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Preferred Hotels & Resorts Leaders Share Their Insight on International Women's Day

NATIONAL REPORT—While the hospitality industry at-large is taking important strides to address gender equality, only 26 percent of senior leadership positions are currently occupied by women, despite making up 50 percent of the workforce. To facilitate greater progress and in support of International Women's Day on March 8, with this year's theme of #BreaktheBias, a group of diverse women from [Preferred Hotels & Resorts'](#) global leadership team are sharing their wide-ranging insight with women seeking to develop careers in hospitality.

For context, the makeup of the Preferred Hotels & Resorts leadership team is unique compared to industry standards, in that 47 percent of its senior executive team leaders globally are women, including several positions that are traditionally filled by men, specifically CEO, President, and Chief Revenue Officer, with 50 percent of its wider leadership team also being women.

"While excellence should not be distinguished by gender and while we are proud that the gender equilibrium within our leadership team serves as a best practice for others, we recognize that the hospitality industry at large has great progress to make before gender bias stops making regular headlines," said CEO Lindsey Ueberroth. "To create impactful momentum on a global scale, it is critical for fellow female executives to share success stories for how they have navigated bias within the industry as a way to champion other women in pursuing their career ambitions without potential prejudice as a hinderance."

Three Women Share Their Expertise

Preferred Hotels & Resorts leaders sharing their insight include Michelle Woodley, President;

Seema Roy, Area Managing Director – South Asia, Middle East & Africa; Boyana Simeonova, Vice President, Customer Relations; and Roberta Possenti, Vice President – Europe. The leaders' insights are shared in a Q&A format :

1. **To level the playing field for women in hospitality, how can we move beyond recognizing bias to actively tackling it?**

Michelle: Recognizing and acknowledging bias is the first step. Actively tackling it takes time and intention. Training and education is important and should take place through multiple platforms such as online learning, in-person discussions, and sharing experiences.

Roberta: It starts with ourselves. It takes a concerted effort to think differently and challenge the stereotypes that have been set in male-dominated environments. It's about providing space, opportunities, and security for women, enabling them to express themselves freely without the fear of prejudice and judgement.

Seema: We need to make the topic of bias part of daily conversation versus only bringing it up while discussing diversity and inclusion. It needs to be at the core of company culture for it to be embraced fully.

2. **What advice would you share with women that might be experiencing unconscious bias in the workplace?**

Michelle: Don't be afraid to confront the issue head on. You owe it to yourself to bring it to the attention of the individual that is displaying the bias. The person in question may not even be aware of it or understand why a certain comment or action is demonstrating a bias. The most important part of this is explaining the "why."

Boyana: I grew up with a strong female role model—my single mother working as a doctor in Bulgaria, which was a communist country at the time. She instilled in me the confidence as a women to tackle any challenges that I've faced during my career. My

advice is to be confident and demonstrate to your colleagues your invaluable skills. They will recognize and respect you for it.

Seema: As women, we play a crucial role in bringing about positive change to help level the playing field. This can be done by taking charge, making our voice heard, by encouraging and supporting other women, and by embracing diversity. We need to recognize our own self-worth and play to our strengths.

3. **In your opinion, how does gender equality positively impact economic and sustainable development globally?**

Michelle: By having a well-balanced senior team of both women and men, we encourage diverse perspectives in important areas of collaboration, communication, and management style, helping us to overcome barriers and make well-rounded decisions. It has been proven that all environments with greater gender equality have more cohesion and connection, leading to a valuable mix of perspectives, which greatly benefits society.

Boyana: Gender equality provides different perspectives and ultimately better success in any business endeavor. Globally it contributes to more balanced living conditions and development.

Seema: Gender diversity and equality allows us to create a balanced and holistic environment. It helps boost productivity, increase organizational effectiveness, and growth.

4. **How can we address the gender pay gap and what advice would you give to women in our industry seeking to level up in this regard?**

Michelle: Be proactive—no one is going to do this for you. Do your homework and understand the competitive landscape. If you are a manager and have influence over pay scale of others, be sure you are being fair and equitable.

Boyana: Skills, performance, and contribution should be awarded at market value. My advice for anyone unhappy with their pay is to know your worth and be prepared to ask for it.

Roberta: Challenge the system and communicate with your peers. Leverage your connections and seek support and guidance to further your well-deserved success.

5. **At Preferred, 47 percent of senior leaders are women, but in most companies, women are under-represented. What advice in terms of small steps would you give to brands and other female leaders seeking to create more inclusive, representative leadership teams?**

Michelle: For internal promotion and advancement of women in the workplace, I strongly encourage participation in development programs. At Preferred, we currently have two women participating in the Ethnic Future Leaders Program of WiHTL Diversity in Hospitality Travel & Leisure. We also have two senior executives, including myself, participating in a reverse mentees program, which has been incredibly valuable in understanding the biases that others face.

Roberta: Believe that change is possible. Mentor and train your top management to think differently and be more aware of their team. For example, inviting the team for evening drinks may be appropriate for some, but not for mothers needing to go home and take care of the kids. This “inclusive” activity can therefore become quite bias, defeating the purpose. Leaders must evaluate consequences of their actions and find ways of being inclusive of all. It’s also fundamental to provide flexibility to women in their career path, finding solutions to fit their needs and keep them active in the workplace.

Seema: I am proud that Preferred has so many women in senior leadership positions. For brands to be fully committed to alleviate gender gap issues, diversity and inclusion must be a strategic priority and part of company culture. A few basic tips to be considered include hire diverse at all levels in the company, provide mentorship and training opportunities, strive to provide equal pay for equal work, stay committed and work towards retention of women in the workforce.

6. **What advice would you share with women beginning their careers in the hospitality industry?**

Michelle: My advice is the same for everyone, not just for women. Make every day count—reflect on your successes and failures often, ask for feedback, and contribute new ideas to every meeting. Always remember when you are entering the hospitality industry, whether you are going down the path of operations, finance, marketing, or

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management, that hospitality is the act of hosting guests in an open, friendly, and warm manner. If you are not willing to be the ultimate host in all that you do, think again.

Roberta: Take a seat at the table. Listen. Express your views. You're not there by chance, you've earned it. Build connections with peers that can support and mentor you in your career path.

Seema: What has helped me navigate through my journey all these years is clarity of thought, and the adaptability and willingness to learn and grow at every stage. Be authentic, positive, and resilient. Stay true to your individuality and to your role. Proactively find a mentor, they can help you adapt to the new culture quickly and be an enabler for your professional and personal development.