



ENGAGE

March-April 2025 | Volume 5 | Issue 2



Bold & Empowering

Women leaders across the hospitality spectrum are driving change with resilience, empathy and strategy



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From the President's Desk



KB Kachru
President, Hotel Association of India
Chairman - South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group

This issue of HAI Engage is special—not just for the stories it tells, but for the voices it amplifies. As we turn the spotlight on women in Indian hospitality, we do so with both pride and purpose. The industry has long benefited from the passion, resilience, and innovation women bring to the table—yet their contributions often remain under-recognised and under-represented, especially in leadership roles.

The latest report from the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) reveals that women accounted for nearly 40% of the global tourism workforce in 2019, with Hospitality as the largest employer. In India, however, the figures paint a more sobering picture: the country ranks among the lowest in female participation in the Travel and Tourism sector, alongside Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Only 10% of CEOs and 15% of senior management positions in Indian hospitality are held by women, compared to the global average of 25%.

This issue seeks to change the narrative, not just by highlighting the disparity, but by celebrating those who are breaking through barriers. We gathered insights from key hospitality leaders to explore the diverse ways in which women are shaping the future of the Sector.

We also feature initiatives by hospitality chains that are moving beyond tokenism to embrace true inclusion, mentorship, and flexible work environments that help women thrive. Gender inclusiveness is not just a moral imperative—it's a strategic advantage that drives innovation, performance, and growth. In hospitality, embracing diversity creates richer guest experiences and stronger, more resilient teams. As India's tourism sector accelerates its post-pandemic recovery, tapping into the full potential of its female workforce is not optional—it is essential.

We hope this Issue inspires greater awareness, action, and above all, appreciation for the women who help make our industry not just hospitable, but remarkable. **HAI**

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With women driving growth at the grassroots but underrepresented in leadership, the hospitality industry is waking up to the need for change—and committing to a more inclusive future.



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HAI ENGAGES WITH GOA LEADERSHIP



Rohan Khaunte with HAI members including HAI President K.B. Kachru and Secretary General M.P. Bezbaruah.

As part of its outreach to the States, a delegation from the Hotel Association of India (HAI) met with Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant in February, to discuss key issues related to Goa's tourism development. The delegation was led by HAI President K.B. Kachru, and included M.P. Bezbaruah, Secretary General, Nikhil Sharma, Managing Director and Area Senior Vice President for South Asia,

Radisson Hotel Group, Vinay Albuquerque, Director, Alcon Victor Group, and Jack Ajit Sukhija, President, Travel and Tourism Association of Goa.

The discussions covered a wide range of topics, including infrastructure development, policy support, and skill development. The Chief Minister appreciated HAI's commitment to the state and its role in fostering a vibrant tourism and hospitality sector.

The delegation also met Minister for Tourism Rohan Khaunte. Key highlights included re-positioning Goa beyond its beaches by promoting forest trails, treks, adventure tourism, local cuisine, and increasing the share of high-spending tourists. Expanding skilling programs to enhance employability of local youth also emerged as a major area for collaboration.

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Jammu & Kashmir spotlight



The Hotel Association of India (HAI) continues to play a pivotal role in advancing tourism in Jammu & Kashmir. A high-level meeting held recently in New Delhi brought together key stakeholders from the tourism sector—including senior government officials and industry leaders—to chart out strategies for boosting tourism in the region.

HAI President and Chairman, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group, Mr. K.B. Kachru participated in the meeting along with Ms. Yasha Mudgal, Commissioner Secretary, Tourism Department, J&K, and other officials.

Key areas of discussion included sustainable tourism practices, enhanced connectivity, better waste management, and the need for eco-friendly regulations. The meeting reflected a shared vision for the region's growth, with a focus on aligning Budget 2025 provisions with the hospitality sector's developmental goals.

Emphasis was placed on employment generation and economic upliftment, recognising J&K's immense tourism potential as a vital contributor to India's broader regional development agenda.

HAI PAYS TRIBUTE TO ARVIND SINGH MEWAR

The Hotel Association of India (HAI) mourns the passing of Shri Arvind Singh Mewar, a distinguished member of the erstwhile royal family of Mewar and the 76th Custodian of the House of Mewar. He passed away on 16 March, at

the age of 81 after a prolonged illness.

Shri Arvind Singh Mewar's invaluable contributions to tourism, hospitality, and cultural preservation left a lasting impact on the

industry. As Chairman of the HRH Group of Hotels, he played a crucial role in transforming royal properties into renowned heritage destinations, elevating Rajasthan's global tourism appeal.

Expressing his grief, K.B. Kachru, HAI President, said: "His life was a testament to his unwavering dedication towards preserving India's rich cultural heritage and championing noble causes. His remarkable efforts not only safeguarded the legacy of the House of Mewar but also significantly contributed to the growth of heritage tourism in India. His visionary leadership in positioning Udaipur as a premier luxury travel destination will continue to inspire the hospitality sector for years to come. He has left an indelible mark on the hospitality industry."



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HAI Membership & Its Benefits

HAI is the apex body of Indian Hospitality. Its membership is available to all branded hotels and all hotels/hotel projects in India that are recognised / classified by the ministry of tourism, Government of India.

By becoming members, the hotels not only affiliate themselves with the only national body of hotels but also receive several additional benefits & privileges as follows:

- HAI Silver Cards for two nominees per hotel. The Silver Card entitles the holder to discounts on accommodation and food at all HAI member hotels across the country.
 - An access to Industry updates through regular “bulletins”.
- An opportunity to participate as HAI’s nominee in the Hotel & Restaurant Approval and Classification Committee (HRACC) of the ministry of tourism, GoI.
 - Information, data, advisory, consultative representative and research services.
- Attendance at the Annual General Meeting of the Association.
 - Nomination for election in the Executive Committee of the Association.
 - Participation in the Association’s flagship event “Hoteliers Conclave.”

● Legal Services - HAI has taken several legal actions on behalf of the Industry.

● Participation in Seminars, Workshops, etc. organised by HAI or other Associations.

● Featuring in HAI Hotels Directory printed annually and distributed widely.

● HAI ENGAGE - Association Magazine and a leading voice of the Industry for extended outreach.

● HAI LeaderSpeak - Association Newsletter.



HAI Hotels Directory 2025 Released

The HAI Hotels Directory is a one of its kind publication. A window to the wonderful world of HAI member hotels — some of the finest properties in the region and the world. While fulfilling the need for an authentic compendium of member properties, the directory also serves as a useful hotel guide to the discerning traveler both international and domestic, whether travelling for business or for leisure. Its unique design features only one member hotel per page. The 2025 edition has been released, detailing 316 hotels across 106 locations. It is also available on the Association’s website.

<https://hotelassociationofindia.com/pdf/HAI2025.pdf>

HAI invites all professional hotels to provide impetus to the Association’s advocacy efforts by aligning with the Industry Body.

The enrolment process is extremely simple and available on the Association website and the relevant link is https://hotelassociationofindia.com/membership_details.html.

For queries and more details on membership connect with the HAI Secretariat at info@hotelassociationofindia.com



LEADING WITH GRACE AND GRIT

Women leaders across the hospitality spectrum are driving change with resilience, empathy, and strategy—while calling for policies that create truly inclusive, gender-equal workplaces.

Team HAI Engage





The Westin Hyderabad Hitec City

In India's ever-evolving hospitality landscape, women are steadily breaking through long-standing barriers to redefine leadership. From hotel chains and kitchens to wellness retreats and heritage properties, their journeys reflect grit, grace, and an unwavering commitment to excellence. These trailblazers are not just challenging gender norms—they are reshaping the very fabric of the industry. Their voices echo the need for inclusion, empathy, and equity in a people-first business. This lead story brings together diverse perspectives from across the sector, showcasing how women are

creating space, building legacy, and mentoring the next generation of hospitality leaders.

The Westin Hyderabad Hitec City, launched by Chalet Hotels, in partnership with Marriott International has a distinctive identity. This 168-key property is managed and operated by an all-women team, making it the first of its kind not only within the city but also within the brand's portfolio across South Asia. By offering an empowering platform for women, Chalet Hotels aims to challenge traditional norms and foster inclusivity in the hospitality sector. The firm's vision is to create an environment where talented women can excel, break barriers, and take up leadership positions

traditionally dominated by men. "We have been tracking the customer responses from the branch's inception. And the feedback that we get from here is overwhelmingly positive," the hotel management says.

Meanwhile, **Ranju Alex**, Area Vice-President, South Asia for Marriott International, faced the big challenge of breaking stereotypes about women in leadership in an industry that has traditionally been male dominated. Early in her career, she had to work twice as hard to prove her capability. "Instead of letting that deter me, I focused on delivering results, building strong teams, and leading with authenticity," she says. The industry is dynamic and fast-paced, requiring leaders, particularly women, to be resilient. "Strong



“Women leaders benefit from having a keen eye for detail, problem-solving skills, financial acumen, and the confidence to take decisive action in high-pressure situations”

RANJU ALEX
AREA VICE PRESIDENT,
SOUTH ASIA,
MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL

WOMEN FRIENDLY WORKPLACES

Here's a checklist for gender inclusivity.

- Enforce 9-hour working days to maintain a fair work schedule.
- Involve employees in strategic decisions to enhance mental engagement and motivation.
- Strengthen POSH laws.
- Conduct gender bias programmes for men.
- Organise women's sessions for sharing challenges and victories.
- Encourage HR to actively listen and evolve policies based on employee feedback.
- Look at pay parity.
- Give them a seat at the table, involve them in decision making
- Watch for bias and structural barriers during interviews, promotions, selections, etc.
- Invest in mentoring programs.
- Create networking opportunities.
- Create flexibility during the child rearing and bearing years.



emotional intelligence is key, as we are in the business of people, and the ability to build genuine connections with guests, teams, and stakeholders is invaluable. Women leaders also benefit from having a keen eye for detail, problem-solving skills, financial acumen, and the confidence to take decisive action in high-pressure situations. Most importantly, fostering a culture of mentorship and inclusivity helps pave the way for women to thrive in leadership roles," she says. "When we create environments where teams feel valued and empowered, the guest experience naturally elevates. Leadership isn't just about making strategic decisions, it's about inspiring people, embracing change, and building a sustainable, people-first industry," she adds. "Leaders must be held accountable for fostering inclusive environments where everyone can succeed. The ultimate goal is to ensure that diversity isn't just a metric—it's a mindset. By fostering an ecosystem where women are seen, heard, and valued, we pave the way for a stronger, more equitable future for the hospitality industry," she says.

Charanjit Singh, CMD, Le Meridien, New Delhi, points out that while great leaders are not defined by gender, "women often make exceptional leaders due to their emotional

Le MERIDIEN



“Take charge of your growth. Don't believe in the glass ceiling—look at the open sky. There's no shortcut to success, only merit, commitment, and passion”

CHARANJIT SINGH
CMD,
LE MERIDIEN, NEW DELHI



intelligence and collaborative nature.” She adds, “Women in our business will face challenges as women in any business. Many women give up at the start, challenged by the inflexibility of timings and demanding work pressures, but if you manoeuvre this block, you will not miss the million other ‘desirables’ that our industry offers. Women must break the myth of being just caregivers or emotionally weaker. Lead with confidence, display your vision with conviction, and influence with power,” she says.

To truly support women, Singh calls for policies focused on inclusion, family-friendly flexibility, and equal opportunities. From zero-tolerance for harassment to mentorship and skill-building programmes, organisations must create environments where women feel safe, heard, and empowered to lead.

For young women aspiring to leadership, Singh's message is clear, “Take charge of your growth. Don't believe in the glass ceiling—look at the open sky. There is no shortcut to success, only merit, commitment, and passion.” Ultimately, leadership, she says,

“is not just about reaching the corner office, but about opening doors for others and creating a culture of inclusion.

Kamal Kant Pant, Principal & Member Secretary, IHM Pusa, New Delhi, says that recognising the need for specialised development and to fill this critical gap, his institute in collaboration with PHDCCI, may come up with short-duration certification programs for practicing managers, including customised programs designed for women leaders.



“I would suggest to young women joining this industry to approach the sector with confidence and an open mind, leverage their inherent hospitality instincts and work diligently to excel”

KAMAL KANT PANT
PRINCIPAL & MEMBER SECRETARY,
IHM PUSA, NEW DELHI



He points out that institutions play a crucial role in fostering leadership. He further says that industry-academia partnerships are vital for creating a supportive environment for women. These collaborations facilitate practical training and internships, ensuring students gain real-world experience. Moreover, they provide a platform to address and mitigate issues such as workplace intimidation. By working closely with industry partners, we can establish clear guidelines and support systems to ensure a safe and healthy working environment for women. He adds, "I would suggest to young women joining this industry to approach the sector with confidence and an open mind, leverage their inherent hospitality instincts and work diligently to excel. While it's important to be aware of potential challenges, avoid seeking privileges based on gender. Instead, strive to earn respect through hard work, dedication, and professional excellence."

Resilience and stamina are key for women looking to build long-term careers in hospitality, says **Mamta Wasan**, CEO & Director of Mekosha Wellness & Ayurveda Spasuites Retreat, Thiruvananthapuram. The



“This industry demands physical and mental strength—it’s not a work-from-home career. Choose your spouse wisely”

MAMTA WASAN

CEO & DIRECTOR,
MEKOSHA
WELLNESS & AYURVEDA
SPASUITES RETREAT,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

ability to endure long hours and navigate life's many phases without stepping away is essential. She emphasises that an eye for detail and robust operational depth are just as crucial for women as they are for men, and having these qualities commands respect. "Empathy is a woman's strength. It helps build strong relationships—with guests and teams alike. A mature, calm approach and emotional intelligence are invaluable in handling crises."

Reflecting on her own journey, she recalls the challenges of balancing a demanding career with personal responsibilities. "I worked under some really tough, even unreasonable leaders, while raising a child with a spouse who worked longer hours than I did. Personal time, social life, and health took a backseat. I had to dig deep for physical and mental strength to keep going. The biggest lesson? Maintain high work standards, but never forget the humane side of management. Truly care for your employees."

Creating a more women-friendly hospitality industry, she believes, requires structural changes such as a five-day work-week and nine-hour workdays to ensure work-life balance, involving employees in strategic decisions so that they feel more engaged, strengthening POSH laws and ensuring workplace safety, especially for those working late hours, conducting gender bias programmes for men, organising regular women's sessions where they can share challenges and victories, and fostering an HR culture that listens, evolves, and implements meaningful policies. "When women feel a sense of belonging, they reciprocate with loyalty. Mentorship programs help those returning from career breaks, ensuring they have the support needed to reintegrate successfully."

For young women aspiring to leadership roles, she offers practical advice, "This industry demands physical and mental strength—it's not a work-from-home career. Choose your spouse wisely. If they don't support you, you are either on your own or



you may need to reconsider your career path. Teamwork is integral. And finally—train and up-skill. Not just yourself, but your teams. When you invest in growth, you gain expertise across a range of subjects, making hospitality an incredibly rewarding career.”

She also stresses the importance of networking, something many women struggle with but which is critical to career advancement. “Building strong professional relationships is key to reaching the top—and staying there. Mentorship and networking should be ingrained in workplace culture to help women navigate their way forward.”

Chef **Veena Arora**, Hyatt Regency, New Delhi, points out that starting her career in the 1990s, she faced challenges as there were very few women chefs in the industry. Discrimination was common, from being overlooked for her ideas to facing inappropriate behaviour such as crude language, unwanted stares, and difficulties with travel. Gaining recognition and respect in a male-dominated environment was an uphill battle, she says. However, she adds that her upbringing and years in a student hostel instilled resilience in her. “I stayed



committed to my work, knowing that my skills, honesty, and dedication would eventually speak for themselves. The appreciation I received for my cooking fuelled my determination to keep going. Over time, I set clear boundaries to foster a respectful and inclusive kitchen culture, ensuring that both men and women were treated equally. This helped in building strong, collaborative teams.”

“Many organisations conduct workshops on workplace harassment, ensuring that all forms of misconduct are addressed. This shift has helped create safer, more respectful kitchen environments where talent is recognised regardless of gender”

CHEF VEENA ARORA
HYATT REGENCY,
NEW DELHI



“While professional kitchens were once heavily male-dominated, today, we see women working at all levels—not just in senior roles like head chefs, but also as trainees, apprentices, and line cooks. There is now a greater awareness of gender equality, with workplaces actively promoting inclusivity. Many organisations conduct workshops on workplace harassment, ensuring that all forms of misconduct are addressed. This shift has helped create safer, more respectful kitchen environments.”

Her advice to those entering the profession, First, stay committed to excellence—be honest, dedicated, and passionate about your craft, as your work will speak for itself. Confidence is equally important, so be bold and stand your ground; don’t hesitate to voice your ideas or



“Empowering teams, fostering growth, and promoting collaboration are key. Resilience is equally crucial to navigate challenges while staying focused on long-term goals”

BINNY CHOUDHARY
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
NOORMAHAL GROUP,
KARNAL

take charge when needed. Embrace teamwork, understanding that leadership is not just about authority but about building strong relationships and collaborating effectively with your team. She emphasises not letting gender bias hold you back—focus on your skills and performance rather than societal perceptions, as hard work and talent will earn respect.

Binny Choudhary, Managing Director, Noormahal Group, Karnal, believes emotional intelligence, adaptability, and visionary leadership are vital for women leaders to make a mark in hospitality. “Empowering teams, fostering growth, and promoting collaboration are key. Resilience is equally crucial to navigate challenges while staying focused on long-term goals,” she says.

Choudhary highlights gender bias and stereotypes as a common hurdle for women. “I faced it early in my career, but stood firm against discrimination. The success of Noormahal Palace, Karnal, reflects that journey,” she notes. Professional development, mentorship, and networking helped build the confidence and connections that fuelled her growth.

To boost women’s representation in hospitality, she calls for gender-diverse hiring, mentorship, and targeted skilling programs. “Showcasing





“Emotional resilience, integrity, and empathy are essential traits for women leaders in hospitality”

MINI CHANDRAN
HEAD-STRATEGIC ALLIANCES &
PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT,
CGH EARTH - EXPERIENCE HOTELS |
EXPERIENCE WELLNESS

role models, engaging male allies, and setting clear diversity goals can truly accelerate change,” she says.

Mini Chandran, Head-Strategic Alliances & Product Development, CGH Earth, believes emotional resilience, integrity, and empathy are essential traits. These qualities help navigate high-pressure environments and also build strong, guest-centric teams. To drive change, she urges women to lead authentically, foster inclusive cultures, and celebrate diversity. Women bring unique perspectives to the table, and by mentoring others, creating safe workspaces, and setting an example, they can inspire the next generation. Chandran notes that leadership challenges are inevitable but sees them as opportunities for growth. Instead of avoiding setbacks, she emphasises learning from them.

Deepika Rao, Executive Vice President-New Businesses, Hotel Openings, and Corporate Communications, IHCL, says that IHCL's DEI strategy is built on three core pillars of H.E.R: Hiring without discrimination, Environment of Inclusion, and Retention through continuous growth and development. It has set clear goals to hire individuals from marginalised communities and people with disabilities.

To nurture high-potential women employees, IHCL offers developmental programs across levels. “The company's pro-women policies, such as extended maternity leave, creche

IHCL



“Inclusivity starts with representation—my team composition sends that message loud and clear”

DEEPIKA RAO
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT – NEW
BUSINESSES, HOTEL OPENINGS, AND
CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS, IHCL

facilities at all hotels, and industry-leading benefits like reimbursement for IVF and surrogacy, further strengthen the commitment to attracting and retaining women employees,” she says.

At IHCL, she champions diversity through initiatives like the Ginger Leadership Program that fast-tracks women into hotel manager roles. “We are seeing women lead hotels in



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metros and Tier II - III city alike.” As someone who’s grown within the Tata Group, she says, “I have never faced gender-based discrimination; on the contrary, I was part of ‘Reach Out,’ a cross-industry mentoring programme for women transitioning to senior leadership. Inclusivity starts with representation—my team composition sends that message loud and clear.”

Ruchika Kapoor, Assistant Corporate Executive, Sarovar Hotels, says there has been a significant shift in the industry, with more women rising to leadership roles in hotels, such as unit heads or general managers. There is also an increased representation of women in management positions. Organisations are prioritising gender equality and fostering inclusive workplaces, enabling them to connect with a wider audience, drive business growth, and create more opportunities.

“Women should focus on developing strong leadership skills, proactively managing their

SHRAVANTHI
SAROVAR PORTICO
Bengaluru - JP Nagar
A SAROVAR HOTEL



“Continuous upskilling and viewing challenges as opportunities for growth can further enhance career progression”

RUCHIKA KAPOOR
ASSISTANT CORPORATE EXECUTIVE,
SAROVAR HOTELS



careers, seeking mentorship, and building professional networks. Striking a balance between work and personal life is essential, as is advocating for inclusive environments. Continuous upskilling and viewing challenges as opportunities for growth can further enhance career progression.”

Kanika Hasrat, Senior Regional Director, Operations South Asia-Hilton, says she truly believes that while leadership is built on universal values that transcend gender—like vision, strategy, and culture, women often bring a strong sense of emotional intelligence to the table. This ability to lead with empathy and awareness helps create motivated, connected teams where people feel supported. And when people thrive, organisations do too.

“I’ve also learned through my years of mentoring women that developing strong analytical skills is just as important. More women need to build confidence in financials, data analysis, and understanding debt structures and balance sheets. When we combine emotional intelligence with sharp business acumen, we bring a well-rounded perspective to leadership—one that drives both people and business success,” she says.

Another key factor is building meaningful connections across teams and departments. Networking isn’t just about visibility; it’s about exchanging ideas, learning from different perspectives, and creating growth opportunities.

Hilton
HOTELS & RESORTS



“Women often bring a strong sense of emotional intelligence to the table. This ability to lead with empathy and awareness helps create motivated, connected teams where people feel supported”

KANIKA HASRAT
SENIOR REGIONAL DIRECTOR,
OPERATIONS SOUTH ASIA-HILTON

She adds, “While it is true that digitalisation and AI are transforming hospitality, at its core, this industry will always be about people. Technology may enhance efficiency, but it cannot replace the warmth of a genuine smile, the reassurance of a familiar face, or the power of a meaningful connection. Women naturally bring strong emotional intelligence, empathy, and patience, which are not just beneficial but critical elements in a service-driven business like ours.”

Says Chef **Gunjan Goela**, Food Historian and Consultant, New Delhi, “When I started my professional career as a chef, life wasn’t so easy. There were a few female chefs that had made a mark in this field. So, I was competing with my male counterparts as a chef and had to prove my mettle in the kitchen at every step. Since long working hours are a part of daily life, the challenge was to stay fresh and active every day blooming with ideas. Some days were great but then there were setbacks



“My advice to all the women would be to find the drive and have the courage and capacity to take a risk”

CHEF GUNJAN GOELA
FOOD HISTORIAN AND
CONSULTANT,
NEW DELHI

too. Sometimes, I had to do chores that were not meant for me. Micromanagement of resources in the kitchen was also a challenge, which meant that I had to take orders from those who were not even a part of the management. Now that I look back at the bygone times, I smile as these challenges made me tough at work and brought out the best in me.”

She adds, “My advice to women would be to find the drive and have the courage and the capacity to take risk. Anyone, irrespective of their gender, can be successful in the food industry if they are passionate about their dreams.”



Sonica Malhotra Kandhari, Joint Managing Director, MBD Group says, “By empowering women to step into every role—from butlers to managers, drivers to leaders—we can break the outdated, patriarchal expectations of women’s roles in society. Women lead with empathy, collaboration, and inclusivity, which can foster a more diverse and dynamic workplace. I make it a point to promote women at every level of my team, as I know they bring a unique perspective that enhances the guest experience. When women are empowered to contribute fully in the workplace, the entire industry benefits, driving positive, long-term change.”

Jyoti Mayal, Chairperson of Tourism and Hospitality Skill Council, says women leaders



“By empowering women to step into every role—from butlers to managers, drivers to leaders—we can break the outdated, patriarchal expectations of women’s roles in society”

SONICA MALHOTRA KANDHARI
JOINT MANAGING DIRECTOR,
MBD GROUP



“Women leaders bring fresh perspectives that drive inclusivity, safety, and innovation in the tourism and hospitality sector”

JYOTI MAYAL
CHAIRPERSON,
TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY
SKILL COUNCIL (THSC)

bring fresh perspectives that drive inclusivity, safety, and innovation in the sector. By advocating for policies that support work-life balance and gender equality, women can thrive. Their focus on customer-centric solutions and community engagement enhances traveller experiences. Women leaders can also mentor aspiring professionals, ensuring the next generation continues to shape the industry with resilience and creativity.



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President
Hotel Association of India
Chairman - South Asia
Radisson Hotel Group



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Hotel Association of India
Executive Vice President
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Mr. M.P. Bezbaruah
Member (Ex-officio)
Secretary General
Hotel Association of India



“Be a constant learner. Do the ordinary in an extraordinary way. Be confident and never shy away from challenges”

GUNJAN BISARYA
HEAD HOUSEKEEPING,
ITC HOTELS

Gunjan Bisarya, Head Housekeeping, ITC Hotels, says, “Women housekeepers are reshaping the hotel industry with innovation, leadership, and dedication. Traditionally under-recognised, they are redefining service standards, enhancing guest experiences, and driving efficiency. Women, the original homemakers, bring naturally strong instincts and a personalised touch to hospitality.”

Many have moved beyond operational roles, taking on leadership and administrative responsibilities that boost associate morale and streamline operations. “It’s heartening to see several former housekeepers now serving as General Managers and Hotel Managers at ITC Hotels,” she notes. Her own journey, marked by resilience and passion, reflects this evolution. “I chose to return to my first love—housekeeping—to give back to the department that gave me everything.”

On gender inclusivity, she credits ITC Hotels for progressive hiring and policies like maternity leave, caregiver travel support, and LGBTQIA+ inclusion. “These efforts show we are not just celebrating women but embedding them in leadership roles.”

Her advice to aspiring women, “Be constant learners. Do the ordinary in an extraordinary way. Be confident and never shy away from challenges.”



“At ASPHL, we believe ambition paired with empathy creates impactful leadership—where performance meets purpose”

SUJATA GUIN
CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICER
& SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT,
APEEJAY SURRENDRA PARK HOTELS LTD.

Sujata Guin, Chief Human Resources Officer & Senior Vice President at Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels Ltd. (ASPHL), believes that women leaders in hospitality must bring a blend of resilience, adaptability, empathy, and strategic thinking to succeed in this dynamic industry. “At ASPHL, we believe ambition paired with empathy creates impactful leadership—where performance meets purpose.” She notes that women can drive change by leading with authenticity and foresight, while creating inclusive, merit-based workplaces. Building a strong pipeline of women leaders, she adds, requires systemic support through DEI frameworks, mentorship, skill-building, and bias training. “Only when the ecosystem is truly supportive can we see a sustained increase in women leaders at the top.” Mentorship and networking, she says, are essential for confidence, visibility, and growth, while structured, inclusive programs can offer women the tools to thrive. To young aspirants, her advice is simple, “Be resilient, be ambitious, and be curious. Focus on impact, not just titles, and lead with purpose and passion.”

As these voices show, true leadership in hospitality goes beyond titles—it’s about impact, inclusion, and intent. With the right support, policies, and purpose, women are not just participating in the industry—they are powering its future. **HAI**

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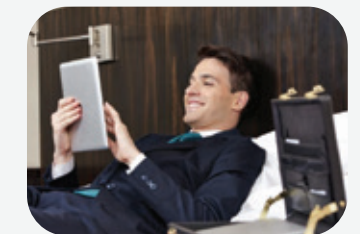
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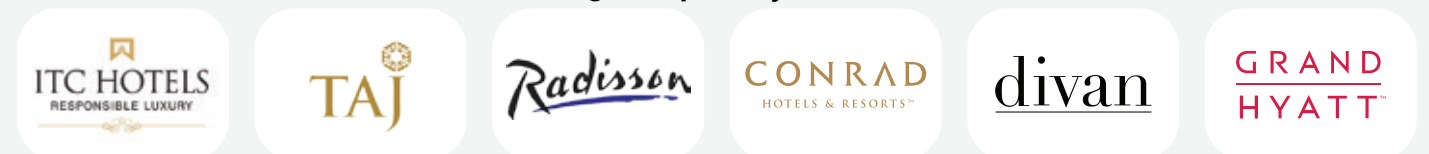


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“Women leaders bring high emotional intelligence and a collaborative approach”

Liz Ortiguera, senior advisor to CEO of World Travel & Tourism Council & MD of Bridge XP Advisory, underscores that a crucial strategy for inclusivity is mentorship and sponsorship.

What key qualities do women leaders need in Hospitality?

Let's first consider the essential leadership traits needed in general for the sector since they are not gender-specific. These are emotional intelligence, effective communications, resilience, operational excellence, and cultural sensitivity, to name a few.

Women leaders can excel in all these traits, and often bring a more collaborative and inclusive leadership style that is increasingly vital in a global, experience-driven industry. They often bring high emotional intelligence and a collaborative approach — both essential in guest-centric industries like Hospitality.



How can women leaders drive positive change and shape the future of Hospitality?

The time has come for women to support women truly. When I was early in my career, it seemed women leaders were harder on their female staff versus being supportive. Broadly, progressive leaders support the development of their staff, create positive workplaces and ensure fairness.

Also, let's acknowledge that female consumers are most often the decision-makers in planning leisure travel, accounting for 70-80% of all leisure travel decisions, according to various studies.

Women leaders in Hospitality can lend their perspectives on reshaping service models, workplace cultures, and customer experience strategies. Their leadership can help create a brand of Hospitality with a stronger focus on social impact, workforce empowerment, and community connection, which is what consumers are looking for today. Plus, research has shown that companies led by diverse teams perform better.

Can you share a challenging situation you faced in your leadership journey and how you overcame it?

Some challenges are the ones you don't see or hear directly. My first career was as a scientist/engineer in pharmaceutical industry. I remember hearing many years later that one of my first bosses felt I couldn't be promoted because my voice was “too feminine”. That former leader might be surprised today to see how frequently I use the same voice to speak to wide audiences and the broader industry.

“*Inclusive cultures are built through intentional design, not chance. Brands must embed inclusion into everything from hiring and promotion to daily team dynamics, ensuring women feel seen, supported, and empowered to lead*”



(L to R) chef Amanpreet DoSanj; chef Aarthi Sampath; Madhav Sehgal, general manager, The Leela Palace Bengaluru; chef Amninder Sandhu; and chef Sherry Mehta

FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY

Liz Ortiguera suggests:

- ◆ Create safe spaces for feedback and inclusion (employee resource groups, anonymous channels, etc.)
- ◆ Train leaders in inclusive management and unconscious bias.
- ◆ Ensure zero tolerance for harassment, whether between staff or from customers.
- ◆ Embed inclusivity into brand values and guest experiences—not just internal culture.
- ◆ Celebrate women leaders and track their progress publicly.
- ◆ Inspire and support your young female staff.



In terms of challenging situations, a significant one was when I transitioned from being a scientist/engineer to wanting to work in strategy and marketing. I had moved to Japan with my husband, and thought I had killed my career doing so. I didn't speak the local language and was considered "a trailing spouse". I transitioned industries (pharmaceuticals to Amex), functions (engineering to strategy) and countries (US to Japan). Getting my MBA before the transition

was one saving grace, but so was my persistence and motivation. Conquering that challenge started my 18-year career at American Express.

What steps should the industry take to ensure greater representation of women in top leadership positions?

The industry must go beyond statements, facilitate big cultural change and enable structural changes—from providing training broadly to the adoption of measurable goals. A few recommendations:

- Training on unconscious bias, diverse leadership styles and building strong teams.
- Set diversity targets and link them to performance evaluations.
- Ensure women are part of succession planning and leadership pipelines.
- Offer flexible career paths that accommodate different life stages, without penalising ambition.



“
Women’s leadership can help create a brand of Hospitality with a stronger focus on social impact, workforce empowerment, and community connection, which is what the consumers are looking for today
”

- Create visibility: showcase success stories, women-led innovations, and elevate role models.

Women leaders also have a critical role to play, take the stage, be visible and reach out to more junior staff with mentorship and coaching.

What role do mentorship and networking play in empowering women in the sector?

Mentorship and sponsorship are catalysts for women's advancement. A mentor/advisor can help you navigate challenges. A sponsor, someone who advocates for you when decisions are made, is even more powerful.

Personally, I lean away from the idea of

networking since it seems very transactional. I prefer to just be open to meeting people and try to get to know their interests. Get comfortable with entering a room or group of people you've never met before. Build relationships, and that creates a strong network.

How do you see the evolution of workplace policies to support women in leadership better?

My observation has been that the highest performing companies have the most evolved workplace policies. Workplace policies are evolving to recognise that leadership doesn't take one form. And they view supporting their talent more holistically, across genders. Life stage flexibility, mental wellness support, and inclusive leadership development are essential for attracting, retaining and advancing talented staff and leaders in general.

he more progressive workplaces will win the war for the best talent. Innovations at the most progressive companies like on-site child care centres, better paternity leave policies (in addition to maternity), unconscious bias training (for men and women) and communications coaching (i.e. how to facilitate a balanced meeting) benefit everyone.

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership roles in Hospitality?

There is a world of opportunity in Hospitality. Especially in Asia-Pacific region, our industry needs more talent and would benefit from diversity. Determine what you are good at and what you love to do, and reach for the stars.

How can Hospitality brands create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women professionals?

Inclusive cultures are built through intentional design, not chance. Brands must embed inclusion into everything from hiring and promotion to daily team dynamics, ensuring women feel seen, supported, and empowered to lead. **HAI**

Wanderlust & Wilderness

In this issue, we list our favourite national parks across the country, boasting a variety of exciting species to spot and experiences to enjoy.

BY RIAAN JACOB GEORGE



India, with its vibrant and diverse landscapes, is home to some of the most spectacular national parks in the world. From the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas to the dense mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, these parks provide a safe haven for countless species of flora and fauna — including the majestic big cats. Whether it's exploring dense tiger reserves or wandering through vast alpine sanctuaries, India's national parks offer a unique gateway to experience the wild up close and in all its raw beauty.



JIM CORBETT NATIONAL PARK (UTTARAKHAND)

Established in 1936, the Jim Corbett National Park is India's oldest national park and plays a key role in the country's Project Tiger initiative. Nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, just hours away from Dehradun, the park is famous for its Bengal tigers and diverse wildlife, including elephants, leopards, and over 600 species of birds. Its lush landscapes, which include dense forests and grasslands, offer visitors an unparalleled wildlife experience.

KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK (ASSAM)

Recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kaziranga National Park offers an experience like no other. Located in Assam, just 217 km from Guwahati airport, the park is renowned for its thriving population of the one-horned rhinoceros. Its expansive marshlands and tall



Jim Corbett National Park, Forest Side Farm (Uttarakhand)

Budget boost for national parks

India's national parks attract millions of visitors annually — and beyond tourism, they play a critical role in combating global warming, protecting watersheds, and preventing soil erosion.

World Wildlife Day, celebrated every year on 3 March, recognises the vital role of wildlife in maintaining the planet's health. The 2025 theme, "Wildlife Conservation Finance: Investing in People and Planet," underscores the need to preserve biodiversity for future generations. To strengthen these efforts, the Government of India, through the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), has rolled out a robust framework of policies and conservation initiatives. In the Union Budget 2025–26, the

MoEFCC has been allocated **3,412.82 crore**, marking a **9%** increase over the 2024–25 revised estimates. **• 3,276.82 crore (96%)** is for revenue expenditure — up **8%** **• 136 crore (4%)** is for capital expenditure — up **46%** from **93.25 crore**

Key allocations include: **• 450 crore** for the Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats (centrally sponsored scheme) **• 290 crore** for Project Tiger and



Ranthambore National Park (Rajasthan)

Elephant, a significant 18% increase from the previous year, making up **64%** of the wildlife allocation. These investments reinforce India's commitment to protecting its rich natural heritage — for both people and the planet.



Kaziranga National Park (Assam)

Gir National Park is the only place in the world where the Asiatic lion roams free. Established as a sanctuary in 1965, Gir is now home to over 600 of these majestic big cats, once on the brink of extinction



Ranthambore National Park (Rajasthan)

elephant grass create the perfect habitat for tigers, wild water buffalo, and swamp deer — making Kaziranga one of India's most vibrant and ecologically rich wildlife reserves. The park also offers breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. The mighty Brahmaputra River flows through the northern part of the park, adding to its unique ecosystem.

RANTHAMBORE NATIONAL PARK (RAJASTHAN) Ranthambore National Park is one of the most popular places in India to spot the sought-after Bengal tiger. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with its iconic Ranthambore Fort adding a historical touch to its wild surroundings. Leopards, sloth bears and nilgai are also popular animals to spot while exploring the park. For exceptional wildlife viewing opportunities, the best time to visit this park is between October to June.



Betla National Park

KANHA NATIONAL PARK (MADHYA PRADESH)

This is one of the largest in the state and is often regarded as the inspiration behind Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. The park is home to Bengal tigers, leopards, and the rare Barasingha (swamp deer) and it is also one of the most significant tiger reserves under Project Tiger. The best months to spot these wild cats are March to June when temperatures are high.

GIR NATIONAL PARK (GUJARAT)

Located in Gujarat, Gir National Park is the only place in the world where the Asiatic lion roams free. Established as a sanctuary in 1965, Gir is now home to over 600 of these majestic big cats, once on the brink of extinction. But lions aren't the only draw — the park is also a haven for bird watchers and wildlife enthusiasts, with sightings of leopards, hyenas, and even crocodiles. One of Gir's most unique features is the presence of the Maldhari tribe, who live within the park's boundaries and play a vital role in its conservation efforts.



Gir National Park (Gujarat)

Kanha National Park is one of the largest in Madhya Pradesh and is often regarded as the inspiration behind Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*



Hemis National Park

The Largest National Parks in India

While the above parks are popular for their iconic wildlife, India also has vast protected areas dedicated to conserving entire ecosystems. Here are the five largest national parks in the country:

Hemis National Park, Ladakh

Area: 4,400 sq. km

Nestled in the breathtaking high-altitude deserts of Ladakh, Hemis National Park is India's largest park. It's famous for being home to the elusive snow leopard, along with blue sheep and ibex (a type of wild goat). The rugged mountains and dramatic terrain make it a paradise for trekkers and wildlife photographers.

some incredible wildlife, including snow leopards, Himalayan tahr, and musk deer. If you love trekking and breathtaking mountain views, this place should be on your bucket list.

Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh

Area: 1,985.2 sq. km

One of India's richest biodiversity hotspots, Namdapha is a nature lover's dream. It's the only park in India where you can find all four big cat species—tigers, leopards, snow leopards, and clouded leopards. The dense forests and remote location make it an offbeat yet fun and must-visit destination.

Desert National Park, Rajasthan

Area: 3,162 sq. km

Imagine an endless sea of sand dunes and rocky landscapes—that's the Desert National Park for you. Found in the heart of the Thar Desert, despite its harsh environment, it's home to rare creatures like the Great Indian Bustard, desert foxes, and various species of eagles and raptors. It's a must-visit for birdwatchers and desert explorers.

Khangchendzonga National Park, Sikkim

Area: 1,784 sq. km

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, this park is named after the mighty Kangchenjunga mountain range. Its diverse ecosystem supports rare species like the red panda, Himalayan black bear, and snow leopard. If you're looking for breathtaking scenery and unique wildlife, this is the place to be.

Gangotri National Park, Uttarakhand

Area: 2,390 sq. km

Set in the Garhwal Himalayas, this park is known for its glacial landscapes and alpine meadows. It's also home to



SUNDARBANS NATIONAL PARK (WEST BENGAL)

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Sundarbans National Park is the largest tidal halophytic mangrove forest in the world. Located in West Bengal, it serves as a critical habitat for the elusive Royal Bengal tiger. The park's dense mangroves are crisscrossed by rivers such as the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. Visitors here can savour the sights of crocodiles, fishing cats, wild boar, spotted deer, and numerous bird species. The park is also home to species like the Gangetic dolphin.



Sundarbans National Park (West Bengal)

PERIYAR NATIONAL PARK (KERALA)

Nestled in the Western Ghats of Kerala, Periyar National Park is renowned for being a haven for Indian elephants, who are often seen at the park's watering holes. The picturesque Periyar Lake, home to the endangered Mahseer fish, offers visitors a unique opportunity to witness wildlife from a boat safari. The park is also home to tigers, leopards, and various species of birds, making it a paradise for nature enthusiasts.



Periyar National Park (Kerala)

BANDHAVGARH NATIONAL PARK (MADHYA PRADESH)

Bandhavgarh National Park, situated in Madhya Pradesh, boasts one of the highest densities of Bengal tigers in India. Visitors can explore the park on jeep safaris, increasing their chances of witnessing these big cats in their natural habitat. According to Hindu mythology, the Bandhavgarh Fort is believed to be over 2,000 years old, is said to have been gifted by Lord Ram to his brother Lakshman. The ruins' ancient caves and carvings add a historical charm to the area.



Bandhavgarh National Park (Madhya Pradesh)



Bandhavgarh National Park (Madhya Pradesh)

PENCH NATIONAL PARK (MADHYA PRADESH)

Famed for being the locale for inspiring Rudyard Kipling's 'The Jungle Book', Pench National Park is a treasure trove of biodiversity. The park is home to tigers, leopards, wild dogs, and numerous species of deer. In 1992, the park was declared a reserve under Project Tiger and is well-connected and accessible from cities like Nagpur, Jabalpur and Seoni.

VALLEY OF FLOWERS NATIONAL PARK (UTTARAKHAND)

The Valley of Flowers National Park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its breathtaking alpine meadows. During the monsoon season, when the snow melts, the valley transforms into a vibrant tapestry of colourful blooms. The park is also home to rare species like the snow leopard, Asiatic Black Bear, Himalayan blue sheep, and numerous migratory birds, offering visitors a once-in-a-lifetime experience. This valley is believed to be the place from where Lord Hanuman collected the Sanjeevani herb to revive Lakshman, as mentioned in the Ramayana. **HAI**



Valley of Flowers National Park (Uttarakhand)

Is the glass ceiling cracking?

With women driving growth at the grassroots but underrepresented in leadership, the hospitality industry is waking up to the need for change—and committing to a more inclusive future.

By MP BEZBARUAH

Secretary General, Hotel Association of India



The year 2024 ended, on all parameters, on a high note for the Hospitality industry. The future looks promising. Hotels are making new investments. To cope with the expected future growth, hotels and all Tourism and Hospitality services will have to expand even faster. Availability of skilled manpower, however, looms as a possible constraint. In this scenario, the role of women needs to be sensitively analysed to see how women can propel tourism as an engine of growth.

This role can be examined in two perspectives. First, is the larger picture of women's role in servicing the industry, both directly and indirectly, as being part of the supply chain. Second, in the narrower perspective, the role in a formal structure of managing the sector's growth.

Women and Tourism share a two-way relationship—Tourism offers opportunities for women to gain economic benefits, while women contribute to Tourism's growth in various ways. Various surveys and reports have highlighted some of the key contributions of women. Women's skills are prominent in the accommodation sector, including homestay services, food and beverage services, souvenir-making, opening stalls, hawking, cooking, cleaning public places, and working in the Hospitality industry. This role is extremely important but often goes unrecognised and unaccounted for. However, a UNWTO report on the role of women cites examples that reflect the wide range of their contributions, including indirect and unpaid roles. Women often play a key role in maintaining and transmitting cultural traditions and heritage, which are vital for Tourism development.

Women are also increasingly becoming active

entrepreneurs in Tourism, particularly in small-scale accommodation and related businesses. Tourism provides women with diverse income-generating opportunities in both formal and informal employment, such as crafts and cuisine, which are important components of Tourism and contribute to household and community economies.

With the growing popularity of homestays to address accommodation shortages, this role is expected to become significant in the Indian context.

Similarly, Tourism jobs are often flexible and can be carried out in various locations—including the workplace, community, and household—making them well-suited to women's participation. Tourism can serve as a vehicle for women's empowerment, offering economic opportunities and enhancing their social standing.

Numerous studies and reports by organisations such as the World Bank, UNWTO, and the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTTC) have highlighted the pivotal role of women in the global Travel and Tourism sector, along with some ongoing concerns. According to recent WTTTC data, women make up a significant portion of the Tourism workforce, accounting for nearly 40% of total employment. This represents a substantial rise in direct female employment within the sector—from 38.6 million in 2010 to 47.8 million in 2019—reflecting a 24% increase.

Key findings show that Hospitality is the leading employer of women in the Travel and Tourism industry, with over half (52%) of all female employment in 2019 concentrated in this segment. The data also indicates that women's participation in Travel and Tourism surpasses the global average workforce participation rate in other sectors.



Many studies and surveys have shown that gender inclusiveness makes good business sense. Various ILO reports indicate that two-thirds of companies surveyed agreed that diversity initiatives improved their business outcomes



On a positive note, many studies and surveys have shown that gender inclusiveness makes good business sense. Various ILO reports indicate that two-thirds of companies surveyed agreed that diversity initiatives improved their business outcomes.

When enterprises have an inclusive business culture and inclusive policies, the predicted probability of achieving:

Unfortunately, the representation at leadership and C-level functions is much lower. “In 2018, women continue to represent a large proportion of the Tourism workforce (54%), but remain concentrated in low-level employment and are poorly represented at higher professional levels. This means that, although women’s participation in Tourism is significant, the overall quality of their participation remains poor. The pay gap has not been bridged, as women in Tourism in 2018 continue to earn 14.7 % less than men on average. As in all sectors, gender inequality remains a key challenge for tourism employment.”

Issues surrounding women’s paid employment in the organised sectors of Tourism and Hospitality have not changed significantly since the first women’s rights convention held in New York in 1848—over 160 years ago. What is even more distressing is that, according to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report published in 2022, it will take an estimated 132 years to close the global gender gap.

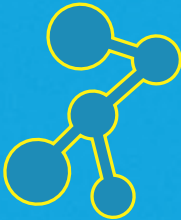
Such stark realities draw attention to some of the key challenges women continue to face in employment, including in Tourism and Hospitality, commonly referred to as the “glass ceiling.” In 2001, the ILO published a report titled “Breaking through the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management.” An updated ILO report in 2015, titled “Still Lonely at the Top,” acknowledged that while the glass was cracking, “the ceiling is still not shattered.”

The term “glass ceiling”, which gained prominence in the US during the 1970s, broadly refers to invisible, artificial barriers created by organisational and attitudinal prejudices that hinder women’s rise to leadership roles. The underlying factors remain the same: gender stereotyping, work-life balance challenges, social exclusion from informal networks, lack of mentorship, and more.

Increased profitability and productivity is	63%
Enhanced ability to attract and retain talent is	60%
Greater creativity, innovation and openness is	59%
Enhanced company reputation is	58%
Better ability to gauge consumer interest and demand is	38%
When boards are gender-balanced, companies are almost	20% more likely to have enhanced business outcomes.

Obviously, there is much to be done by the government and the industry to exploit the potential and create a congenial atmosphere. This issue of HAI Engage draws attention to the sterling achievements of some of the leaders and the efforts and initiatives of the industry to recognise and encourage stronger and meaningful participation of women in the sector. As the HVS report has pointed out, this is important because the quoted WTTC report shows that India, along with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, has one of the lowest participation of women in the Travel and Tourism industry. The same report also mentions that according to the World Economic Forum, only 10% of CEOs are women, and women make up only 15% of senior management, far below the global average of 25. It is heartening to note that the leading lights of the Hospitality industry, including IHG and Hilton, have signed the Cancun WTTC Women’s Initiative Declaration, committing, among others, to boost women’s leadership role to 30-50% and 30% at the Board and C-suite level by 2030.

There is a long way to go. Fortunately, things are changing, promising to shatter the glass ceiling. **HAI**



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