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The need to incorporate cultural competence teaching in MICE education:

A proposed teaching plan for exploring cultural attitudes towards women-only hotel floors.

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Conference paper

1. Introduction

In Britain, the provision of MICE and events-based courses is steadily increasing. Rogers states that 'the relative immaturity of the business tourism and business events industry means that education and training courses are still being developed, although considerable provision already exists. The industry is yet to achieve a comprehensive, structured educational framework but recent years have seen a growth in full-time and part-time educational programmes, combined with a somewhat random, piecemeal provision of training courses, mostly short courses of one or two days' duration' (Rogers 2007, 57). Particularly on an academic level, the increase in provision has been considerable, with 29 courses now being offered on a university and college level throughout the UK. Although this is no doubt a positive development, 'there is still concern within the events community about the need for a greater dialogue between academia and the industry in order that courses can achieve greater relevance to organising events in today's highly regulated and dynamic business environment' (Rogers 2007, 57).

One of the characteristics of the highly dynamic MICE industry is its increased multiculturalism. A recent IMEX poll showed that 'organisers of global events now acknowledge that meetings return on investment (ROI) can be 'strongly influenced' by sensitive or insensitive planning for multicultural differences' (IMEX 2007). Effective cultural planning, which includes responding to gender considerations, managing religious expectations and coping with dietary preferences can 'seriously affect ROI, notably in the sense that effective decision making and successful inter-relationships achieved during the event would be the key to satisfactory post-event productivity' (Bloom 2007, 20).

This paper starts by highlighting the trend toward greater multiculturalism and increased cultural encounters in the conference and events industry. It then reviews the value of intercultural competence training, and the different forms this can take in MICE education. Finally, it will propose a teaching model to incorporate intercultural competence training in MICE education, applied to one example of different cultural perceptions of a prominent business tourism phenomenon: the increased emergence of women-only hotel floors, to cater for the need of the female business traveller.

2. Multicultural meetings

'Globalisation and the economic development of formerly less developed countries is increasing the volume of international, and inter-cultural, business travel. This has great implications for the industry, particularly as many of these countries have previously generated few international tourism trips. These countries include China, India and Russia, to name but three' (Swarbrooke & Horner 2001, 152). An IMEX poll this year showed that the number of nationalities typically involved in meetings averages over 15. The most important cultural differences that can affect the event planner's work are stated to be 'the varying styles of national leadership, differing management language, contrasting attitudes towards humour, contrasting attitudes towards punctuality and time-management, and alternative approaches to negotiation and compromise' (IMEX 2007, 1). Asked whether they expect multiculturalism to become an even bigger concern in the future, an important majority of planners (approximately 60 per cent) answered yes (Bloom 2007, 20).

Swarbrooke and Horner outlined 7 implications of increased intercultural business travel:

- Need for staff to develop skills in new languages
- Need to recognise political and historical sensitivities between cultural groups and nationalities
- Need to recognise varying perceptions of the same destination between different cultural groups
- Need to recognise different daily lifestyles, e.g. eating times, of various cultures and nationalities
- Need to design facilities and operate services to meet the needs of different religious groups
- Need for hotels, venues and transport caterers to accommodate different cultural tastes in terms of food and drink
- Need for staff at all levels to understand different standards of etiquette between cultures (Swarbrooke & Horner 2001, 153)

Preparing students in conference or events courses for the challenges multicultural meetings pose is a way in which MICE courses can start to bridge the alleged gap between academia and the industry. It is clear that not all of these aspects can be addressed in a single academic course (developing language skills to name but one, is probably outside the scope of an events or conferencing course). But this is not to say that MICE education providers cannot make a positive contribution to the intercultural competence of their students. The next paragraphs will review the different levels of intercultural education and their relevance for MICE education and the educational approaches and techniques that can be used in the practice of the classroom.

3. Educating for successful intercultural encounters

‘Intercultural encounters that forcibly expose individuals or groups to an alien environment cultural environment can be a source of heavy stress’ (Hofstede 2001, 424). In a MICE context, reducing this stress and thus making the event a more enjoyable and productive experience for the delegates, can considerably impact on the overall success for the planner. In current MICE education though, many teaching materials are very dominated by a US/UK perspective. This means there is a danger of ethnocentrism, which can be defined as ‘an exaggerated tendency to think the characteristics of one’s own group superior to those of other groups (Hofstede 2001, 17). This is mainly due to a dominating the positions the USA, the UK and other English-speaking nations have long held over MICE research and practice. There also is ‘an absence of comprehensive data on cross-cultural and national differences in the demand side of the business travel and tourism market’ (Swarbrooke & Horner 2001, 226). A new emphasis in MICE education on cultural encounters, combined with a wider range of intercultural teaching materials and research evidence, could be a potential way to counter this ethnocentricity.

To facilitate successful intercultural encounters, the planner needs to possess a degree of intercultural competence. Hofstede argues this competence is acquired over three phases; the first of which is *awareness*. Building on *awareness* allows the learner to perceive people in their cultural context, and encourages knowledge of the own

mental mindset. MICE education can and should increase the cultural '*awareness*' of learners, highlighting the ethnocentricity of the literature, both academic and trade journals. By giving intercultural relations and differences increased attention, *awareness* can be encouraged. A second phase is *knowledge*, where the student learns about symbols and rituals in different cultures, and acquires an intellectual grasp of their values. Although it would not be possible to include all aspects and characteristics of all cultures, MICE education can go some way to increase the students' *knowledge* of cultural aspects that can be important for event planning, by formally including these elements into teaching. The final stage is *skills*, which is based on *awareness* and *knowledge*, and reinforced by practice (Hofstede 2001, 428). It is probably outside the scope of a MICE course to increase intercultural '*skills*', but the development of these could be encouraged by offering intercultural exchanges (educational and/or professional) and apprenticeships.

MICE education can thus aim to improve the intercultural *awareness* and *knowledge* of students. Still, in full teaching schedules, this might seem like a time-consuming and resource-intensive challenge. This is why this paper aims to propose a teaching model that is practical, integrated, and does not push out other interesting areas of study. In the 3.1, the different approaches to teaching intercultural competence will be introduced and their potential for MICE education will be reviewed. On the basis of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, paragraph 3.2 combines and integrates the most applicable teaching methods into a feasible model for intercultural competence teaching in MICE education.

3.1. Intercultural competence training techniques

For MICE education to successfully contribute to the first two stages of intercultural competence training, the most appropriate educational approaches need to be used. 'A common typology for classifying training designs concerns the approaches used in training (didactic versus experiential approaches to training) and the contents of the training (culture-general versus culture-specific approaches to training) (Gudykunst & Hammer in Graf 2004, 199). Didactic approaches generally involve a lecture or discussion format in which differences and similarities among the respective cultures are presented. In contrast, the experiential approach to intercultural training is based on the supposition that people learn best from their experiences, for example through simulation or role-play. Culture-specific training refers to the characteristics of just one culture, and gives guidelines to interaction with its members. In contrast, culture-general training does not focus on one specific culture, but highlights rather the importance of culture on human behaviour and interaction in general (Graf 2004, 200).

All these approaches are potentially applicable to MICE education. Most academic learning tends to be achieved via a didactic approach, so incorporating cultural competence training in this form of teaching would seem to be an achievable target for most MICE lecturers. This didactic approach to intercultural competence training can for example be achieved through using case studies and literature or conference collateral from different cultural backgrounds. At present, finding multicultural teaching materials can be a challenge, as most tend to illustrate a US/UK view on meetings and conferences. There is thus a need for texts and case studies in this area,

accompanied ideally by photographic or video examples to support teaching and visualise the subject.

A more experiential approach is less commonly used in academic learning, but this does not mean that the use of role-play or simulation would be inapplicable to MICE teaching. A role-play simulation exercise 'is designed to confront the trainees with intercultural situations. After the realisation, trainees discuss the situation and their (re)actions and emotions with the trainer and draw conclusions from their experiences' (Graf 2004, 200). Particularly when it comes to teaching the more practical aspects of conference and events planning, such as timetabling, programming, catering or etiquette, these techniques could be incorporated in MICE education. Again, educational material that gives examples of situations to act out is hard to come by, and it often depends on the personal knowledge and experience of the lecturer which cultural situations could potentially be used in role-play.

Culture-specific training is often given to expatriates who have just moved to a new cultural environment. It refers to 'information about a given culture and guidelines for interactions with members of that culture' (Brislin and Pedersen in Graf 2004, 200). Although culture-specific training might not be suitable for general MICE courses, as the question would need to be raised which cultures to study and which to leave out, this would be a suitable topic for shorter professional training courses. With China, Brazil, India and Eastern Europe described as 'hot new markets' (Bloom 2005, 12), companies will increasingly acknowledge the use of and indeed the need for culture-specific training of their staff. This combined with the 'increased demand for relatively short-term trainings' (Graf 2004, 209) could represent an important opportunity for MICE educators to spread inter-cultural MICE competence in a more corporate, non-classroom setting. In a more academic setting, culture-specific competence can be encouraged via intercultural apprenticeships or exchanges.

Culture-general training highlights the 'many topics relevant to getting along in other cultures that are not specific to any culture' (Triandis in Graf 2004, 209). This approach would seem more applicable to academic MICE courses that do not focus on one particular market or culture. Cultural-general training can be incorporated by highlighting the importance of cultural differences for the MICE industry in general, supported by culture-specific examples. Again, the general lack of intercultural teaching materials or texts can result in educators being dependent on their own experiences and knowledge to highlight these differences. Inviting guest speakers or visiting lectures from different cultures could widen the cultural perspective of both students and lecturers.

3.2. Incorporation in MICE teaching

While all the techniques and approaches discussed above are potentially applicable to MICE education, incorporating them in often very full teaching schedules can be a challenge. By focusing on the most effective techniques, MICE educators can maximise learning in this area without jeopardising other subjects. Graf (2004) has evaluated the different techniques, and found that 'cultural-general training with an experiential orientation' is the most favourable. Rather than choosing a culture-specific approach, focusing on one culture only, basic MICE courses are thus encouraged to introduce the influence of various cultures on meetings organisation

and interactions. This can consequently increase the *awareness* and *knowledge* of students in a variety of cultural settings.

‘Whilst didactical lessons (e.g. lectures and discussions) are appropriate for improving *knowledge* about other cultures, they are insufficient to develop the emotional and behavioural dimension of intercultural competencies’ (Graf 2004, 208). This means that to improve intercultural *knowledge*, didactical techniques can be suitable; but to increase *awareness*, more experiential techniques are recommended. This is an important finding for academic teaching, where experiential learning techniques are usually not often practised. Incorporating role-play and simulation around the topic of multicultural competence could be more effective than didactic teaching: in other words, it would be more useful for students to act out an encounter with religious differences than to tell them about them. Still, it needs to be highlighted here that the research these recommendations are based on, was carried out in a Western setting, with German and American students. The preference for experiential techniques could again be cultural. ‘Adult learning theory also suggests that different people learn best through experiential techniques, whereas others learn best through didactical techniques. Therefore, by using both techniques, trainers ensure that they will use, at some point during the training, the techniques the trainees prefer’ (Graf 2004, 209).

The need for more intercultural teaching materials and texts to achieve cultural competence in MICE teaching has been highlighted already in this paper. Based on Graf’s findings, the nature of these materials can be defined in more detail. They should be culture-general, using examples of different cultures to highlight differences that affect MICE. Ideally they should include didactical elements on the one hand (texts, case studies, discussion questions) and experiential elements on the other (for example a teacher’s guide with examples of role-play and simulation exercises). They could also be supported visually by photographic or video material, which can be made available for example via a dedicated web page.

The following paragraph aims to put the theoretical and educational concepts of paragraph 3 into practice, by proposing a teaching plan that integrates intercultural competence into more general MICE education. Intercultural competence teaching is shown not to take the place of MICE subjects, but to complement and enrich them, using an integrated approach.

4. Example: Women-only hotel floors

This example is based on my own lecturing experience. When discussing the increased numbers of female business travellers, the example of women-only hotel floors was mentioned. I usually teach about this topic in London, with a predominantly Western group of students, and their attitude to the concept is usually quite sceptical. When teaching the same lesson with a group of South-East Asian students, I was surprised to find that their attitude was much more accepting and positive. This teaching experience can be the basis for developing an approach to MICE teaching that highlight this cultural difference: the topic can be approached in a culture-general way (because cultural viewpoints are compared), mixing didactical elements (to increase the students’ *knowledge*) with experiential elements (to encourage students’ emotional and behavioural *awareness*).

4.1. Background

Women now constitute almost 50 percent of all the business travel in the United States (edition.cnn.com). This is a dramatic increase since 1980 when they accounted for only four per cent (Alamdari & Burrell 2000, 4). The same trend is also clearly visible in Europe, and is spreading to other regions of the world (Swarbrooke & Horner 2001, 149). As women are becoming an important and growing segment of the travel market, 'hotels, airlines, airports and car rental companies are seeking to expand their shares of this valuable sector of demand' (Total Research 1998, 1). One way hotels try to appeal to the female business traveller is by offering women-only hotel floors: examples are the Crown Plaza hotels in downtown Washington and Bloomington, Minnesota; the St Regis hotel in the Pudong area of Shanghai, and the Rosewood Corniche in Jeddah. These women-only floors usually offer extra security and a few extra frills, like chocolates, fresh flowers or luxury toiletries, often in return for a slightly higher room rate.

When teaching about this new trend in hotels, many of the materials found in English-language textbooks and in the press rated this development as relatively unsuccessful. Swarbrooke and Horner for example, refer to a 1998 study in their textbook 'Business Travel and Tourism', and highlight that 'the women interviewed for the survey clearly did not consider the provision of women-only floors or special arrangements for single female travellers as important factors when selecting a hotel room. This is bad news for those hotels which have tried to target the female market as if it were different from the male equivalent' (Swarbrooke & Horner 2001, 228). This view was generally supported by the US press in 2007, when the Marriott chain planned to designate one floor of the JW Marriott in Grand Rapids, Michigan, exclusively to women. This caused outrage in the media, with the topic making national headlines and prominent Los Angeles discrimination attorney Gloria Allred heavily criticising the plans. In an interview, she asked "What is next? Are we going to have a white-only floor for the Ku Klux Klan? Are we going to have men-only floors for men being afraid to be hit on by women? This is a giant step backwards' (toledoblade.com). Even though there were also proponents of the idea, the women-only floor plans in the Marriott Grand Rapids were abandoned.

Based on these sources, one could assume that generally there is no great future in the concept of women-only hotel floors, and that most women's attitudes towards them are unfavourable. This would then also be the view the MICE lecturer using these sources, would propose to his or her students. My teaching experience with a group of South-East Asian students, mainly women, showed that there also exists a very different view on the matter: they rated the women-only floor as a positive development, and as a special attention and appreciation to women travellers. The discrimination claims made in America seemed exaggerated and even unfounded to them. This emphasised how the materials I had been using only showed a very culturally influenced view of the matter: because I had used Western materials, I propagated a Western viewpoint; and that because I am a member of this culture myself, I did not initially question this. This experience was a stark reminder that incorporating intercultural awareness in MICE training is undoubtedly important in a globalised industry, but that teaching it in practice could be challenging when the teaching materials that are used are often US/UK dominated. The following paragraph proposes a more balanced approach to teaching about this topic, aiming to incorporate

the techniques discussed in the paragraph 3.2: a culture-general approach, with a experiential component to increase *awareness*, and a didactical component to increase *knowledge*.

4.2. A proposed teaching plan

As *experiential* techniques (simulation, role-play) were shown to be particularly suitable for developing the emotional and behavioural component of intercultural *awareness* (see 3.1); these could be used to make students aware of their own inherent cultural attitude towards the topic. One way of achieving this could be a simulation of a sales situation: one person could take the role of a sales agent for a hotel that offers a women-only floor, whereas another student could take the role of the women traveller and rate the extras that are offered. Another simulation could be that of a debate: a few students could be asked to be proponents to the scheme, whereas others could represent the opponent group. Not only can a short exercise like this allow students to become aware of their own attitudes and opinions towards this matter, it also allows, if there are different cultural backgrounds represented in one classroom, to explore how culture could be an important part in this. In my own experience the majority of students were usually European, but the presence of Asian and Arab students enriched the debate and brought it on the subject of culture quite naturally.

When students have established their own views and made the link with culture, they can then be introduced to different cultural evaluations of women-only floors. This can for example happen didactically, by introducing case study texts or video clips and discussing them. *Didactical* techniques are shown to be particularly successful in conveying *knowledge* about other cultures on the one hand; and on the other hand, by including both teaching techniques, it offers all students a teaching style they prefer (see 3.2). Case study texts are not always easy to find in textbooks, but can be found for example in the press. In the appendix to this paper, two example texts are included: a forum page on the Washington Post website, with mostly negative comments; and an extract from an article on the Arab News website, with more balanced views and a different cultural perspective.

Both texts show the different roles women-only facilities in hotels can play: whilst they offer extra security and frills in the US, they are almost a necessity for female business travellers in Saudi Arabia, as ‘the Kingdom’s hotels usually only accommodate women who are either accompanied by male family members or who have the approval of their male guardians in the form of either an approval document stamped by the man’s place of work or a letter from a police station’ (www.arabnews.com). Presenting both views encourages a more culturally sensitive appraisal of women-only facilities, and can be supported with a limited amount of culture-specific information about the culture discussed. It can be highlighted for example that ‘the segregation of sexes is still a very common phenomenon in most Arab cultures and societies. The more conservative the society is, the more we are likely to come across various types of segregation. This segregation is based on Islamic principles but is also reinforced by Arab values pertaining to the honour of the family, where women are perceived to be that shield of honour. It could be said that Arab culture is exceptionally protective of women’ (Al-Omari 2003, 110). Still, this

does not mean women are excluded from public life, and more and more women now work. 'The changing role of women throughout the Arab world means that there are an increasing number of women running their own businesses or are board members of large conglomerates' (Al-Omari 2003, 112). As more women now occupy important business positions, business travel might become more frequent; it could be argued that women-only facilities can potentially support this development in the Arab cultural context.

To achieve a *culture-general perspective*, other examples of cultural attitudes towards gender segregation in travel and tourism can be given. In Asia, there are not only examples of women-only hotel facilities (for example the St Regis hotel in Shanghai, Grand Bluewave hotel in Kuala Lumpur), but also women-only metro carriages (Tokyo) and buses (Delhi), all with the aim to increase safety and security for women. These initiatives are mostly reported to be successful and do not result in outcries about inequality and discrimination. Still, even though women-only floors seem more accepted culturally, this does not mean that female business travellers in Asia necessarily insist on staying on these floors: a Business Travel News Asia Pacific survey in 2004 showed that women-only floors were rated of much lower importance than reliable and high-speed internet access and business lounges (www.btnap.com). Compared to the Saudi example, it thus becomes clear that women-only floors have a very different cultural meaning in Asia: although in both cases there seems more acceptance of the phenomenon than the US, this acceptance has a very different basis. In Saudi Arabia they might be a necessity for women travellers because of travel restrictions, whereas in Asia the safety aspects and extras are central to their appeal.

The lesson can conclude with the observation that women-only floors cater for a particular niche in the business tourism market, and that different cultural appraisals of this phenomenon exist. Compared to the very US-influenced evaluation of the concept in Swarbrooke and Horner (see 4.1) (which is undoubtedly a correct assessment within this cultural context), the use of materials from other cultural sources can enrich and nuance the students' understanding of it. This proposed teaching plan is just one example of how MICE education can encourage greater intercultural *awareness* and *knowledge* and prepare students for multicultural meetings. It also aims to be an example of how intercultural competence can be feasibly integrated in a general MICE course, without infringing too much on other, equally necessary and interesting areas of study.

5. Conclusion

Multicultural meetings and events are an important development in the MICE industry, and MICE education cannot afford to ignore it. IMEX research has highlighted that the sensitivity of multicultural planning can strongly influence the success and return on investment of a meeting or event, so graduates of MICE courses need to bring yet a new strength to the industry. Although it is outside the scope of a MICE course to develop a full set of intercultural *skills* in all cultures in their students, this paper has highlighted that encouraging *awareness* and *knowledge* are a possibility, and maybe even a duty. A culture-general approach, with a strong experiential element next to the more traditional didactical teaching, can be a feasible way to achieve this.

This paper has given the example of women travellers in business tourism, more specifically of the women-only hotel floor. This is only one of many possible topics that can be discussed from an intercultural perspective. Varying styles of leadership, attitudes towards humour and punctuality, approaches to negotiation and compromise, politeness and etiquette, religious and dietary considerations etc. are just some of the many other areas that can affect the planning process. An ethnocentric view on these issues does not prepare the student sufficiently for multicultural planning, and should thus be avoided in MICE teaching.

One of the challenges MICE lectures face is to do full justice to a concept as complex and contested as culture. As with all discussions about culture, there is a risk of developing clichés that lack nuance and can be offensive. To avoid these clichés, further research in this area is necessary to get a better understanding of the nature and importance of cultural differences in MICE. The 'absence of comprehensive data on cross-cultural and national differences in the demand side of the business travel and tourism market' (Swarbrooke & Horner 2001, 226) is already highlighted in paragraph 2. More in-depth research into the cultures of key new markets for example can be useful both for the education of MICE students and the MICE industry.

There is also a need for teaching materials that can help and support the MICE lecturer when teaching intercultural competence. Although there are sources available that document cultural differences in MICE, few do so in a consistent and in-depth manner. A greater number of intercultural examples could for instance be built into general or existing MICE handbooks. But specialist materials could also be developed, alternating background texts with discussion materials and articles –to satisfy the didactical component of intercultural teaching-, and providing ideas for the role-play and simulation exercises that are so important in experiential learning. Visual materials like pictures or a linked website or CD-ROM with videos or testimonials can support lecturers who teach in one particular cultural context, and find it hard to access others. Finally, lecturers who are lucky enough to have students from different cultural backgrounds in the classroom, could encourage a multicultural perspective by drawing on their experiences and knowledge.

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Appendix 1

Hotels with Women-Only Floors: A Good Idea?

Even though **Marriott has scrapped plans to set aside a women's-only floor at a major new property**, the concept is still being batted around among hoteliers.

Marriott had originally designated the 19th floor of its new \$100 million, 340-room JW Marriott in Grand Rapids, Mich., to be **exclusively available to women**. A flap ensued. Critics, led by Los Angeles discrimination attorney Gloria Allred, said having a separate floor for women was **discriminatory**. Proponents said it **provided more safety for women travelers**. In the end, Marriott decided to allow both women and men on all floors of the Michigan hotel.

But executives at Marriott, Crowne Plaza and other chains have told us that **the idea is still alive**. Crowne Plaza has women-only floors at two of its hotels, including the glitzy Crowne Plaza in downtown Washington and its property near the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport in Bloomington, Minn. At the latter property, the rooms at the women-only floor cost \$30 more. Guests there get tighter security and a few extra frills, such as chocolates and fresh flowers. The floors have so far proven popular, by the account of executives at Crowne Plaza. And no wonder: Women, who make up more than 40 percent of business travelers, are increasingly concerned about security.

As hotels ponder whether to push ahead with the idea, where do you stand? **Should there be more women-only floors in hotels?** Why or why not?

*It's hard enough as it is to be accepted as an equal in the business world. I certainly don't want anything that gives the impression that we are "fragile flowers" that have to be specially protected from the big, bad world. That's a step *backwards* for female travelers.*

The only exception I could think of would be in certain international settings, where local custom might be, shall we say, less favorable toward women.

Posted by: mcccxxxiii | September 27, 2007 10:13 AM

I don't see it as discrimination so much as good old-fashioned 'women are the weaker sex' thinking. I'm a woman, and I can see the point, but at the same time, I wouldn't pay the extra for what they should be providing anyway (and I don't need any more chocolate, thank you, Marriott).

I would like to know what the crime numbers are at relatively upscale properties like Crowne Plaza & Marriott. And are they more often committed by guys coming in off the street v. guests v. employees? My inclination would be that guests commit fewer crimes than outsiders or employees. If that's true, then it seems to me there needs to be more security in general in the case of the former, and better background screening in the case of the latter.

Posted by: liz | September 27, 2007 05:45 PM

I don't mean to denigrate the safety issue, but just because something might make you feel safer (and I don't think this does contribute much to safety, in part for the reasons others have identified above), doesn't mean all other considerations should be cast aside. It's kind of offensive to be told that I'm restricted from going to certain floors of a hotel because of a demographic group I'm in. It's also setting a very bad precedent, that I think women would lament down the road if "women-only" became a means of oppression rather than protection. Women aren't children.

Posted by: Andy | October 3, 2007 08:41 PM

http://blog.washingtonpost.com/travellog/2007/09/womenonly_floors.html

Appendix 2

arab news

Women-only hotels cause concern

Najah Alosaimi, Arab News

RIYADH, 13 May 2007 - Establishing women-only hotels is a growing trend across the Kingdom. However, many people express concern that the new phenomena may cause further gender segregation within society. Of late many hotels have tried to meet the market demand for women-only accommodation. The Luthan Spa and Hotel is a women-only hotel in Riyadh, which was built by 26 Saudi businesswomen at a cost of SR62 million. Another new ultra-luxury hotel is the Rosewood Corniche in Jeddah, which recently announced that it has dedicated a floor to women guests, something indicative of the high demand for women-only hotels.

In recent years, Saudi women have adopted a more assertive public role. Saudi women often travel across the Kingdom on work-related business and, due to the Kingdom's strict rules against gender mixing, are left in difficult situations when checking in at hotels. The Kingdom's hotels usually only accommodate women who are either accompanied by male family members or who have the approval of their male guardians in the form of either an approval document stamped by the man's place of work or letter from a police station. According to hotel registration figures of three major hotels in Riyadh, the percentage of women booking rooms on their names is minimal.

Local newspapers recently reported that a Saudi mother, accompanied by her two daughters, traveled from Dammam to Riyadh and were forced to sleep in a taxi paying money to the driver after hotels and rental apartments refused to allow them to stay without a letter from their father who was in hospital. Some Saudi businesswomen view women-only hotels as a solution to the problems they face when traveling. Businesswoman Majdah Al-Kathery said that women-only hotels would help her and would make traveling for her much "easier."

However, Madeeha Al-Ajrosh, a social activist, feels having women-only accommodation in the Kingdom is a double-edged sword. Women travelers need to be accommodated whenever they travel and women-only hotels can easily solve these issues. However, we still need to look at the reasons that cause hotels to be less welcoming to single women and not single men. What benefit is a letter from a guardian when women have identification cards, which they could possibly use. It is for reasons like this that we should be more aware of the importance of accommodating women in their own country," said Al-Ajrosh. Layla Al-Hilali, a social activist and family consultant, believes that establishing women-only accommodation is only a temporary solution and may have the long-term negative effect of creating increased gender segregation.

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