

# “You can’t be what you can’t see”: gender representation on hospitality professional boards

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Despite being one of the UK’s largest and most diverse sectors, hospitality struggles with gender diversity at senior levels and on boards of professional membership associations (PMAs), which remain overwhelmingly homogenous [1]. Visible diversity on boards, as displayed on their websites, can signal that barriers to inclusion can be overcome, whereas a lack of representation may discourage professionals from joining such an association and raise doubts about its ability to meet the needs of its members, the very essence of PMAs. The opportunities arising from a more inclusive composition of PMA boards deserve greater consideration, particularly because the leadership skills gained through board membership can facilitate advancement both within the workplace and across the profession [2]. This article calls for greater gender representation on UK hospitality professional boards to foster an inclusive culture, maintain their relevance, and inspire the next generation of leaders.

PMAs play a crucial role in the advancement and sustainability of their sectors by educating their members through professional training and advocating at the policy level [2, 3]. Hospitality PMAs, like those in other sectors, are typically dependent on membership fees and carry a significant responsibility to genuinely represent their members’ interests and needs. However, challenges remain, particularly with board composition, as persistent informal recruitment often limits diversity by favouring similar individuals [4]. While many PMAs aim to increase inclusivity, they are often hampered by long-standing institutional processes and systems which unfortunately reinforce exclusive structures. This creates a paradox when pursuing diversity [5]. Addressing discrimination and bias is essential to ensure equal opportunity and retain top talent. Ultimately, PMAs are vital in supporting members and driving industry development but must continually evolve to reflect their professions’ diversity and dynamism.

The authors collected data between June 2023 and December 2023 to gain insight into this problem. Details on the name, gender and race of each board member, including the Chair, were collected and analysed. The complete dataset included gender and race information for 749 board members, including the Chairs, from 63 PMAs.

Descriptive statistics, used to explain the composition and characteristics of PMAs [6], revealed significant gaps in board gender diversity and representation. Of the 63 PMAs, 18 represent hospitality and are the focus of the remaining part of this article. While women are represented across the analysed hospitality PMA boards, only a third include non White representation, highlighting a lack of racial diversity at the highest leadership level (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hospitality PMAs by gender and race.

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It was also noted that the six hospitality PMAs with a female chair exhibited greater board diversity – 67% of these PMAs had boards with a majority female membership, compared to 8% of PMAs led by a male Chair. This disparity underscores how current board compositions, both visually and practically, reinforce who holds power and influence in professional organisations. Despite PMAs’ stated commitments to inclusivity and equality, these ideals are not always reflected in their leadership structures.

These findings show that the boards are largely homogenous in composition. Increasing board gender diversity is vital for fostering creativity, innovation, and effective leadership, helping hospitality PMAs remain relevant to their increasingly diverse membership. To achieve this, PMAs should adopt transparent, inclusive recruitment practices, including blind recruitment, expanded candidate outreach, and regular diversity tracking. Proactive sponsorship and mentoring of under represented members will help increase their visibility and access to leadership opportunities, ensuring that PMAs genuinely represent all members, embody the values they promote, and set a standard for the wider profession. The benefits of applying these strategies have not yet been clearly documented, but McKinsey & Company [7] argue that companies with diverse boards are more likely to achieve stronger financial performance, greater social impact, and higher workforce satisfaction.

#### References

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