'over the past few years, there definitely has already been a substantial shift in a better balance' (P22). There are a couple of mentions about wellness and wellness programmes. 'In addition, support and education around stress management, as well as health and wellness, are an incredibly important component in helping support work/life balance' (P30). 'Introduction of employee wellness programmes' (P48). 'Promote health and wellness: Strengthen our wellness and health programs to better support our staff's well-being.' (P81). 'Mental health awareness and awareness around general behaviours and words which are masked as 'industry jargon' (P94). But need to be revealed for what they are. In closing, P90 summed up similar thoughts of several of the participants, 'It is incredibly important for businesses in the hospitality industry to start considering and implementing meaningful health and wellness solutions for employees. The nature of the industry is not going to change, but the nature of the organisations within it, absolutely can.' This would contribute to improved retention in the industry (Ghani et al., 2022). Interestingly, if all the comments are considered, there is a growing awareness of the inconsistencies experienced by hospitality employees, with an acceptance of 'things the way they are' (I2) but a growing urgency for transformative action.

The data revealed that the employees would like to fulfill their responsibilities as workers and the demands placed on them as family and community members. There is a call to investigate strategies to promote diversity, equity, inclusion and a more intentional sense of belonging, purposefulness, and implement an improved work-person-life balance. These strategies aim to improve employee satisfaction, wellness and support. Transformative actions are required to encourage career longevity in the hospitality industry.

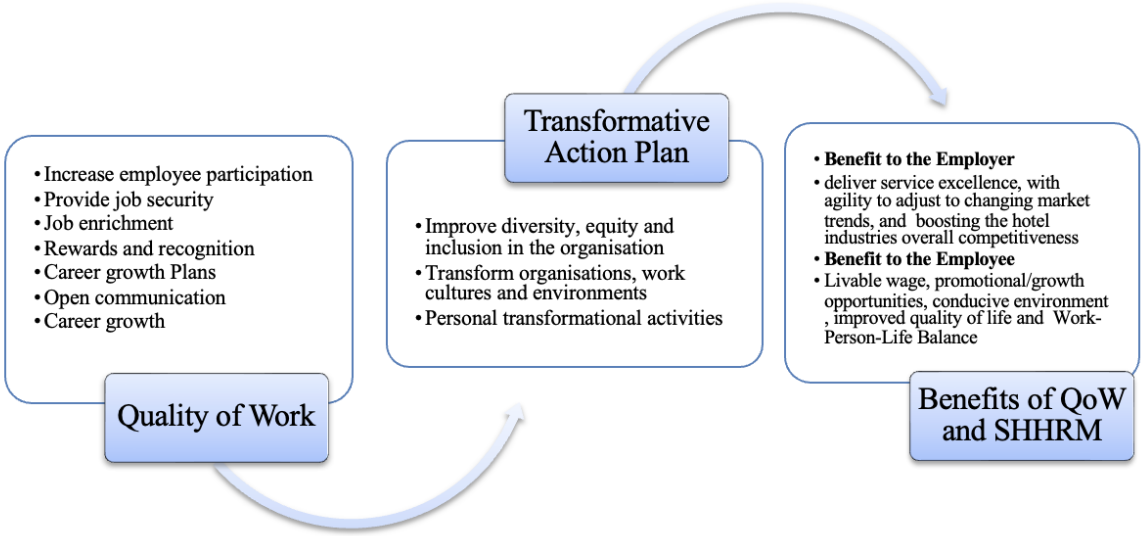

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of findings

Recommendations and implications for management

The analysis presented a comprehensive list of aspects that need to be addressed within the hospitality workplace, like fairness with regards to pay, shifts and weekend work allocations. Implementation success will depend on the organisational culture, leadership commitment, and willingness to make structural changes. In addition, ongoing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are necessary to assess the effectiveness of these strategies and make further adjustments as needed. It was disappointing that industry experts highlight those strategies that are desirable but far fewer are considered feasible. There are too many varying establishments, all differing in size and complexity, with differing business models, facilities and service offerings available that so reaching consensus at this point was not achievable. Governmental policies in different countries will assist in initiating and protecting the hospitality workers if they deem it necessary. Regardless, organisations can actively initiate changes following this action plan for transformation.

- Transformative action 1: Improve diversity, equity and inclusion in the organisation - Provide training to highlight gender-, generational- and personality differences to improve tolerance in the team. Introduce emotional intelligence workshops to improve communication between team members and management, to develop stronger and more cooperative relationships. Revisit all company policies and procedures for bullying, intimidation and humiliation of all workers, not only women and other minority groups. Encourage empathy amongst team members.
- Transformative action 2: Transform organisations, work cultures and environments - Investigate all jobs so that they can be well-defined, incorporating some flexibility and autonomy of tasks, especially those that are repetitive. Workloads, shift schedules, off days and weekend work should be carefully analysed so shifts are evenly distributed. Respectful interactions between all employees, team members and management should be encouraged. Safety and security, both internally and externally, should be adequately considered for all employees.
- Transformative action 3: Personal transformational activities -Employees should be encouraged to use their voice, sharing without consequent victimisation, their concerns, thoughts and possible solutions to various employee issues. This will result in the purposeful development of supportive relationships. Encourage self-evaluation to identify stressors so to promote more effective self-care activities. Effectively conducting performance appraisals to identify career goals and aspirations, to identify the support structures, training and development that could provide value. Interrogate why there is a continued intention to leave and respond with career crafting so that the training and development are in line with expectations. Develop comprehensive mentoring programmes at all levels and in line with career aspirations.

In summary, the practical contributions of the study are that a list of strategies has been formulated, and the various organisations should systematically work through them and make the necessary changes. Not all of them can be addressed immediately, but adaptations can start to take place. The theoretical contribution of such a study not only confirms what a lot of literature is already leaning towards but also provides a nuanced view of hospitality human resources and, particularly, of chefs' working environment in South Africa. Regarding policy contributions, the policies need to be re-examined to encourage fairer and more equitable workload distribution, as well as policies around fair pay and equal promotional opportunities.

Conclusion

Happy employees do great work.

The critical need for hospitality organisations to reassess their human resource policies and practices in response to persistent challenges such as work-life imbalance and work-family conflict has been stressed by several authors over the years (Baum et al., 2024; Blomme et al., 2010; Chang & Busser, 2019; Giousmpasoglou, 2024). These issues, often rooted in extended working

hours, detrimental management approaches, and physically demanding labour, continue to affect the sector. Despite ongoing discourse, the hospitality industry remains in need of transformative human resource strategies aimed at enhancing employee engagement, productivity, and retention. This study identified three central themes: the significance of a woman chef's professional role, her personal identity, and her broader life responsibilities. These dimensions were examined in relation to their interdependence and the balance required for sustainable career development. Based on these themes, targeted strategies were formulated through the identification of specific objectives and corresponding actions. These strategies were subsequently presented to industry experts with the intention of fostering empowerment among both women chefs and managerial staff. The anticipated outcomes include improved communication, enhanced teamwork, and increased job satisfaction; factors that are instrumental in achieving organisational and managerial objectives. The resulting recommendations encompass both individual agency and institutional policy reform. Although the primary focus of the study was to improve the work-person-life balance of women chefs, the findings offer broader implications for the hospitality industry, suggesting that systemic improvements in quality of work and transformative changes to move towards a more sustainable hospitality human resource management would benefit all employers and employees. No research is without its limitations, especially for qualitative research that is time-bound. Globally, the hospitality industry was negatively affected by COVID-19, and this led to a reluctance to contribute to the study. Although the data collected was rich and nuanced, some would consider the populations too small. A persistent concern with interviews is that the participants may not be truthful. However, the use of three data tools allowed confirmation and agreement between the data sets. Moreover, the joy of research is that when one question has been answered or an investigation is considered complete, new questions or studies emerge. Even with a topic such as this, the macro- and micro geopolitical and socioeconomic changes that have emerged over the last decade or two have resulted in the necessity to re-examine concepts like work-life balance, quality of work, decent work and sustainable human resource management. Conversely, aspects of work-family conflict, well-being and toxic work environments need to be revisited too. This study occurred specifically in the hospitality sector so further research could be to compare employment in organisations that operate during standard working times. Large hotel groups can implement the above-mentioned strategies far easier than small hospitality establishments because of resource allocation. A comparison between large and small establishments could be investigated further. This too can therefore aspects of quality of work in varying departments in the hotels could be analysed to understand which has greater demands and strategies to balance these better.

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