

# Top Management Positions in the Airline Industry: The Role of Gender Differences

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The objective of this study is to determine the role of gender and to examine the impact of gender on leadership roles in top management positions in the airline industry. This article focuses on airline industry management concepts in order to discuss the role of gender diversity. In the methodology, a qualitative research method with case studies and a documentation analysis technique was used, which involved collecting and analysing data obtained from more than 50 articles discussed in the literature review. Furthermore, two informal interviews with human resources managers were conducted for an examination of the recruitment of women's representation in the leadership roles of top management positions. Gender role theory was applied to examine the role of gender in predicting top management positions. As a result, the article reveals important empirical data on gender and managerial perspectives regarding the hiring of females for top management positions to run companies, the broader culture of gender equality, and the elimination of gendered job promotion inequality. The implications of this study are related with the investigation of airline business management literature, through the lens of those in top management positions, and the role of gender in the relationship between the airline industry and leadership. The academic perspective is also discussed using gender role theory through academic literature. Conclusions are then summarised, and suggestions for further research are also provided.

**Keywords:** *Gender, Gender Role Theory, Top Management, Airline Industry, Gender Equality*

## Introduction

Only a few social scientists studied the issue of sex and gender before the middle of the twentieth century. However, this field has exploded in the last several decades. At present, the American Sociological Association (ASA) is one of the largest organisations to focus on sex



and gender. It is argued that in the heyday of functionalist sociology, sociologists were primarily interested in sex and gender and wrote about women as the “hearts” of families and men as the “heads” of families (Conroy & Weiler, 2016).

Serious attempts to study sex and gender followed the movement of women into science and the influence of the second wave of feminism on intellectual questions. Psychologists began to measure sex role attitudes using scales that had been embedded in personality and employment tests. A decade of debate ensued on the best use of and measurements for this new conceptualisation. The particular controversy focused on whether the label ‘androgyny’ should be defined by similarity on both measures, or only strong identification with both masculinity and femininity, with the consensus emerging that only those high on both measures should be labelled as androgynous (Tenhunen, 2014).

Gender differences have been studied as an interdisciplinary topic and subject for many decades in a wide variety of fields including psychology, business, entrepreneurship and technology. Previous studies have explored the nature of the existing gender differences, as well as their origin and impact on individuals’ lives (Dautzenberg, 2012). It is accepted that the behavioural differences found in biological roles or sex roles, however they are reinforced by society’s values, cultural beliefs and social structures, are regularly referred to as ‘gender’ (Link & Strong, 2016). Gender-specific inequalities might originate from biological analysis performed in previous researches. However, this differentiation is subsequently provoked by societal perceptions and expectations, which function as cultural guides that lead to the two genders developing and maintaining their social status in different ways (Pinar, McCuddy, Birkan & Kozak, 2011).

An important feature of all societies is for occupations to be segregated by gender. The level of segregation differs between countries. Countries with a low Gross Domestic Product tend to have a low level of segregation, while wealthy industrialised countries have at least moderately high levels of segregation (Deng & Grow, 2018). This reflects the social structure of societies in which jobs are often prescribed according to gender. For example, management positions in the airlines are mostly dominated by males, while females predominate in the lower level positions (Alsos et al., 2013).

The hospitality and tourism sectors around the world, including the airline industry, provide hospitality to customers as a core product of their organisations. Often, their barriers and challenges obstruct female employees from growing their professional careers within the organisation. In the airline industry, therefore, opportunities for promotion are insufficient to meet the expectations of female employees (McCuddy et al., 2010).



Most of the hospitality sector, including the airline industry, requires the same skills from both male and female employees. Therefore, when they have good qualifications and proven records of hard work, they should be able to succeed in organisations equally. However, past studies have shown that females are not satisfied with equal employment and career opportunities regarding promotion (Ng & Pine, 2003). This is because, although a female employee has been promoted to a management position, she may not receive equal pay for the position (Skalpe, 2007).

Subsequently, this article examines the lack of equal employment opportunities in the leadership of top management levels in the airline industry. There is still a significant gap and numerous challenges for women in leadership roles. The data from the practitioners and the academic literature that were reviewed are analysed and synthesised in the next chapter.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Role of Gender Differences***

Gender is commonly known as the differences between sexes, male or female. In general, however, it is more than merely physical and biological differences, according to Kelan and Jones (2010).

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), these roles are socially constructed and referred to as 'gender' which also consists of the attributes, activities and behaviours that a given society perceives as appropriate for the distinction of women as opposed to men. Among the constructs, gender is a multidimensional one in which different limitations, responsibilities, experiences and roles are assigned to an individual based on gender identification or sex (Jermisittiparsert & Srihirun, 2019).

The term 'gender' refers to the periodic perceiving of the distinction between men and women in the context of the social, political, and cultural constructs of society, which can change over time. Coleman (2016) states that gender is not a permanent individual attribute status, but depends on the sociocultural products of individuals' opinions, beliefs, attitudes and experiences. Traditional gender issue discourse is concerned with the domination by males in some societies or positions. Since the 1970s, researchers have noted the need to differentiate between gender and sex, and they have defined gender (i.e., whether someone is a woman or man) as based on the psychosocial ramifications of biological sex. Most often researchers operationalise gender by either observing the behaviour of men and women or by asking them whether they identify as male or female.

As argued by Collier et al. (2013), the term 'gender' has been used to define the differences between sexes and social structures as well as the roles of the individual. However, more

important than just physical differences are the prejudices caused by social, political and economic conditions. This draws into focus the important distinction between sex and gender, in which the term ‘sex’ usually refers to the biological differences between males and females as determined by appearance and the perceptions of other people. In addition, feminism is basically involved with remedying the disadvantages historically borne by women. Feminist economics is a rethinking of the discipline of economics in order to improve women’s economic conditions. As a by-product (or external benefit) of this rethinking, feminist economics provides an improvement of economic theory and policy (Robb & Watson, 2012, p. 550). Because feminist economics is an endeavour aimed towards the improvement of the economic conditions of women, it also questions the notion of objectivity in economics and argues that theory formulation and policy recommendations are dependent upon one’s culture, position in society, and life experiences.

The stereotypes of gender consist of the shared beliefs about the characteristics and attributes associated with each sex (Alesina et al., 2013). Women are commonly believed to have more communal qualities such as expressiveness, connectedness, relatedness, kindness, and supportiveness, whereas men are associated with more agentic qualities in the context of independence, aggressiveness, autonomy, instrumentality and courage. Stereotypical characteristics attributed to the two sexes not only describe how men and women are (descriptive stereotypes) but also how it is believed that they should be (prescriptive stereotypes) (Sutter & Gltzle-Rutzler, 2015).

One gender role theory proposes that gender generates shared social role expectations of men and women to perform the behaviours that affect people’s perceptions in the social sphere. This is because gender roles represent a collection of descriptive and injunctive expectations about women and men, for example, “The stereotype of men is more leader oriented, intellectual, analytical, able to think abstractly, and high problem-solving skill, whereas women are considered kinder, warmer, more expressive, more supportive, and gentler” (Carli, 2010 p. 343). According to this theory, gender automatically defines stereotypical expectations that favour men over women for leadership positions (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010).

The complicated way to classify gender is not only in terms of our personalities, cultural rules, or institutions but with all of these aspects. There are multiple levels of analysis of a social structure that integrate the notion of flexibility, causality and cultural meaning in the theory of gender. These differences in gender structure have an impact on the opportunities and constraints according to the sex category, and so do the consequences, in three dimensions: (1) the differences in individual self-development of gender; (2) the interactions of men and women are different in cultural expectations even though they fill identical structural positions; (3) the cultural, logical and explicit regulations and distributions are gender-specific (Tacoli & Satterthwaite, 2013).



Additionally, sex refers to visible biological differences, while gender is viewed as socially elaborated through interaction, which enacts gender beliefs. Gender inequality issues have been studied and discussed for decades. Many scholars have identified that gender inequality involves cultural beliefs and stereotypes that shape everyday life interactions. These findings are congruent with the principle of masculine domination, which points out the similarities between gender beliefs and men and women's status in the social structure. This paper then reviews the literature on the top management positions in the airline industry and discusses how gender may influence such values and furthermore, how gender inequality prevents the promotion of more women to top management positions (Workman & Lee, 2011).

Gender Role Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) states that gender initiates shared social role expectations based on people's perceptions and understanding of how men and women should behave to show their gender. Moreover, this is the reason that gender is associated with bias and over-emergence in self-managing teams. However, the theory itself speaks directly to how behaviours are performed by men and women. The gender role also represents a compilation of descriptive and injunctive representations in the social realm about men and women. For example, men are socially considered to be more suitable in leadership roles by possessing intellectual, analytical, and problem-solving skills, whereas women are considered to be kind, supportive, feeling, expressive, and gentle in actions (Carli, 2010). According to this theory, gender stereotypes directly favour men over women for any leading social role. Besides this, the empirical evidence that women and men are different in their leadership effectiveness rating is also subject to the bias of gender (Heilman, 2012).

Hence, the recapitulation of gender roles is defined as the set of social norms stereotypical of behaviour that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate or desirable for a person, based on their actual or perceived sex; these are the actual concepts of femininity or masculinity. Although men and women vary substantially among cultures, the questions of to what extent does biology determine gender roles and their variation, and to what extent is their social structure responsible, arise.

### **Gender Roles in Top Management Positions in the Airline Industry**

The domination of top management by men has no clear explanation. Many types of research have argued for the importance of supply-side, explaining that the lack of women in the top management positions reflects the limitations of experienced female candidates to fulfil senior and top management positions. These researches have examined gender and management positions in various organisations. It is crucial to segregate the behaviours on which research has been carried out and how they are interpreted. In most research on gender and management and leadership roles in organisations, only the sociodemographic definition of gender seems to

be addressed (Matsa & Miller, 2013). Moreover, a plethora of studies have been conducted to examine precisely how male and females are different from one another in terms of management, leadership style, behaviour and efficiency.

However, some studies do not discuss a theory regarding the reason that gender is expected to have an impact on management. There is also an argument regarding whether females differ from males with regard to authority in positions (Adams & Funk, 2012). It is argued that also having females in leadership positions affects firm performance in terms of business growth (Ahern & Dittmar, 2012; Dezso & Ross, 2012), management behaviour, or bias in the gender regarding distribution of rewards within firms. Furthermore, numerous studies document the lack of women in top corporate positions (Dezso & Ross, 2012).

There are bias issues with regard to the equality of airline employment, particularly in the management level, such as CEO positions. For this reason, there is inequity across the globe in relation to the empowerment and rights of women in all aspects, including the air transportation sectors, such as the airline industry, employment and economic participation, where there is a need to reduce gender inequality (Kim et al., 2018). In airline management positions, female employees have less empowerment compared to their male counterparts in several visible areas, because of invisible reasons, barriers and challenges. These include marital status, motherhood, discrimination and stereotyping. Management positions require long working hours and a high degree of mobility that males seem to have more of than females when perceived by corporate executive boards (Pinar et al., 2011). Consequently, the wishes of female employees for advancement into senior level management positions has become more difficult in the airline industry because of the prevalent “traditional role” stereotypes (Schaap, Stedham, & Yamamura, 2008).

The research about top management positions has been dominated by efforts to explain the gap between women and men’s participation in managerial roles, especially the limitations on women’s upward mobility (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). There are only a few female leaders in the airline industry, particularly in the Chief Executive Officer positions across the globe, with females accounting for less than 5 per cent of the CEOs from 1,500 listed airlines (CAPA, 2016). It was argued by Peterson and Philpot that the airline industry is very competitive and challenging, hence such an organisation must be led by a male CEO as not many females have the competence and deep experience to take on the role of CEO to execute the airline administration, which is very complex in its business operations (Peterson & Philpot, 2007).

Similarly, top management in an organisation needs empowerment to elevate their role to execute the business operations in order to achieve the organisation’s goals. Empowerment is defined as a “multi-dimensional social process that could help people obtain control over their lives, their society and the organisation they belong to”. Therefore, to empower women, it is



essential to reduce the gender gap that is found in top management positions (Thabhiranrak & Jermisittiparsert, 2019).

## **Methodology**

This paper used a qualitative research method with primary data from case studies and a documentation analysis technique (Myer, 2019). Literature from academic and managerial resources was studied, including researches, books, and articles published in international journals. More than 50 articles were collected from various sources of research papers and practitioners, particularly online channels, for example, Google Scholar, Emerald, Sage, Elsevier, ProQuest Business and Management Journals, E-books and Books, in order to search for the relevant content and data. Only articles published in the last ten years were reviewed in order to ensure the use of modern data. Relevant journals were reviewed, such as the *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, using the technique of content analysis and synthesis to write this paper. This research also included two informal interviews with human resources managers regarding the recruitment process and women's representation in leadership roles in top management positions. All data and content were analysed using existing studies, research, reports and documentation.

## **Results**

The significant findings of this study empirically reveal the impacts on top management positions in the airline industry. Consequently, in the study, there was an investigation and focus on airline industry concepts in order to discuss the managing of gender diversity (Hussein & Jermisittiparsert, 2019).

In this paper, the intervening variables that are present in the airline industry work environments are dominated by the males in the top management positions. However, the current global phenomena are changing, including airlines, which must certainly comply although there have only been a few changes recently. The gender balance, with females in top management positions, is steadily becoming an indicator of success. An airline that emphasises that women run the organisation may prosper because of the presence of females, but more likely it is the broader culture which opens those doors for females that could make a given organisation a more effective, competitive entity. Being gender-blind, as well as open on other cultural levels, sounds like a compelling argument for greater efficiency. In aviation, where such a stark industry transformation is occurring, there should be clear advantages in hand. Nevertheless, the airline industry continues to be one of the most prominent places of gender inequality with regard to top management. For example, female pilots are significantly underrepresented at just 10 per cent of the total pilot population around the globe (IATA, 2019). In contrast, some customer-oriented airlines seem to be hiring more women to lead the

business, as evidenced by the research and reviews of over 200 airlines across the world. However, it has been reported that the proportion of women holding CEO roles in the airline industry is still only approximately 4 per cent, as compared to 12 per cent in other industries that also have a very low rate of gender equality. Summarising the total number of women that run an airline business in the position of CEO by region, the number of women airlines CEOs has not improved much over the past few decades up to the present. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) outlined that gender equality is the key challenge for the airline industry, and it is clear that there is a large amount of work needed to achieve gender balance in the top C-level positions.

**Table 1:** Globally represented female airline CEOs

<b>Regions</b>	<b>No. of female CEOs</b>
Asia and the Pacific	3
Europe & the UK	6
South America	3
Middle East	3
Africa	2
North America	1

As seen in Table 1, gender parity in airlines is becoming slightly more widespread compared to the last couple of decades, as airlines strive to understand the ways in which they can work to increase the number of women in their top management positions.

Regarding scholarship and practice, there have been many debates about whether women manage differently from men. This has led to the reason that women are progressing less frequently to the top management positions in organisations. This paper explores the sameness/difference argument in a broader analysis of management styles, emphasising business functions. It is also suggested that any analysis and debate on the management style must also refer to a feminist theoretical framework and gender role theory, which recognise inequality and patriarchal issues.

Additionally, previous studies have identified other hurdles to gender equality. These include discrimination, the family-life demands of women as caregivers, prejudice, and the stereotyping of men, who continue to dominate management. Empowerment is also a key driver for women to be chosen for leadership roles. Significant findings have emerged as a result of previous research. Women now perceive the barriers that prevent them from moving up to top management positions (Foster & Red, 2015). This affirms the research of Skalpe (2017), which stated that the interlinks between barriers such as discrimination, family-life demands, prejudice and stereotyping with women's advancement to top management in the workplace were statistically significant. It also supports Morgan and Pritchard's (2019)



research, which emerged in this study; they expressed that women are more sensitive and encouraging leaders as perceived by most men and women; hence, in response to these findings, the customer-oriented airlines prefer to hire women to run the business.

There is an expectation that it will be possible to reduce gender inequality in top management positions and for future increases in gender equality to indicate that the number of women who are in the top management positions such as CEO, chairperson, and president in the airline industry has continued to rise.

## **Conclusions**

This study explores the upper echelons of the airline industry and analyses gender equality for women in leadership roles in middle and top management level positions. Recently, gender diversity has been addressed as an important factor in generating positive synergies between groups of employees and increasing innovative firm performance. A more diverse workforce in terms of age, education and gender may have a positive effect, given that these individual characteristics may complement each other (Baer et al., 2013). The last section of the results summarises gender inequality in the top management positions of the airline industry, as follows.

Firstly, the study aimed to draw the attention of researchers, corporate shareholders, and policymakers towards gender issues involved in the relationship between leadership and airline industry management. Improvement is needed to further increase the number of female CEOs.

Secondly, with the support of gender role theory, the study concluded that there is direct bias against females with regard to top management or leadership. Thirdly, gender inequality exists, and it is maintained and reinforced at each level of social analysis (individual, interactional, and institutional). At the individual level, gender and development emerge through the internalisation of either a male or female identity (Knorr, 2011).

This study highlights the importance of increasing gender equality in the context of the business level, particularly the airline industry, where inequality as to gender in the top management positions still exists.

Also, the study shows that more organisations are making an effort to demonstrate that they are addressing gender issues by building gender and culture teams within their organisations in order to communicate with regard to this issue. To recapitulate, based on the findings and conclusions drawn, the awareness of conducting gender analysis to identify the real gap and challenges to increasing the number of women who participate in the decision-making process

and leadership roles in the top management levels needs to be addressed and implemented for best practices.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The literature on Gender Role Theory supports the position that in management and leadership, there should be equal opportunity for both males and females. Thus, in terms of the theoretical implications, this paper supports elements of gender parity employment at the top management level. From a theoretical perspective, the main contribution of this paper to the existing knowledge is the identification of the gender-specific drivers for the promotion of females to top management positions (Jermsittiparsert, 2016).

### **Practical Contributions**

From the perspective of both the organisation and the individual, it is essential and in the best interests of every concern that biases in the selection process are eliminated. In addition, top management level rotational programs should be implemented. They could be initiated to ensure that each member, both male and female in particular, of the team has an opportunity to exhibit their management and leadership skills as well as the behaviours that are needed to lead for organisational effectiveness. Another reason that explains why females are under-represented in top management positions, e.g. in the airline business, could be because females perform less agentic behaviours in groups, as demonstrated by previous research. Many obstacles that females in top management experience in higher managerial levels start from them simply being minorities within the group membership.

However, agentic behaviours are not the only solution to female's under-representation in the top management levels. One permanent solution would be for gender stereotypes to be transformed in society and for top management to be conceptualised, not only as agentic but also as beyond stereotypes. Having said that, in this paper, it is believed there is value in being able to support a "way out" for females in gender roles.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Perhaps one of the most important questions to emerge from this paper is: How do women add value to the organisation? Is their functional background or increase in agentic behaviour likely to help females conquer gender bias, at least in the context of the self-managing team? Moreover, future research could investigate the impacts of agentic and social structure behaviours on top management positions at different stages of group development. This would allow for a more explicit examination of whether gender bias evolves over time. Finally, this paper did not explore other potential predictor variables, such as cognitive ability or



management experience. As a first step in identifying the phenomenon, this paper only scratches the surface. Hopefully, future researchers will perhaps be motivated by the content in this paper to extend our understanding and interest to their future studies.



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