

# Perceptions and implications of implicit gender bias in the hotel sector in Aruba

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aimed to collect data on the perception of top executive women in the Aruban hotel sector regarding implicit gender bias.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative study on the metacognitive processes of awareness, evaluation and autocorrection was utilized. Through purposive sampling women in the top two leadership levels in Aruba Hotel and Tourism Association (AHATA) member-hotels were selected.

**Findings** – Results showed that a third of the top female executives experienced implicit gender bias career barriers. Different types of bias were identified such as: judgments regarding pregnancy, unequal pay and obstructions by the male general manager. How the women dealt with this bias depended on the type of bias and their personality. The identification of bias and its effects on the career trajectory were also influenced by characteristics of the work setting such as the size of the hotel and functional area.

**Research limitations/implications** – The research limitations include the chosen scope, the impediment of the generalizability of the findings due to the nature of the study, self-perceived data and possible researcher and respondent bias.

**Practical implications** – This study added to the existing body of leadership development literature with a focus on the effects of implicit bias on female leadership advancement. Some specific theoretical concepts that were combined in this study are organizational leadership, metacognition and the unconscious mind. The important role of personality was also confirmed in this study however one element that stood out in the current study was the effect of resilience in overcoming perceived barriers and attaining personal career goals. Suggestions and directions for future research are provided.

**Originality/value** – Despite the fact that gender bias was not observed in an explicit form, participants advised to be aware of the existence and effects of the implicit form and to seek education and guidance from female mentors and to remain goal oriented when confronted with this bias. Since female under-representation in senior leadership positions in other economic sectors is not observed this advice serves as a significant practical implication for the development of female leadership in this important sector in Aruba.

**Keywords** Metacognition, Implicit gender bias, Female hotel leadership, Aruba, Small island context

**Paper type** Research paper

In the island nation of Aruba, women are well represented in the highest leadership positions in sectors such as banking, education and the government; however, this is not the case in the hotel



sector. Of the 27 member hotels of the Aruba Hotel and Tourism Association (AHATA), six of the general manager (GM) positions were occupied by women in 2020 (T. LaSorte, e-mail communication, January 16, 2020) and in 2021 this number was reduced to five (R. Reeberg, e-mail communication, January 11, 2022).

The situation that females are under-represented in top management positions in the hospitality and tourism (H&T) industry has also been identified in many other countries. Findings of a sample in 157 countries by the United Nations World Tourism Organizations (UNWTO) show that 54% of the employees in the overall tourism industry are women. However, although they represent the majority of employees, women remain underrepresented in senior management positions, occupying 26% of executive positions (UNWTO, 2019).

Studies show that women primarily work in the human resources (HR) field, if they are even considered part of the executive team in the H&T industry. This is not uncommon since women are often placed in departments such as housekeeping, HR, event management, sales and marketing, and the front office positions, and in these areas reaching the highest leadership positions may be difficult (Baum, 2015; Blaney & Blotnicky, 2017; Dashper, 2017, 2020). The “Women in Hospitality and Leisure 2020 Report” by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2018) states the following about this topic:

There are very few female role models that are CEOs and Chairmen in the sector of Hospitality, Travel and Leisure, and more female Executive Committee members reside in Human Resources (HR) rather than Commercial or Finance, giving a false view on the sector’s progress on gender diversity and the talent pipeline for CEO and top leadership roles. (p. 8)

In their series on Tourism and Development titled “Women and Tourism: Designing for Inclusion,” the World Bank Group also pointed to the under-representation of females, describing that, compared to men there are less women in the track to be promoted to top leadership positions (World Bank Group, 2017). The Castell Project (2020) has a similar conclusion in their report “Women in Hospitality Industry Leadership Report 2020”, stating that women made up only 18% of the executive level positions within hotel enterprises, and the ratio of men to women attaining a leadership position is 7:1. Gender parity in leadership positions has not been attained yet in the H&T industry despite the fact that women represent most of the hourly workers in this industry (Baum, 2015).

Although women are well represented in top leadership positions in other sectors in Aruba, it is important to learn more about why this is not the case for the hotel sector in Aruba, especially considering the fact that women make up the majority of employees in the accommodations and food sector within the H&T industry as stated by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Aruba (CBS, 2020). The established positive effect of the representation of women in top executive levels within the labor market, the positive influence on gross domestic product (GDP) growth and positive business outcomes (ILO, 2019a; IMF, n.d.) makes their absence in top leadership positions in the most important economic sector on the island of Aruba yet another reason to conduct this research. The importance of the H&T sector for Aruba is shown in this industry’s contribution to the nation’s GDP share of more than 87% (IMF, 2019).

Worldwide there is a paucity of studies dedicated to the advancement of women to the highest leadership positions in hotel management and the reason for the underrepresentation in these positions (Baum, 2013; Masadeh, 2013; Segovia-Pérez, Figueroa-Domecq, Fuentes-Moraleda, & Muñoz-Mazón, 2019). Since most leadership studies draw on the male experience (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Van Esch, Assylkhan, & Bilimoria, 2017), the inclusion of the perspective of women is yet another important aspect that needs more attention in research.

Prior studies in the H&T sector point to implicit gender bias as a cause for the underrepresentation of women at senior management positions. The UNWTO 2019 Global Report

on Women in Tourism states that “gender norms, discrimination and stereotypes also combined with forms of gender-based violence, such as sexual harassment, keep women from leadership positions” (p. 71). The inclusion of self-reported emic interpretations or subjective introspections of the experience with implicit bias can shed light into the mind processes of women and the actions undertaken to maintain their career and/or secure career advancement.

To fill the research gaps, this study aims to address the role of implicit gender bias in the under-representation of women in top leadership positions in the Aruban hotel sector as perceived by women at these leadership levels. Interviews were conducted with local women and women who have been on the island for five years or more and who have reached the two highest executive levels in the hotels in Aruba: the GM-level and the level directly under the GM.

The study delves deep into the experience of bias as a barrier and in-depth questions were asked after the participants expressed that they had experienced implicit gender bias. Semistructured questions focused on details of the personal experience with implicit gender bias as a career barrier. The informants were asked to reflect on this experience using a metacognitive lens and report on the different mind processes and actions they took. The findings of this exploratory study can be used to increase understanding into the tacit nature of gender-related career advancement obstructions.

## Literature background

### *The context of Aruba*

Aruba is a small island state of 70 square miles in the southern Caribbean Sea, 20 miles off the coast of Venezuela. It is part of the Dutch Kingdom of the Netherlands, and its multicultural population includes over 90 nationalities. The main source of income is tourism, representing 87% of the GDP (IMF, 2019), making this industry the most important strategic sector for this small island state (DiPietro & Peterson, 2017). The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2020) states in their report “Global Economic Impact & Trends 2020” that in the global economy, Aruba has the second highest relative GDP share and number of tourism employees, whereas in the Caribbean, Aruba has the highest GDP share related to tourism and travel.

Starting in the 1980’s the tourism industry became the dominant industry and most important source of income facilitating a growth spurt in hotel businesses in Aruba (Murphy, 2011; Ridderstaat, Croes, & Nijkamp, 2014; Vanegas & Croes, 2003). The significant and rapid growth in tourism is represented in the number of annual (stay-over) visitors, which rose from 181,000 in 1986 to almost 1.1 million in 2018 and an increase in hotel rooms from 2,000-3,000 to 7,000-8,000 rooms between the 1980s and 1990s (ATA, n.d.; Murphy, 2011; Ridderstaat *et al.*, 2014; Vanegas & Croes, 2003). Due to this growth Aruba has become one of the most tourism-dense microstates within the Caribbean (Peterson, DiPietro, & Harrill, 2020). The majority (approximately 65%) of the tourists visiting Aruba are from the United States (Central Bank of Aruba, 2019).

Besides the large economic impact of the tourism sector, the H&T industry is also the largest employer on the island. The subsector that offers the highest employment within the H&T industry is the accommodation and food service sector consisting of 12,301 employees (24%) in 2019, comprised of 57% females and 43% males.

*The hotel industry in Aruba.* The AHATA is a nonprofit association that represents 73% of the hotel properties and timeshare resorts on the island (AHATA, n.d.; J. Hepple, e-mail communication, May 30, 2020) including all of the international chain hotels present in Aruba. In order to become a part of the association, hotels need to register and participate through dues and communications. International chain hotels are well represented in Aruba, especially the U.S.-based franchises, and this can be explained by the demand in familiar

international hotel brands by the predominantly U.S. tourists to Aruba (Croes, 2008). The smaller hotels on the AHATA member list that are not part of an international hotel chain are mostly owned by local families and entrepreneurs. The less than 27% of hotels that are not members of AHATA are smaller hotels (<20 rooms) and timeshare resorts (J. Hepple, email communication, May 30, 2020).

*The culture in Aruban hotels.* Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) argued that the multilayered mental programming of people exists on different levels of culture, such as on personal, organizational and national levels. In the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) project's conceptual model, it is mentioned that the cultural values and beliefs of a society affect the organizational culture including assumptions about leadership (House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002). According to Yukl (2013), the concept of leadership that managers have is not only influenced by their cultural values but also by other contextual elements such as the typology of the industry and organization, including the ownership status of an organization. An example of this would be if an organization is part of a multinational brand with a foreign owner. This would provide additional layers of cultural influence and contextualization that may create more challenges or complexities. As described earlier, this is the situation with the majority of the larger hotels in Aruba that are managed by international chains (J. Hepple, e-mail communication, May 30, 2020). The consequence of this is that although generalizations cannot be made, it is foreseeable that the organizational cultural values and implicit norms in these international chain hotels that are set by corporate head offices outside Aruba will impact values and beliefs within the local Aruban subsidiaries. One such value is inclusivity where diverse groups are offered equal chances and treated with fairness and respect.

#### *Women in executive leadership positions globally*

Data on the representation of women in senior leadership positions worldwide shows that in various sectors, women are under-represented in senior leadership positions. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) states in their presentation *Bias and Backlash*, that "women occupy 27% of senior business positions globally" (UNDP, n.d). In the "Social Institutions and Gender Index" (SIGI) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a cross-country measure for discrimination in 180 countries shows that women hold 24% of all management positions (OECD, 2019). The International Labour Organization (ILO) global enterprise survey of 2019 included 13,000 businesses in 70 countries worldwide that confirmed this under-representation (ILO, 2019b).

The under-representation worldwide is also the case for the H&T sector and although women make up the majority of employees in this sector, their representation in executive positions globally shows a minority share in these positions (Baum, 2015; Blaney & Blotnick, 2017; Castell Project, 2020; UNWTO, 2019; World Bank Group, 2017). As described earlier, recent previous studies attribute the under-representation of women in senior leadership positions to implicit gender bias including stereotyping (ILO, 2017; UNWTO, 2019). The current study focuses on implicit gender bias barriers as perceived by the participants and the metacognitive processing of this experience as reported by the participants.

#### *Implicit bias*

Bias has two forms; conscious or explicit bias and unconscious or implicit bias. Examples of bias that are unconscious or implicit are stereotyping and prejudices (Amodio, 2014). According to Greenwald and Banaji (1995) as well as Greenwald and Hamilton Krieger (2006), implicit bias means to sub-consciously assign discriminatory labels to people of a particular social group based on implicit attitudes or implicit stereotypes. Upon registering the characteristics of a stereotyped group, for example gender, stereotypes are automatically

activated (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996; Bargh & Williams, 2006; Reskin, 2005). Since this happens without conscious awareness, even persons who think they have egalitarian opinions regarding genders are prone to this (Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Reskin, 2005).

From a socialcultural point of view, Kahn (2018) suggests that the process of forming an implicit bias happens like this: “the mental recognition or construction of a social group, the association of a stereotype with that group, and the layering of a positive or negative association or attitude on top of the stereotype” (p. 25). People make sense of the world through categorizing based on social stereotypes and people automatically do this in order to survive in a complicated world (Reskin, 2005). Categorizing is seen as a natural human process linking heuristics or mental shortcuts to cognitive biases (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). It is a subconscious automatic process that creates unconscious beliefs based on dominant ideas in society (Amodio & Ratner, 2011; Kirwin Institute, n.d), for example, regarding gender.

Characteristics are ascribed to a group by the society they live in and according to Bronfenbrenner (1977), gender characteristics are defined through the dominant cultural values regarding the socioeconomic status and hierarchy in power between men and women. Traditional roles of labor are at the basis of these gender stereotypes and certain traits and behaviors were linked to these roles (Hoyt & Simon, 2017). For example, Western literature describes that agentic traits such as confidence, assertiveness and dominance were linked to men and communal traits such as sensitive, affectionate, gentle and soft spoken were linked to women (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ginige, Amaratunga, & Haigh, 2007; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). These gender stereotypes are learned at an early age (Damon & Lerner, 2008) and impact perceptions and expectations regarding the position, roles, performance and behaviors of men and women (Beatty, 2007).

The theory that has been used to describe the aforementioned is the social role theory which states that roles and behaviors have been assigned to men and women through socialization at an early age and that these roles and gender-based expectations are at the basis of gender stereotypes (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Based on the social role theory, the role congruity theory included differences in gender roles in leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This theory states that because of a mismatch, an incongruity in gender and leadership roles, women are less favorably viewed when it comes to leadership positions. Specifically, two prejudices against women are in play here: “a woman not being viewed as suited for leadership positions, and when a woman demonstrates the behaviors attributed to an effective leader, she is assessed less favorably because she is a woman” (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 576). Because of these prejudices against women in power and leadership positions, the role congruity theory asserts that it is a challenge for women to reach the highest leadership levels and be successful in those roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Conditioned ideas about the ideal leader are also described in implicit leadership theories (ILTs) (Forsyth & Nye, 2008; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Lord & Maher, 1991). ILTs represent the implicit beliefs about leadership and gender and these perceptions are a cause for bias against female leaders (Forsyth & Nye, 2008). The greatest cause of prejudicial and discriminatory barriers for women to attain the highest leadership positions are gender stereotypical beliefs and implicit theories. Therefore, women encounter major challenges to be perceived as leaders and to be promoted to leadership positions (Hoyt & Simon, 2017; Lord & Maher, 1991; Schyns, 2006).

### *Metacognition*

The concept of metacognition was introduced by Flavell (1976), a developmental psychologist from the U.S., and he defined the concept as follows: “Metacognition refers to one’s knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them, e.g. the learning-relevant properties of information or data” (p. 232). According to Flavell (1979) an

intellectual undertaking with a metacognitive experience includes a conscious cognitive and affective component. The two distinct areas are known as metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation indicating an awareness of one's own thinking or cognitive processes and the management or regulatory control of one's own thinking (Flavell, 1979; Jaleel & Premachandran, 2016). Elements of metacognition – awareness, evaluation and generating and implementing strategies for auto-correction – are based on the assumption that individuals are entities capable of independent thinking and action which includes self-awareness, self-determination and self-direction (Hacker, Dunlosky, & Graesser, 2009).

Paris and Winograd (1990) offer another description of metacognition; “Metacognition fosters independent learning by providing personal insight into one's own thinking. Such awareness can lead to flexible and confident problem-solving as well as feelings of self-efficacy and pride” (p. 7). Paris and Winograd (1990) distinguish two aspects in metacognition which are self-appraisal and self-management. In essence metacognition includes mental processes such as self-perception, self-awareness, self-evaluation, self-correction and affective feelings, for example regarding self-efficacy. Bandura (1994, p. 1) defines self-efficacy as: “People's beliefs about their capabilities to produce effects”, meaning their beliefs about what they can do with the skills they have. Self-regulation refers to: “Exercising influence over one's own motivation, thought processes, emotional state and patterns of behavior” (Bandura, 1994, p. 1).

It must be noted that metacognitive beliefs people hold about themselves may have a social/cultural origin and this self-view can impact their self-concept and aspects of this such as self-confidence (DeMarree & Morrison, 2012; Kleitman & Gibson, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). According to Hofstede *et al.* (2010), the self-concept stems from mental programs created by, for example, the social and cultural environment, experience and gender. It affects cognitions, behaviors, emotions and motivations (Hanges, Lord and Dickson, 2000). For example, the self-conception of gender sets our values and beliefs forming our personality, directing our predispositions and behavior (Segovia- Pérez *et al.*, 2019). Personality can be related back to values (Bilsky & Schwartz, 1994) and includes patterns of behaving, feeling and thinking typical to an individual (American Psychological Association, [APA], n.d.)

Perceptions of self, the self-concept and the personality of women play important roles in how women deal with issues in their lives, for example if they view barriers from implicit bias as an obstacle or an opportunity for them (Karunaratne, 2015; Narayanan, 2017). According to Sealy and Harman (2017), self-efficacy is an important factor when it comes to leadership interest and ambition and women might carry this bias of not being able to see themselves as able to reach higher leadership positions, without being aware of it (Castell Project, 2019). In the study by Mooney and Ryan (2009), barriers to female career progression in the hotel sector are categorized as self-imposed because they are established in the minds of women and affect their decision-making. Decisions can also be based on conscious choices by women when they see leadership positions as less desirable because of the potential impact on their lives such as increased stress, responsibility and work-family imbalance (Gino, Wilmuth & Brooks, 2015).

## Methodology

In this exploratory qualitative research, data were gathered using open-ended questions in semistructured in-depth interviews following a probing process inspired by the concept of metacognition.

Participants were selected based on purposive convenience sampling from the list of women in leadership in the hotels in Aruba. Purposive criterion sampling was used as the foremost sampling technique since specific participants were targeted for this study. Only women at the top two highest leadership levels – GM and the level directly under the GM – of

all the AHATA member-hotels with 50 rooms or more and who had been on the island longer than five years, were invited to join the study.

Of the 44 women identified, 38 women met the selection criteria and were approached to be interviewed. The final number of interviews completed for this study amounted to 25 as some women did not wish to participate, and data saturation was reached.

The participants were asked to reflect on their experience with implicit gender bias as a career barrier and report on different cognitive processes they went through. The informants self-reported on the stages in their experience with implicit bias, from becoming aware of the implicit bias to their self-evaluation, and finally the auto-correction as a response to the obstacles they perceived. These stages follow the metacognitive aspects as identified in previous literature (Hacker, Dunlosky, & Graesser, 2009) and cover the main areas of metacognition areas known as metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation indicating an awareness of one's own thinking or cognitive processes and the management or regulatory control of one's own thinking (Flavell, 1979; Jaleel & Premachandran, 2016). By probing into the mental processes, an understanding was gained into how the participants processed the phenomenon of implicit gender bias.

Data collection took place during the period of February-June 2020 at the hotels and only one interview was fully on Zoom because of the shutdown due to the Covid 19-pandemic. By accepting the voluntary invitation, the participants consented to the interview and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. A unique nontraceable number represented them, and the names of the hotels in the study are also not mentioned in the transcripts and findings. The participants were also informed that they could ask for clarification of questions and had the right to decline to answer. Interviews were recorded after specific consent was granted by the participants and the verbatim transcripts were sent to them for their review and approval thus ensuring respondent validation of the data.

The tool used to collect data were semistructured questions derived from the literature and based on metacognitive processes relating to mental processes of awareness, evaluation and behavior. The questions used are presented below in Table 1. Follow up questions were formulated during the interview process itself.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, starting with coding for predetermined and emergent codes (Saldaña, 2013), and then combining the codes into categories, and finally into themes. Finding important statements and the core of the experience in the thick, rich description of the experiences is a major part of data analysis in a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2009; Gray, 2014). Computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) NviVo was used to support the data analysis process.

Measures to establish trustworthiness of the data and to ensure rigor in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) focused on attaining credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The need to ensure rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research is important because researcher bias can create misinterpretation and influence validity and reliability.

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When and how did you become aware of any barriers or obstacles in your career advancement, specifically implicit bias?

What was your reaction towards these perceived barriers? Describe the thought process

What were some modifications in your thoughts, actions, and behaviors (including leadership style) as a reaction to the perceived barriers, to procure career advancement?

Were the modifications you made, as a reaction to barriers, successful?

Additional Question (especially after major modifications): Looking back, do you have any regrets? Would you have done anything differently?

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**Table 1.**  
Questions relating to  
mental processes of  
awareness, evaluation,  
and change

Researchers should reflect and evaluate their own biases that might impact their interpretations and the whole research process (Berger, 2015; Koch & Harrington, 1998).

To limit researcher bias and increase objectivity in this study, the researcher used several measures such as: member checking of transcripts, using verbatim quotes, peer review, audit of the findings, the involvement of research experts during the whole research process including observations on how interviews were conducted.

Another important aspect relating to bias is respondent bias. Bias in respondents' answers is a possibility when participants' responses are influenced by what they perceive as acceptable answers to the interview questions. The use of open-ended, nonleading and follow-up questions and portraying neutrality are used to collect the subjective, emic perspective of the participants (Given, 2008) and were used to mitigate this type of bias.

**Results and discussion**

Most of the participants in the study were in the age groups 40-49 and 50-59 years old as shown in Table 2. The average age of the women in this study was 48 years, and the area that held the oldest age category is housekeeping. Function names differed per organization. The second highest level of executives in the larger hotels was called directors whereas in the smaller hotels the names were manager, coordinator or supervisor.

Findings showed that when it comes to experiencing implicit bias and obstacles based on that implicit bias, three subgroups of women could be identified in the group of respondents as shown in Table 3. Group one experienced implicit bias and found it was a barrier, group two experienced implicit bias, but it was not viewed as a barrier and group three did not experience implicit bias nor any bias barriers.

In the analysis noted below, the respondents will be identified by their Identity (ID) number and not their name or property in order to protect their anonymity. For example, ID24 or ID25 are two different female leaders in the hotels in Aruba.

Age			Position		
N	% Samples		N	% Samples	
0-29	0	0	2	8%	GM
30-39	6	24%	2	8%	Hotel Manager
40-49	7	28%	2	8%	Assistant GM
50-59	7	28%	2	8%	Director of Revenue Strategy
60-69	4	16%	1	4%	Director of Rooms Operations
70-79	1	4%	1	4%	Director Sales and Revenues
			1	4%	Director of Recreation
			1	4%	Director of Housekeeping
			3	12%	Director Human Resources (HR)
			1	4%	Director of Loss Prevention
			1	4%	Director of Resort Operations
			*	4%	Manager Sales and Marketing
			*	4%	Manager Reservations
			*	4%	Manager Guest Relations
			*	4%	Manager House Keeping
			*	4%	Manager Front Office
			*	8%	Coordinator of Operations
			*	4%	Supervisor Administration

Note(s): \*small local hotel, less than 75 rooms

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**Table 2.**  
Profile of demographics



A further analysis of the demographics of the participants based on the three subgroups related to function, age, years of experience in the industry, and size of hotel shows the following findings. The function groups that stand out as not having experienced implicit bias nor any career barrier are the HR and housekeeping executives. The rest of the directors in the sample have all encountered implicit gender bias in their career although not all experienced this to be a barrier to their career. Within the age categories 30-39, 40-49 and 50-59, it can be observed that the experience with implicit bias as a barrier is different within these three age-categories as well. In age category 30-39, the majority of the women encountered no implicit bias barriers, 40-49 mentioned to have experienced bias but they did not believe that it was a barrier to them or their career, and in age category 50-59, the majority of the women stated that they had experienced implicit bias as a barrier. When it comes to years in the industry, the findings show that two groups stand out. The group with 10 years or less of experience in the industry reported not to have encountered implicit bias barriers, and the group with 30 years or more of experience reported to have experienced this. When it came to size of the hotel, the women in the smallest hotels perceived no implicit gender bias barriers in their careers.

The findings of group one – experience with implicit bias as a career barrier – are relevant for this study since the probing process included an evaluation and auto-changes made to continue career advancement after implicit gender bias barriers were perceived. This group included eight women (of the 25). A dissection of the experience of the women using a step-by-step metacognitive analysis shows the following findings.

#### *Subprocess theme awareness*

Regarding the awareness of the experience with implicit bias, the women were asked the question if and when they became aware of obstacles in their career because of implicit gender bias. About a third of the 25 women in the study mentioned that they perceived implicit gender bias and whether they experienced this as a barrier was linked to the type and combination of the implicit bias. The specific type of bias most often perceived was an unequal treatment based on gender especially related to assumptions regarding pregnancy and maternity. The combinations of implicit bias were a main cause to leave the work environment and included for example the combination of unequal payment and sexist comments.

The largest group of women that encountered implicit bias as a barrier in their career included women of 54 years and older with at least 20 years of experience in the hotel sector. The barrier most cited by this group of women was a compromised relationship with the male GM. Due to a strained relationship with the GM, the women perceived that they had a disadvantage that impacted their career prospects. ID37 remarked that the GM position was promised to her however another male expat was brought in. “I was promised a position of general manager when the expat left. And instead they brought somebody in, and the guy who made that decision told me I was too strong” (ID37). Another participant (ID38) mentioned that because of incidents in the past the GM labeled her as unfit for a GM position. After he left she was selected as the GM of an affiliate hotel.

However, some younger women between the ages of 32 and 43 also encountered implicit gender bias barriers. The bias this group of young women referred to the most was the perceptions

**Table 3.**  
Overview of  
frequencies per  
category

Category 1: Yes, experienced implicit gender bias, yes it was a barrier (yes-yes)	8
Category 2: Yes, experienced implicit gender bias but not as a barrier (yes-no)	5
Category 3: No, did not experience implicit gender bias and no barrier (no-no)	12
<b>Source(s):</b> Table created by author. Copyright 2021 by Madhu S. Jadanansing	

related to pregnancy and motherhood and the pressure that came from work demands. In three of the eight cases these judgments towards women related to the assumed decline in quality of work because of maternity and pregnancy and caused the women to leave the work environment. One participant stated: "There seemed to be a bias that oh okay now she is going to be focused on having a family and it will affect the performance" (ID24). Another participant had this to say about the subject: "I think one of the biggest biases is the notion that you are a woman so you will become a mother and your job will not be your main priority and you won't care as much as a guy" (ID23).

An emergent theme was identified when several participants mentioned that some of the implicit gender bias did not originate from their colleagues but from guests and visitors of the hotel. Also, one participant mentioned that she experienced bias based on ethnicity and age coming from these outsiders.

#### *Subprocess theme evaluation and reaction*

The next step of the metacognitive process was to analyze how the women reacted to the implicit bias once they perceived this to be a career obstacle. The women were asked to describe their reaction, including their thought process. A reaction most often observed was the determination to speak up which came from the evaluation of the experience of the bias barrier as an injustice practice.

One participant mentioned that she contacted the human resource director (HRD) about her experience with sexist remarks. When she was introduced as the new executive in an all-male executive team a colleague made the remark that she must have slept her way up to the top. "I basically wanted to speak to him and share that I didn't feel that it was right, 1) in the setting in front of other people to make an inappropriate comment like that and 2) that I felt that it was discriminatory" (ID25). The reaction that she received was that it was just a joke.

The participants who spoke up mentioned that they were not heard or the incident was downplayed, or that they were even reprimanded. The participant who went to the HRD noticed that the HRD dismissed the incident as a joke, so she went to the GM who said: "Don't worry about it. It is no big deal" (ID25). Her evaluation of everything that had happened brought her to the following conclusion, "This was the second or third thing and I brought it all together and what I chose to do at that time was resign" (ID25).

Four of the women who encountered implicit bias as a career obstacle had the same evaluation and left the work environment. Participant ID24 shared this about her thought process, "At one point you cannot anymore and it is unreasonable, and at that point I needed to make the decision, let's move and switch to a different organization." She referred to the preconceived notions about the effect of pregnancy and motherhood on the quality of work and the unreasonable expectations from her superiors.

The women who chose to stay in the work environment made that decision based on age, near retirement age, years at the hotel and loyalty to the organization. Participant ID40, who stayed in the organization explained her decision to stay: "I didn't want to leave this property. Because I grew with it, you know, uhm, it was like mine".

Another element commonly noted in the reactions and evaluations of the women is that they became cognizant of the personal changes they needed to make, especially in their character and as such the experience with bias as a barrier had affected their mind set and personality. In the next section these personal changes are described.

#### *Subprocess theme auto-correction and changes*

The personal changes made by the women who encountered gender bias as a barrier, involved their strategies in attitudes, behavior and leadership style. A change that most

women self-reported was that they felt that they had become a stronger person. Participant ID40 stated “I was determined to be stronger, with what I already know and go with innovation, go with the modern world and work with the new generation.” Additionally, an attitude to stand up for themselves was also invoked, even though this strategy wasn’t always successful. Specific autocorrective strategies included: improving their image of a hard worker, being more present, displaying their work more often, and enhancing their digital and innovation skills. According to [Hoyt and Simon \(2017\)](#), women can react by adhering to stereotypical beliefs or show counter stereotypical behavior. The women in this study reacted with resilience, showing an attitude and behavior that opposes the stereotypical behavior, for example by working harder and proving that they were worthy.

The women who experienced implicit gender bias barriers also changed in their awareness and reported a heightened alertness about the possible occurrence of prejudicial disadvantageous situations and some mentioned to have lost their motivation. The women also became more cautious in sharing personal details. ID24 said this about keeping her professional and private life separate: “Yeah, less expressive of personal. . . you know. . . keeping personal strictly personal and even not sharing about children.”

When asked what they would recommend for other women who encountered gender bias as a barrier, several additional strategies were identified. Recommendations included were to not ignore the bias and to address it immediately but not impulsively. The women were also aware that changing others is not realistic, so the advice was to be focused on themselves and their progress and to see the truth of the bias which is that it is the problem of the other party rooted in their ignorance and insecurity. Participant ID21 mentioned this after openly discussing with her male colleague how he made her feel and described his behavior towards her, “He was kind of taken back by it because he did not realize that he was doing it.” Participant ID42 reflected on an experience that she categorized as gender bias and mentioned that she understood that the incident was the result of the insecurity of the other party, “It’s all a mirage because you are giving them insecurity. And that is what I realized”.

Another strategy that was identified was to take on the position of a role model and to use personal stories as a tool to guide other women. Education, training and seeking a mentor were also recommended when women were experiencing barriers from gender bias. Studies by [Baum \(2015\)](#), [Boone et al. \(2013\)](#), [Brownell \(1993\)](#), [PricewaterhouseCoopers \(2018\)](#), [Dashper \(2017, 2020\)](#), [Karunarathne \(2015\)](#), and [Remington and Kitterlin-Lynch \(2018\)](#) previously confirmed that a barrier to women’s career is caused by a lack of mentors, role models and training. Thus, some of the women in this study who experienced implicit bias tried to use mentoring as a strategy to help others in these situations.

In this study, self-efficacy ([Bandura, 1994](#)) plays a role when it comes to viewing and addressing issues related to implicit gender bias. According to [Hofstede et al. \(2010\)](#), how women view themselves and their capabilities is caused by socialization and experiences, and this includes the cognitive processes of identifying, evaluating and reacting to situations. The impact of one’s self-concept on reactions and the production of standards for comparison was also identified earlier by [Hanges, Lord, and Dickson \(2000\)](#). [Sealy and Harman \(2017\)](#) stated that women’s leadership ambition is highly influenced by their thoughts about their capabilities and chance of success. The women in this study showed this through their persistent goal orientation even when they were confronted with obstructions in their career. The majority of the group of women that experienced bias as a barrier and who did not reach the GM position yet, still aimed to be GM or regional GM. ID24, who left an earlier workplace because of an experience with gender bias said this, “I have broadened my ultimate career objective a little bit so at this point yes, I hope to become a GM in the next 2 years. I have participated in a GM development program”. ID25, who also left another resort where she encountered gender bias remarked this about her career ambitions, “My ultimate career goal is to be the GM of a luxury hotel in Aruba”.

In this section the experience with implicit gender bias as a career barrier as perceived by the women in this study was dissected and presented according to the steps identified in metacognitive processing. The questions were designed to probe this experience and understand the mental processes involved in the processing of the phenomenon of implicit bias as a career barrier. First the identification of implicit gender bias as a barrier was explored. Next the participants were asked about their evaluation and reaction and finally how they corrected and changed themselves in order to cope with the barrier. As the findings indicate, about a third of the women in this study (eight out of 25) perceived to have experienced gender bias as a barrier. Five of these eight women eventually successfully progressed with their career and most of them did so at another hotel. The rest of the women accepted the situation and remained in their position without any further upward career movement. The women who did not perceive any implicit gender bias barriers worked in the smallest hotels with less than 75 rooms or in certain function areas that have less prospects of attaining the highest leadership positions in the smallest hotels.

In light of the current under-representation of women at the highest leadership level in the H&T sector in Aruba and the fact that this sector is the most important in Aruba, these findings could be used to shed light on this issue.

About 40% of the 25 participants in this study reported not to have experienced implicit gender bias as a career obstacle. An observation was made regarding a link between function area and size of the hotel when it comes to perceiving implicit gender bias as a career barrier. Half of this participant group belonged to the function areas HR and housekeeping and the majority worked in smaller hotels. A dominance of females in the HR and housekeeping areas and an acceptance of the end of the line career in these areas was identified in previous literature (Baum, 2015; Blaney & Blotnicky, 2017; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2018). As to the size of hotels and the perception of implicit bias, the women in the smaller hotels in this study (less than 75 rooms) worked directly with the GM in absence of other hierarchy layers such as the director's level contrary to the multilayered organizational structures in the other hotel with more than 100 rooms. This difference affects the career trajectory of the women and might be a reason why participants in the smallest hotels did not perceive career barriers in their hotels. The majority of the participants in the current study worked in smaller hotels and in the function areas HR and housekeeping and in the overall findings of this study the effects of a dominance of these groups of participants can be observed.

The evaluation and reaction most often made by those women who encountered implicit gender bias was that they had to stand up for themselves and speak up however in the majority of the cases this was in vain which led to the women leaving that work environment. The women who did stay also contemplated on leaving their workplace, but they remained at their current employer due to reasons such as nearing the pension age and loyalty to their co-workers and the hotel.

The specific corrections observed were mostly in the area of the women changing themselves. The participants who encountered implicit gender bias as a barrier stated that they had changed in the sense that they had become stronger and bolder; they worked harder and had an increased drive to achieve career goals. The reason to remain focused on their own goal and growth was also based on the inability to change other people. Other corrections included improving their communication skills, embracing innovation, presenting their capabilities more often and standing up and addressing the situation by speaking up whether it was successful or not and finally if nothing changed, leaving the work environment.

Their advice to other women was to be aware of the occurrence of this type of gender bias and to not ignore it since it does exist. Furthermore, they advised to remain goal oriented and to not doubt oneself and to educate themselves about the situation and seek guidance from female mentors which is in line with Dashper's (2017, 2020) studies of the events and hospitality industries.

### **Theoretical and practical implications**

This phenomenological study added to the existing body of leadership development literature with a focus on the effects of implicit bias on female leadership advancement. Elements in previous academic studies such as the effect of societal bias on women's career advancement as described in social role theory and role congruity theory have been confirmed in this study. Some specific theoretical concepts that were combined in this study are organizational leadership, metacognition and the unconscious mind.

Bilimoria, Godwin, and Zelechowski (2007) implied that women's personal influence in an inclusive work environment play a role in successful career advancement. The important role of personality was also confirmed in this study however one element that stood out in the current study was the effect of resilience in overcoming perceived barriers and attaining personal career goals. Further exploration in future research could entail the point of view of men on the determining factor of female personality. Another future research focus could be on women who did not reach the highest two leadership levels in the hotels, to explore the metacognitive processing of their experience, and to what extent these women differ in their character and personality from the ones that did reach the highest leadership levels amidst perceived gender bias barriers. Also, the effect of context such as the difference in dynamics between smaller and larger hotels and the effect on female career advancement is worth exploring further. Recommended future research also includes repeating the study in another context, for example, would the results be different in the sister islands of Aruba namely Curacao and Bonaire? Emergent themes from this study also point to other possible research topics for example exploration of metacognitive processes in the experience of race and nationality discrimination among employees in the hotel sector of Aruba.

### **Limitations of the study**

Despite the findings of the current study, the following limitations have been identified. First, the research design was limited to a qualitative phenomenological methodology affecting the generalizability of the findings. This includes a lack of generalizability across other segments in the H&T sector in Aruba and similar lodging facilities regionally and internationally. The data collected in this study are self-perceived, based on the participants' individual experience; they represent subjective individual metacognitive processes, and therefore are conducive to subjective narratives. A limitation that is common to qualitative studies is researcher bias and respondent bias, despite the efforts used to minimize these discussed earlier.

One delimitation of the current study is that only the members of the Aruban Hotel and Tourism Association with 50-plus rooms were considered. Other delimitations include the use of purposive sampling and selection of only women in the highest two leadership ranks in hotels who have been on the island for more than five years.

### **Conclusions**

Despite these limitations, the following conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. A significant part of the women interviewed reported to have been aware of and experienced implicit gender bias as a barrier in their career and this experience was influenced by the type and combination of the implicit bias encountered. The findings show that a longer career path (age and experience in the industry) and attainment of higher positions in larger hotels could be linked to a higher chance of experiencing implicit gender bias and its consequences. Amongst the main specific types of implicit gender bias mentioned by the women are: judgments regarding pregnancy and maternity, unequal pay and obstructions by the male GM.

In this study, metacognitive processes of awareness, evaluation and autocorrection were used to dissect the experience of top female leaders with perceived implicit gender bias

barriers. Data were gathered regarding the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women at the top leadership levels in the hotel sector in Aruba. Through semistructured in depth interviews, the female leaders in this study reflected and self-reported on the mental processes of dealing with implicit bias as a career barrier. Results show that implicit gender bias is perceived to be career barrier by the women in this study. The women who did not perceive any barriers from implicit gender bias predominantly worked in certain function areas that usually do not lead to the highest leadership levels or they worked in the smallest hotels with less than 75 rooms.

From this study we learned that implicit gender bias does exist in Aruban hotels and originates at a societal level. This societal level bias trickles down to organizational and individual levels through for example organizational cultures and individual minds. Although more women have joined the hotel industry and are reaching higher leadership positions, men are still viewed as authority figures over women as perceived by the participants and this creates silent career barriers for women.

Through this study an insight into the tacit nature of barriers related to gender was gained. This can provide an understanding in the career advancement dynamics in the hotel sector in Aruba and the factors influencing growth opportunities for women. Bringing clarity in the automatic unconscious reactions towards women and the consequent need to increase awareness in leadership development can contribute to transparent career advancement processes for women. Therefor the findings of this study can be used to delve deeper into the phenomenon of implicit gender bias in the local hotel sector and serve as a prelude to an open discussion on the matter of the underrepresentation of women at the highest leadership positions in Aruba's most important industry.

### Ethical considerations

The women in the study were informed that the conversations are confidential and findings are presented anonymously. Participants were also informed that the data gathered from the study would be used for publication purposes. Some other ethical considerations for this study included: consent was received through the acceptance of the invitation; invitees were explained that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to ask for clarification or decline answering questions, participants were addressed in a respectful manner and all data gathered are securely stored and locked away. The data gathered in this study were collected by and are part of a research for the dissertation of the first author under the auspices of the University of Aruba.

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