

Women Power

Hotel General Managers are largely men, but women are making their mark, and brilliantly so, in this hardcore male terrain.

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

Women hotel General Managers are breaking the mould by successfully stepping into men's shoes. As a tribute to International Women's Day, we speak to some gritty General Managers from leading hotels across the country, who spill the beans on their passion for hospitality and what it takes to thrive in a male domain...

(Presenting the women hotels GMs in an alphabetical order)



AMANDEEP KAUR

General Manager, ITC Gardenia



“The first step is to acknowledge your self-worth, stop doubting yourself based on gender, and to not be too hard on yourself.”

Born in North India, New Delhi was Amandeep Kaur's base where she did a course at the Institute of Hotel Management on her father's recommendation. She received several job opportunities when she passed out and she admits that she made the right decision in choosing ITC Hotels over all others.

KEY MILESTONES

Given an opportunity by ITC Hotels to be part of big events that we catered to; to name some, WEF in 2009, 2011 in Davos and G20 in 2023. In 2019, when I was mentored to transition from functional role to general administration as the first lady General Manager is the milestone that is special and I'll cherish all my life

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The ITC Hotels' ecosystem fosters growth and at the same time provides enough tools and encouragement for everyone across all diverse backgrounds. I would say the journey has given me several opportunities, rather than challenges. The management institute's well-structured training programs armoured us with knowledge and enough shop floor exposure to take up our first posting with a lot of confidence. The work environment along with the accommodation and various facilities provided by the organization, made the journey very pleasant.

ADVICE TO WOMEN

The first step is to acknowledge your self-worth, stop doubting yourself based on gender, and to not be too hard on yourself. There is no shortcut to hard work, irrespective of gender and industry. Hard work is a subjective matter where, while acquiring industry-based knowledge, one continues to invest in oneself by pushing one's boundaries, learning beyond one's subject, creating a large knowledge archive for oneself, reading about diverse topics on related and non-related subjects, travelling extensively, grooming oneself well, and with every opportunity preparing well to give it the best shot every time. I also believe in maintaining a positive mindset, good communication and garnering support from family members.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

As a hotelier, I think of my work as my lifestyle. For me, work and life are two very important aspects and at both places, it's not the quantity of time one spends that matters. What matters is the quality and how we make the best use of time at work and in our personal lives. Also, ITC Hotels has extremely flexible and inclusive policies for diverse workforce, including that for women, that allows us to handle special circumstances at personal front effectively and peacefully. My family members have extended extensive support in my journey and together we have fostered an ecosystem of progressive mindset, where we ride this journey together.

NEHA KAPOOR

General Manager, Hyatt Place Vadodara



“Recognize that gender bias may exist but focus on your capabilities and contributions rather than allowing it to deter your progress. Seek opportunities for growth.”

Neha Kapoor’s journey spans over two decades, giving her a wealth of experiences that she draws from in her position as the General Manager at Hyatt Place Vadodara. After working as a Front Office Associate for a brief period, she switched gears and entered the Sales and Marketing field, which led to her current leadership role.

KEY MILESTONES

Throughout my career, I have encountered and embraced several significant moments that have defined my path. I began my career at the front office and gradually worked my way up to leadership roles in esteemed establishments, where each step brought its own lessons and insights. Whether I was directly assisting guests or leading a team, my goal has always been to enhance their experiences and contribute positively to the organizations I’ve been a part of.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Managing the numerous human element dynamics, satisfying guest expectations, and negotiating the complexities of stakeholder management have presented tough challenges. As the Director of Sales and Marketing and Assistant General Manager at Hyatt Place Hyderabad in 2020, I recall being solely in charge of overseeing five departments during COVID. After working tirelessly to maintain the ever-evolving safety measures in hospitality for six months, I successfully navigated these obstacles, emerging stronger and more capable through effective communication, strategic planning, and the creation of a supportive team environment.

ADVICE TO WOMEN

To all the wonderful women venturing into the hospitality industry, I want to share some heartfelt advice. Embrace your journey with determination and resilience. Recognize that gender bias may exist but focus on your capabilities and contributions rather than allowing it to deter your progress. Seek opportunities for growth, continuously enhance your skills, and leverage your unique strengths as women leaders. Your voice matters, and your advocacy can truly shape a brighter future for all. Embrace your potential and let your light shine brightly in every corner of the hospitality world.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

As a mother of a 15-year-old, maintaining work-life balance is paramount for me amidst the demanding nature of the hospitality industry. I highlight the importance of delegation and time management in maintaining long-term success in both personal and professional spheres. Whether it’s unplugging from work emails and calls during designated personal time or scheduling regular breaks throughout the day, I ensure that I allocate time for unwinding, and spending quality moments with loved ones. By incorporating these strategies into my daily routine, my commitment to work-life balance not only boosts my productivity but also serves as an inspiration to my team.

NIKITA RAMCHANDANI

General Manager, JW Marriott Mumbai, Juhu



“We need to make the corporate force gender agnostic and for that it is critical that the society works in tandem to support that.”

Nikita Ramchandani is responsible for leading all the operational aspects of the hotel and driving the departments to achieve maximum growth and deliver exceptional guest experiences - this includes leading capital projects and guest service procedures, managing the hotel's profitability and ensuring that the hotel's long-term strategic goals are met. A graduate from Les Roches School of Hotel Management, Switzerland, and with over 22 years of experience in the industry, Nikita's astute business and leadership skills have seen her take strides across her career graph with different challenges and roles across the hospitality landscape.

KEY MILESTONES

There have been many in the trajectory that I would categorize as milestones. I do consider myself extremely privileged to have a vast pedigree across legendary brands within this industry. Interacting with leaders that were so ahead of their times and catering to a target audience that was so diverse in its expectation, was a massive learning curve. Moving to Baltimore with Four Seasons taught me basic tenets that needed a fair amount of cultural rebuilding. When I joined Marriott, the company was on the cusp of a huge takeover and reorganization. Once again something that completely pushed me out of the proverbial 'comfort zone'.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The nature of this industry lends itself to massive changes within a short period of time. This sort of churn predictably comes with its own set of situations that warrant changing perspectives. I have had times when I have had to make certain decisions that needed incredible sacrifice and support at a personal front. That sort of unified approach to life is required especially when women are in the growth cycle of their careers.

ADVICE TO WOMEN

We need to make the corporate force gender agnostic and for that it is critical that the society works in tandem to support that. Women need to have adequate backing if they need to have longevity in their careers. So many drop out for reasons that seem more overwhelming than they are. With the heavy focus on diversity and the recognition of what women can bring to the table with their unique capabilities of multi-tasking, high EQ and their educational qualifications, it is an advantage each woman should take advantage of.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work life balance is an outcome of choices and priorities. I, personally, choose quality over quantity and firmly believe that you can thrive professionally only if you are able to make balanced choices. Moreover, these are largely personal and cannot be bucketed into a formula for all. We live in times that need daily tweaks to adjust to what gets thrown at you. Some days, you will be balanced and some days you won't. And to be able to be fine with that is progress.

PRIYANKA BHATT ARORA

General Manager, Lemon Tree Premier, City Centre, Gurugram



“Challenges can multiply, especially when you are not just a hotelier but a woman hotelier. One must be passionate to continue to grow in this industry, especially if you are a woman.”

With over two decades of experience in the hotel industry, Priyanka Bhatt Arora has been the Hotel General Manager at Lemon Tree Premier City Centre since August 2022. Having started her career with Le Meridien, New Delhi, she has worked with ITC Maurya A Luxury Collection Hotel, New Delhi, The Park, New Delhi, Radisson Hotel Noida, Sandal Suites, operated by Lemon Tree Hotels, Noida and Lemon Tree Premier, City Centre, Gurugram. With roles like Club Floor Manager, Duty Manager, Senior Duty Manager, Assistant Front Office Manager, Front Office Manager and Accommodation Manager, she has done it all.

KEY MILESTONES

Our industry deals with humans primarily and, as we all know, they can be unpredictable. Sometimes, our smallest gestures can create a wow moment, while at other times, our best is not good enough for our guests. Every day brings along learning and often erases or amends the previous lessons. I started my career at 19 and was handling operations as a Duty Manager at 22, making me one of the youngest Duty Managers in Delhi. The trust shown by my organisation made me an even better leader.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Every challenge is an opportunity to grow - we constantly heard this from our leaders but I experienced this during the COVID lockdown. As hotels re-opened with skeletal staffing and new norms, I was given the opportunity to run the property with minimum team members and together we did some great work.

ADVICE TO WOMEN

The hotel industry is one of the liveliest industries as we work 24X7 and 365 days a year. We never close our doors and the challenges can multiply especially when you are not just a hotelier but a woman hotelier. I feel that one must be passionate to continue to grow in this industry, especially if you are a woman. No holidays on weekends and festivals can sometimes not just affect you but also your family. During COVID, when people prioritised their health and safety and preferred to stay at home, we moved out of our homes and did our duty with pride. This is possible only when you are dedicated to your work to the extent that others start respecting your dedication. If you expect others to accept you and your lifestyle, you need to first accept it yourself wholeheartedly. My son, who has always seen his mother as a hotelier, is extremely proud of my achievements and he comprehends the requirements of my role. We ensure whatever time we get together; we make the best of it.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Our life is the sum of choices we make. I choose to make my career in this industry and, without a second thought, I would state that I am a proud hotelier.

RADHIKA TATA

General Manager, ibis Hyderabad Hitec City



“Being a woman is my super power. We come as a package of dedication, discipline, determination, passion, and focus.”

Radhika Tata has 22 years of experience, with 12 years in the travel and tourism trade and 10 years' experience in hotel operations, sales, revenue, catering sales, and events management. A core business development and operational excellence strategist and analyst, she is a transformational and influential leader who can adapt changes quickly and develop new leaders.

KEY MILESTONES

Diversifying my profile from travel trade to hotel sales and marketing and then to hotel operations, this journey has been incredible. The journey between director of sales to general manager was the biggest milestone achieved by me in my professional career. I always believed that it is not about the destination but the journey, and one must cherish every moment of the journey. Also, one cannot achieve any milestone alone, it is the management, your leaders, the company, and culture to make us thoughtful leaders and that is what I received from Accor.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Challenges are inevitable and everyone must go through them irrespective of the industry they are working for. Challenges make us stronger but with the right support system, we can also win in most situations. The biggest challenge I feel is our own mental block and self-doubt. When I moved from sales to hotel operations, I faced performance anxiety and self-doubt. I was blessed to work with the best leaders and management who never left any stone unturned while mentoring and guiding me. My leader's trust and belief in me made me stronger and helped me overcome my self-doubt.

ADVICE TO WOMEN

When I am asked 'what is my super power', I always say that 'being a woman is my super power'. We come as a package of dedication, discipline, determination, passion, and focus. Coming from a very strong spiritual background, I believe in Devi Shakti which gives us strength and guides us to fight all battles. Women have the gift of multitasking and handling multiple things simultaneously. The newer generation is very fortunate to be self-sufficient, independent and can choose the industry they would like to work for. Working in the hospitality industry has its own charm. One can choose the department they would like to work for, and work with passion in your area of interest.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

The equation is easy when we love our job and are passionate about the work. Taking care of family after a wonderful work day makes life very simple. Life is not hassled when you don't differentiate the parameters. I feel content when my team feels great and happy at work and I can then carry the same energy and happiness back at home.

RANJEETA MOHAPATRA

Resort Manager, Mayfair Himalayan Spa Resort, Kalimpong



“Understand that you will only be treated as an equal if you believe in your own equality. If you think you are right, stand up for it, don’t be intimidated, and the world is your oyster.”

Ranjeeta Mohapatra began her career as a Guest Relations Manager for Sterling Resorts in Puri and Club Mahindra in Goa. After a brief career break to manage family responsibilities, she re-entered the workforce, joining the newly established Vedic Village Spa Resort in Kolkata as Manager, Front Office. Subsequently, she took on the responsibility of managing spa operations along with housekeeping for three Mayfair properties (Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Gangtok).

KEY MILESTONES

Personally, a significant milestone in my career was undoubtedly my time at Vedic Village. When I joined, we were all working together to launch this property that spanned acres of land, featuring numerous villas, farmhouses, and time houses. The fact that all the hard work finally paid off, considering we started from ground zero, would remain a major accomplishment.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

One of the most significant challenges as a working mother has been managing the household and my two children during their growing-up phases. Initially, it was hard to multitask with so many responsibilities, but over time I learned how to manage my time between the two. Another challenge arose from being a woman, especially when dealing with difficult contractors, vendors, and sometimes guests. It was a challenge to not feel intimidated and to stand up as equals when facing such situations.

ADVICE TO WOMEN

Understand that you will only be treated as an equal if you believe in your own equality. If you think you are right, stand up for it, don’t be intimidated, and the world is your oyster.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

It is challenging when you have children and must manage the household. However, managing time between work and life comes gradually with experience. It took me a while to figure this out - have a set plan for the day, make sure you don’t work longer than required, and ensure all your time spent in the office is worthwhile. Living next to your workplace makes a hell of a difference because that enables you to go home for a short while in case you must.

RATNA MALHOTRA

General Manager, The Oberoi Vanyavilas, Ranthambhore



As the General Manager of The Oberoi Vanyavilas in Ranthambhore, Ratna Malhotra brings with her over three decades of rich experience in the hospitality industry. Her journey began with humble roots, inspired by the elegance of The Oberoi Grand in Calcutta. Despite initial setbacks, including an unsuccessful application to the Oberoi School of Hotel Management, she started as a Guest Relations Executive at The Oberoi Grand.

KEY MILESTONES

My journey has been marked by several significant milestones. Starting as a Guest Relations Executive, I gradually climbed the ranks within the Oberoi Group, managing the esteemed Belvedere club for five years and contributing to the Harvard case study on Oberoi Group Service Excellence. As the General Manager of The Oberoi Vanyavilas for the past decade, our hotel has earned accolades from esteemed publications, consistently maintaining top positions on platforms like TripAdvisor and NPS (Net Promoter Score) within the company. My dedication to excellence, meticulous attention to detail, and unwavering commitment to creating unforgettable guest experiences have been the cornerstones of my career.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

My journey has not been devoid of challenges, particularly as a woman from a non-hospitality background. I encountered scepticism and moments of self-doubt along the way. However, I persevered, leveraging each challenge as an opportunity for growth. Through relentless determination and a continuous pursuit of skill development, I defied expectations and ascended to the role of General Manager. Guided by mentors within the company, including personal encouragement from Mr PRS Oberoi himself, I overcame obstacles with resilience and unwavering focus.

ADVICE TO WOMEN

To my fellow women in the hospitality industry, I offer words of encouragement and empowerment. Believe in yourselves, embrace challenges as opportunities for growth, and seek support and mentorship along the way. Recognize your inherent worth and potential, and never underestimate the impact of your contributions. Oberoi Hotels provides an enriching environment for those passionate about service and eager to cultivate a global perspective. Embrace the journey with confidence and determination, knowing that the path to success is paved with resilience and dedication.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Maintaining a harmonious work-life balance is essential, given the demands of my role. I prioritize self-care and well-being, incorporating mindfulness practices, regular exercise, and moments of relaxation into my routine. Effective time management and delegation enable me to fulfil my professional responsibilities while also nurturing personal connections and interests outside of work.

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SONALI CHAUHAN

General Manager, The Connaught, IHCL SeleQtions



As an alumna of one of India's most reputed colleges, National Institute of Hotel Management (IHM), Sonali's career spans 21 years with an experience across international and domestic hotel brands. She has worked on opening hotels such as Hyatt Regency Kolkata, Taj Santacruz and now The Connaught, IHCL SeleQtions. She recently attended the Executive Programme in Strategy and Organisation at the Stanford University, Graduate School of Business.

KEY MILESTONES

I was selected for the coveted Corporate Leadership Trainee Programme with Hyatt International in 2001. After a 14-year stint with Hyatt, I joined Indian Hotels Company Limited to launch the company's third luxury hotel in Mumbai, Taj Santacruz, Mumbai. I am presently the General Manager at The Connaught, IHCL SeleQtions - New Delhi, the first boutique property for the company. The hotel has been recently awarded as the Best Boutique hotel by Safari India and I have also received an award for The Best General Manager - North India by CMO Asia

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Challenges are a natural course of progression; however, overcoming them and being resilient pays off in the end. Leveraging upon our training resources and enabling our teams to grow by equipping them with the relevant skill and knowledge has led to higher engagement and retention levels especially since we have a young work force and focus on diversity and inclusion. The challenge to open a new hotel, a new brand for the company amid a pandemic in November 2020 was unheard of. A supportive and empathetic team helped us all open the hotel successfully and become profitable in the fourth month of operation. The second wave in April 2021 was another challenge we faced; however, we sailed through it and kept profitability afloat by housing medical team and assisting the medical neighbourhood.

ADVICE TO WOMEN

Working in the hotel industry can be rewarding yet demanding for women. Some advice includes embracing opportunities, building a strong support network, developing leadership skills, prioritizing work-life balance, advocating for oneself, seeking continuous learning, promoting diversity and inclusion, handling challenges with resilience, building a personal brand, perseverance where continued effort to achieve something despite difficulties, and being authentic and confident is much required.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

It's simpler said than done; however, maintaining a work-life balance involves prioritizing tasks, setting boundaries, and utilizing support systems. Delegation of tasks helps along with open communication with colleagues and marking timelines. I personally feel that playing a sport and making time for self-care activities helps an individual to destress and be mindful of their environment.

“It's simpler said than done; however, maintaining a work-life balance involves prioritizing tasks, setting boundaries, and utilizing support systems.”

SWAPNA NAIR

General Manager, Ramada Plaza, Chennai



Swapna Nair has been the General Manager at Ramada Plaza in Chennai since October 2022 and comes with over 17 years of experience in the hospitality industry, having worked with renowned brands in UK, Dubai, and India. As a strategic business leader, she is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the operation to ensure guest and employee satisfaction, talent management, financial performance, and sales and revenue generation.

KEY MILESTONES

Throughout my career, I have achieved several significant milestones. One of the key highlights has been successfully managing the brand positioning of homegrown hotels (Feathers, Chennai) amidst established competitors like Hilton, Marriott & ITC. By developing unique marketing strategies, revenue-generating strategies, identifying new business leads, and leading my team in pursuing these leads, I have consistently surpassed revenue targets and achieved success in a competitive market.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

I think the biggest challenge we and the industry face is finding good qualified young individuals who find working in the hotel industry exciting and challenging. Unfortunately, many people do not think that the hotel industry offers promising career opportunities. Therefore, finding people who are genuinely passionate about working in the hotel industry and who have the potential to reach management positions is rather difficult. We have established an excellent training culture in the organization where the staff feels a sense of learning new skills which adds to their personal growth. This has enabled us to retain good employees and reduce attrition by almost 50%

ADVICE TO WOMEN

My advice to women in the hospitality field is to be focused, persistent, confident, and proactive. Embrace opportunities for continuous learning, build strong networks, and don't shy away from leadership roles. Trust your abilities and contribute your unique feminine touch to the industry.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Maintaining a work-life balance is crucial and it is equally important for everyone in the organization. I have prioritized health as a reason to leave home on time at least three times a week. I prioritize effective time management, set boundaries, and delegate responsibilities. Regular communication with my team and implementing efficient operational processes allow me to achieve a balance between professional and personal life.

“My advice to women in the hospitality field is to be focused, persistent, confident, and proactive. Embrace opportunities for continuous learning, build strong networks, and don't shy away from leadership roles.”

SWAPNA SUBBA

General Manager, Radisson Udaipur



Swapna Subba is a passionate hotelier with over 19 years of experience who possesses a deep ability to enhance the guest experience, build relationships with both internal and external stakeholders, and guide the team to optimize revenues, profitability, and growth innovatively. She is well-versed with world-class procedures and best practices in the hospitality industry through her overseas stint with luxury resorts in Maldives and her experience with different brands of Accor hotels (Novotel, Mercure and ibis). Swapna is an alumnus of IHM-Kolkata and holds a postgraduate degree and MBA in International Hospitality from ISBM Hyderabad. She has a passion for gardening and watching movies.

KEY MILESTONES

Professionally, the most significant milestone for me was when I became a General Manager. I always aspired to become a GM and contribute to the hospitality ecosystem around me. This was special as I ticked one of the dreams from my bucket list. Personally, one of the most important milestones was very emotionally connected when I became a mother of a baby girl. This was completely transformative for me. I believe it brought out the best in me and made me calmer and a mature, responsible person.


OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Fear is one of the biggest challenges that can hold you back from achieving your goals. It can be fear of failure, fear of the unknown, or even fear of success itself. And that is what has happened to me too where I ended up fighting with the demon inside me doubting my capability or confidence to face the world. But fear doesn't have to stop you which I realized much later in my life. Every time we face a difficult situation, we learn more about ourselves and develop our resilience. With each challenge, you become stronger. Challenges are an excellent opportunity for growth. They test your resolve and commitment to your goals. And when you overcome them, you develop emotional and mental strength.

ADVICE TO WOMEN

Believe in yourself and trust your judgment. Don't be swayed by the opinion of others. Don't be shy to communicate your dedication and drive to climb the corporate ladder. A self-promoting attitude is about learning how to communicate what drives you. Consider what makes you excited about showing up at work every day. If you love your job, show it. Search for the value in feedback or criticism you receive from your peers and work towards it, try not to be complacent. Always cultivate perseverance and make a point to venture outside your comfort zone.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

According to me, the correct formula for work-life balance is the proper utilization of the 8-8-8 Rule in a day. That means 8 hours of fulfilling work, 8 hours of quality sleep, and 8 hours of enjoyable and restful activities with your loved ones. Spend your time in a way that supports your goals and values. 

“Believe in yourself and trust your judgement. Don't be swayed by the opinion of others. Don't be shy to communicate your dedication and drive to climb the corporate ladder.”