

Women in hospitality: Charting the road to recovery

Pre-pandemic, the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) estimated that women accounted for 54% of all tourism employees globally, compared to 39% in the broader economy. And yet in Africa, the figure was much, much higher (closer to 70%).



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In fact, in 2019 Fedhasa reported that women accounted for 60% of all employees in the accommodation sector alone.

Fast-forward to 2022 and it's no surprise that women have suffered disproportionate job and income losses in the travel, tourism and hospitality sectors – arguably the hardest hit by Covid-19.

As the International Labour Organization points out, inequalities between women and men worldwide, whether you're talking loss of income, pay gaps, or leadership positions, have all been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving much work to be done.

And yet, women remain the backbone of the hospitality industry, which means they'll play a significant role in its recovery – and future success.

We caught up with four women who are excited by the potential within the industry, the opportunity to do things differently, and who are ready to lead the way:

1. Debbie-Lee Cockrell, GM, Erinvale Estate Hotel & Spa

"Gender isn't supposed to determine whether or not a person can be a remarkable leader. A person's leadership abilities should depend on their individual strengths and personality traits."

With both her parents working in hospitality, Cockrell grew up on resorts, experiencing the excitement of the environment first-hand, and seeing families and friends coming together to enjoy each other's company while looking for new experiences and adventures. Her unique upbringing ignited a lifelong passion for hospitality, and she has developed a deep love and understanding of the industry – including the pressures it can put on family life.

"My childhood memories have driven every decision in my career path. I'm always looking for a unique platform to enable me to be a part of what I am passionate about: developing teams and creating beautiful spaces where people come together to enjoy authentic hospitality."

Cockrell is determined to see her colleagues grow and succeed and is quick to recognise their need for flexibility and support in a sector often characterised by shift work, long hours and unpredictability.

"We have to recognise that women – and men – are more than their jobs. They're partners, wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers – and spending quality time with your family, and doing things you love, is so important. In hospitality, you need empathy for and an understanding of people's lives outside of work if you want to be a successful leader," she says.

Alongside empathy, integrity is key. "Often you learn as a leader through not getting it right, and that's okay. It pushes you to do better each day, to remain humble and to always have a learning attitude. Importantly, you have to hold onto your integrity. As leaders we hold influence, and we need to be mindful of how we use it, as our decisions impact teams of people."

With lockdowns and restrictions a thing of the past, Cockrell is excited to see the industry, like many others, start to truly rebuild.

"I am pleased to share that since the beginning of the year, Erinvale Estate Hotel & Spa has seen a steady start to its recovery, with the return of international visitors. But we're mindful and appreciative of the local support we received too. For sustainable recovery within our businesses, I believe we all need to foster relationships with our local visitors, guests and supporters, while working towards the much-needed recovery of the international market. I believe through surviving Covid as a business, we now understand the true value of building a sustainable business for the future, which requires it to be resilient in so many ways."

Of course, there are challenges. "The pandemic forced many people out of the industry, or to reinvent themselves in order to survive. Many have not returned, choosing to stay in other industries. I am positive that this will change as we move into more settled waters, although for now, this remains a hurdle we need to collectively overcome as an industry," concludes Debbie-Lee.

What advice would you give to young women still at the very start of their hospitality careers?

Remember, you have chosen your career path for a reason. It drew you in, so hold on to that energy and excitement and let it propel you in the decisions you make and the path you choose to navigate while building your career. Only you can make a success of your future, people can give you opportunities, but it's up to you as to how you act on them. Very importantly for us women within any industry, let's support one another and build each other up, we all achieve more in an environment of care.

2. Jessica Redinger, GM, voco The Bank Johannesburg Rosebank

"Hospitality is still very male dominated at senior management levels and regional levels, however, there is a shift taking place and more women are moving into management roles and General Manager positions. Voco is a great example."

A small-town girl originally from Mtubatuba in Northern Kwa-Zulu Natal, Redinger realised her gift for the hospitality industry (and her knack for working with both staff and guests alike) when she began working as a waitress at an iconic Durban hotel two decades ago. Over the years, she's worked in various roles in the industry, culminating in her dream of managing a leading hotel.



Debbie-Lee Cockrell, Erinvale Estate Hotel & Spa's General Manager



Jessica Redinger, GM, voco The Bank
Johannesburg Rosebank

"I had been in the hotel industry for almost 20 years when the opportunity at voco presented itself. I persevered through the recruitment process, which took almost 9 months due to Covid's impact on the hospitality industry! The quirkiness and uniqueness of voco really resonated with me, and I love that every day is unpredictable and ever-changing, especially in these times when the hospitality industry needs to be reinvented. It forces me to be creative and keep coming up with new ideas," says Redinger.

Redinger has learned over her career that while guests may come and go, your staff remain. "We spend most of our time at work, so it must be a fun and enjoyable environment. I have also learnt from personal experience how important family is, my motto is that family comes first. This is to ensure a work-life balance."

For Redinger, the next few years at voco will be exciting. "The pandemic has forced us to rethink how hotels operate, to streamline processes, and be versatile across different departments and roles. It's brought to light what is essential in operations, and what was simply carried over from the past, or is just a luxury. We really had to cut back on anything unnecessary, and it made us think."

Jessica believes that recruiting and investing in a skilled workforce has to be a priority now – as well as promoting diversity, equality and inclusion in the industry. "We have so many unique staff members, and we allow them to be who they are and embrace what they identify with. We are not afraid to ask staff these questions so that we have a better understanding of who they are. I am very lucky to have a small, intimate team, so I get to spend time with each one of them on a regular basis. After all, happy employees make for happy guests."

Although Jessica believes the hospitality industry will take time to recover (with pre-Covid levels returning towards the end of 2023), she is looking forward to leading her dynamic team, and seeing voco The Bank positioned as the number one hotel in the Rosebank node!

What advice would you give to young women still at the very start of their hospitality careers?

Hospitality is a demanding industry; boundaries are very important to ensure that you have a work-life balance. It is possible to have a family and be career driven simultaneously, I ensure this with my team.

3. Patience Masebe, GM, Bon Hotel Rustenburg

"My team makes me a successful GM, and I do my best to pour the best of me into them. We need each other; hospitality is not a one-person show."

Masebe says hospitality is a "giving" industry, which can easily lead to burnout. Thanks to the support, leadership, and educational opportunities she has been gifted in her career, she has been able to achieve her dream role as GM of Bon Hotel Rustenburg.

Masebe has two pieces of advice for women in the sector. The first is to seek support and mentorship so you can consistently grow into the best version of yourself. Both personally and professionally. The second is always to be prepared to chip in when work beyond your scope becomes necessary – doing this will enable you to lead confidently.

"Proving oneself as a young woman in the industry can be difficult, but it's all worth it when you have the passion and determination to succeed. My team is supportive, and they help me to stay focused on my goals – which tells me I am doing something right,"



Patience Masebe, GM, BON Hotel Rustenburg

she says.

Hard work and passion are traits Patience has in buckets. Her drive comes from her desire to make her parents proud. Her first experience in the hospitality industry was doing an internship for a leading hotel in Klerksdorp, which she describes as "the most difficult week of my life". Unthwarted, she pursued a career in hospitality, working her way from receptionist to her current role as GM.

"I have had to grow and expand quickly and painfully, but I wouldn't change a thing. It was uncomfortable to grow, it still is, but I will keep on growing and learning for as long as I live," she says.

Adopted and raised in an Afrikaans family, Masebe says she knows the importance of learning from and sharing life experiences in a team. "Our property is multi-cultural and multifaceted. It is such a joyous experience to come to work daily and pick up a new phrase in Zulu or Afrikaans, and I can only wish this for every company out there. We are a multi-cultural nation, and each company should represent that," she says.

As for supporting women working in hospitality, she says it starts with "empowering our women to have the confidence to do anything their heart desires".

What advice would you give to young women still at the very start of their hospitality careers?

Hospitality is a passion, not a job. The hours, the workload, it can get very tiring. Be prepared to work hard and have a passion for people. Often you only see the passion when you start to do the work, but once you realise what it's all about, you will love every second of it. Realise that most of life is hospitality. People need to work and sleep (business trips), eat (restaurants), get married (events), have business meetings (conferencing) and much, much more. Hard work is one part, the other part is teamwork. You can't do it alone.

4. Viwe Sona, Sales Executive, The President Hotel



Viwe Sona, Sales Executive, The President Hotel

"I love young people, and love using my story as an example that anything is possible when you put hard work in."

Sona heads up Fedhasa's Young Professional Sector, and her role on the Fedhasa board has allowed her to realise her dream of "empowering our youth" to create a generation of "go-getters".

Sona began her career in the front office after achieving a tertiary qualification in tourism and hospitality. She quickly rose through the ranks and is now working in sales; responsible for "getting bums in beds", setting up rates and contracts with clients (government, corporate, leisure, groups, and conferencing) and visiting current and potential clients to make sure that they're happy with the service received.

"I love people and I love dealing with people, even under difficult circumstances! I love that each day is different and that you can create a memorable experience for visitors that they can talk about and remember. I love showing off our beautiful country, what we have to offer, and then delivering on it. The joy that you see on someone's face is exhilarating."

As the industry grapples with a shortage of skills, Sona believes that we need to see more women in leadership positions.

"The industry is slowly embracing women in the industry, but I still feel that we need to see more women in leadership positions. There is just something about a women's touch! Women are great at multi-tasking, we have empathy, but we also have a no-nonsense approach. Young women are becoming more confident and stepping up to leadership roles and

responsibilities. We need each other and that is something that has been overlooked for decades."

Looking back, Sona is proud of the strides she has made in the industry, both as a role model and as an advocate for other women. "When I meet with the staff I led at my previous jobs, it fills me with joy. It's great to hear how people have benefited from my guidance and what they have learned from me," she says.

"Our society has allowed us to believe certain things about ourselves and our environments. I am here to change that using my journey. The change started with me, and I want all young people to know that they have the power within them to make a difference," Sona says.

What advice would you give to young women still at the very start of their hospitality careers?

Learn, learn, learn and learn. Apply your knowledge and skills and be noticed. Give your best, even when situations aren't always favourable. Look at what is positive for you at that point in time and let that be your motivation to carry on. The industry is fun, you can be creative and create wonderful memories for yourself and with your guests.

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