

Why not a women-to-women mentoring dyad? A grounded theory approach to address inquisitiveness

Alisha Rath and Lalatendu Kesari Jena

School of Human Resource Management, XIM University, Bhubaneswar, India

Munmun Goswami

IIM Raipur, Raipur, India, and

Suchitra Pal

School of Human Resource Management, XIM University, Bhubaneswar, India

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the under-researched gender gap in mentoring within the hospitality industry, focusing specifically on female mentees' experiences and challenges in forming female-to-female mentoring relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – A constructivist grounded theory approach was adopted, utilizing data from 75 semi-structured interviews with female mentees in the hospitality sector. This method allowed for a systematic investigation of the factors influencing female mentoring dynamics.

Findings – The research identified key challenges and obstacles faced by female mentees when selecting mentors. These findings offer actionable insights to help industry leaders address gender inequality and foster stronger female-to-female mentoring relationships.

Practical implications – The study provides practical recommendations for hospitality industry leaders to mitigate gender inequality and enhance female mentoring opportunities, thereby promoting more inclusive professional development practices.

Social implications – The study highlights the need for societal and cultural shifts to overcome the barriers faced by female mentees in same-gender mentoring relationships, more so in the context of the Indian hospitality industry. By fostering inclusive mentorship practices, the hospitality industry can contribute to broader social change, promoting gender equality and supporting women's professional empowerment.

Originality/value – While mentoring practices in the hospitality industry have been widely studied, few studies have explicitly looked at women mentors. Additionally, this research uniquely emphasizes the mentee's perspective in addressing gender gaps within female mentoring relationships.

Keywords Female-to-female mentoring, Gender disparity, Grounded theory approach, Gender bias, Inclusion

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The hospitality sector is recognized as one of the largest and fastest-growing service industries worldwide. However, it remains deeply rooted in traditional gender norms (Brizuela *et al.*, 2023). Despite a notable increase in women's participation in the workforce, significant structural barriers continue to hinder their advancement to senior and strategic positions (Kruesi and Bazelmans, 2023). These challenges are especially pronounced in emerging economies like India, where traditional gender roles intersect with professional limitations, significantly shaping and often restricting women's workplace experiences (Chauhan *et al.*, 2022).

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Mentoring is recognized as a crucial strategy in human resource management for fostering professional development, particularly among underrepresented groups (Ntshongwana and Tanga, 2025). For women, mentoring provides not only professional guidance but also vital psychological support and access to networks that help them navigate gendered organizational cultures (Maguire *et al.*, 2025). Notably, mentoring relationships are seldom gender-neutral (Manongsong and Ghosh, 2023), and the dynamics of women-to-women mentoring have not received adequate scholarly attention, often overshadowed by cross-gender mentoring narratives (Shin and Kim, 2023).

In the Indian hospitality sector, entrenched hierarchical structures and cultural norms perpetuate male dominance in leadership, complicating the establishment of same-gender mentoring relationships (Gong and Li, 2021). While hospitality organizations have introduced mentorship initiatives, many lack a gender-sensitive framework and fail to address the unique challenges female employees face in seeking female mentors (Wolf and Brenning, 2023). This oversight reveals a critical gap in strategies designed to promote gender equity in the industry. The existing literature mainly examines general outcomes of mentoring but often neglects gender dynamics and the psychosocial and structural factors influencing mentee preferences (Shin and Kim, 2023). There is a notable lack of empirical studies investigating why female mentees are hesitant to engage with female mentors, even when mentorship programs exist. Most research has focused on mentors' perspectives or organizational outcomes rather than the complex experiences of female mentees. This gap reveals the need for a more detailed exploration of mentees' viewpoints to better understand mentoring dynamics.

This research addresses the gap in understanding women-to-women mentoring dynamics in organizational settings, specifically within the Indian hospitality industry. It examines the conditions that enable or hinder these mentoring relationships. Grounded in Relational-Cultural Theory (Ragins, 2016) and Kram's mentoring model (1985), the study analyzes how female mentees assess and select potential female mentors, focusing on essential attributes. It also explores the structural, relational, and cultural barriers that influence their mentoring choices, contributing to the discourse on female mentorship in organizations. This research study employs constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to inductively develop theory by emphasizing participants' lived experiences instead of testing existing hypotheses. This approach allows for dynamic engagement with the data, revealing nuanced insights that reflect the complexities of social interactions in specific contexts (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Birks and Mills, 2015).

The research is structured around the following objectives:

- (1) To investigate the perceptions of female mentees regarding potential female mentors operating within organizational contexts.
- (2) To delineate the interpersonal and professional traits that shape mentees' processes of mentor selection.
- (3) To examine the institutional and sociocultural obstacles that impede the longevity and effectiveness of same-gender mentoring dyads.

This investigation is systematically structured around three pivotal research questions:

- (1) What specific personal and professional characteristics do female mentees prioritize when selecting female mentors?
- (2) What underlying factors contribute to the hesitation among female mentees to engage in same-gender mentoring relationships, even in the presence of available female mentors?
- (3) What strategies or support mechanisms can effectively bolster female mentees' participation in women-to-women mentoring initiatives within industries characterized by male dominance, such as hospitality?

This study aims to develop a thorough understanding of mentoring processes that is both theoretically sound and practically useful. The manuscript is organized as follows: the next section critically reviews the existing literature on mentoring practices in the hospitality sector, highlighting gendered mentoring dynamics. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical frameworks and methodologies used. The empirical findings are then presented, along with a discussion of their implications. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research.

Review of literature

Mentoring in the hospitality industry

Mentoring is essential for professional development, knowledge transfer, and talent retention in complex service industries like hospitality (Eby *et al.*, 2013; Karcher *et al.*, 2006; Underhill, 2006). It provides career advancement pathways through strategic insights, coping mechanisms, and psychosocial support (Zhang and Rios, 2022). For women, who are often underrepresented in senior roles and face structural inequalities, mentoring is particularly important (Allen *et al.*, 2004; Sheherazade *et al.*, 2022). Despite benefits for all genders (Cook, 2022), women in hospitality frequently have limited access to formal mentoring, especially with same-gender mentors (Dashper, 2019). Challenges such as gender bias, a lack of female leaders, and work-life balance issues hinder the sustainability of women-to-women mentoring relationships (Chauhan *et al.*, 2022; Deng and Turner, 2024). While mentors gain role modeling and networking opportunities (Ragins and Kram, 2007), mentees benefit from shared experiences (Eby *et al.*, 2008; Ghosh, 2014). Cultural and organizational norms often deter female mentees from choosing female mentors, highlighting an area for further research. Investigating the effects of female mentoring and the factors influencing mentees' mentor choices is crucial, particularly in India, where female workforce representation is rising. To this end, we employed a grounded theory (GT) approach to explore the challenges women face in sustaining mentoring relationships and their hesitance in selecting female mentors.

Gender bias in mentoring and leadership

Research has examined mentor attributes and outcomes (Gisbert-Trejo *et al.*, 2019; Eby and Robertson, 2020), yet same-gender mentoring among women remains under-studied (Shin and Kim, 2023). Scholars recognize that mentoring relationships are not just dyadic; they exist within gendered power structures that influence access and outcomes (Bhrami *et al.*, 2023; Holmes *et al.*, 2021). In hospitality, where women are prominent in frontline roles but scarce in leadership, same-gender mentoring can provide valuable support, visibility, and aspirational alignment. However, sociocultural norms, stereotypes, and structural barriers often hinder these relationships. Female mentors may be perceived as overburdened or less powerful than male mentors, which can erode trust among potential mentees (Dashper, 2019; Mary *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, the high attrition of women in corporate roles raises concerns about the sustainability of these relationships. This situation underscores the need for further investigation into why female mentees may hesitate to choose female mentors.

Mentee agency in gendered mentoring relationships

The literature on mentoring largely emphasizes mentor characteristics and organizational structures, but recent studies highlight the role of mentee agency in shaping mentoring outcomes (Ntshongwana, 2024). Inquisitiveness, defined as the active exploration of mentoring opportunities, is crucial for mentees, especially women in male-dominated fields, to find mentors aligned with their goals (Ragins and McFarlin, 1990). Proactive mentees evaluate relationship dynamics, emotional support, professional credibility, and connection longevity, particularly in cultures with fewer female mentors. They also face sociocultural challenges, such as judgment risks (Dashper, 2019), and seeking female mentors can promote solidarity

and address the lack of institutional support for women in leadership (Kruesi and Bazelmans, 2023). These dynamics reveal the complex interplay between mentorship, gender, and institutional barriers, necessitating a greater understanding of mentorship as both a strategic and relational process. While concepts like relational fit (Kram and Isabella, 1985) and psychological safety (Ragins and Kram, 2007) have been studied, inquisitiveness has received less attention. This study addresses this gap by exploring how inquisitiveness can highlight the challenges women face in mentoring within the hospitality industry and enhance their experiences.

Emerging tensions and intra-gender dynamics of mentoring

Same-gender mentoring relationships among women may seem empowering, but they can be complex. Competition, emotional detachment, and hierarchical structures can weaken support, especially in male-dominated fields like hospitality, where limited advancement opportunities intensify rivalries (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Conflicts between loyalty and status concerns may lead mid-career women to hesitate in mentoring younger colleagues, causing discomfort for mentees with authoritative mentors (Ibarra *et al.*, 2013; Wu and Chui, 2020). This aligns with the “stereotype inoculation paradox,” where group identification generates both aspiration and anxiety (Dasgupta, 2011). Effective peer mentoring involves navigating similarities and differences as women seek mentors who align with their values while feeling the need to stand out. This underscores the necessity for context-sensitive frameworks that challenge the assumption that shared gender leads to effective mentoring. The study redefines relational evaluation as a tool for female mentees to assess risks and benefits in emotionally charged environments, advocating for a shift beyond static mentoring models to consider power dynamics and emotional labor (Maguire *et al.*, 2025).

Theoretical and conceptual framework

This research examines female-to-female mentoring in the Indian hospitality sector by integrating Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) with Kram and Isabella (1985) foundational mentoring framework. This approach highlights the interplay between institutional frameworks and interpersonal relationships, elucidating how these elements shape the mentorship experiences of women in male-dominated environments. RCT, developed by Jean Baker Miller and further expanded by Fletcher and Ragins (2007), emphasizes that relationships fostering individual growth characterized by empathy, authenticity, mutual respect, and psychological safety are essential for women’s professional advancement. Such relationships counter societal norms that promote emotional invisibility, making them both enriching and politically significant in sectors like hospitality (Kruesi and Bazelmans, 2023; Gong and Li, 2021). RCT also indicates that relational disconnections, often arising from structural inequalities, impede the development of emotional solidarity and authentic mentoring, crucial for women’s sustained professional growth (Sheherazade *et al.*, 2022).

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) is enriched by Kram and Isabella (1985) framework, which provides a structured, process-oriented approach to mentoring. Kram distinguishes between psychosocial functions, such as companionship, role modeling, and emotional support, and career-related activities, including sponsorship, visibility, advocacy, and coaching. These dimensions are vital in shaping mentees’ perceptions of mentor compatibility. For instance, while a mentee may benefit from emotional support provided by a female mentor, perceived limitations in the mentor’s organizational influence may hinder the mentee’s willingness to seek career advancement support, particularly when female mentors face systemic barriers.

This research employs a dual-theoretical framework, integrating Kram’s mentoring theory and RCT. Kram clarifies the structural and procedural dynamics of mentoring relationships, while RCT explores the relational and emotional dimensions of these interactions.

This approach enhances our understanding of mentee expectations and positions mentoring as a catalyst for individual growth and organizational change, particularly in promoting equity and inclusion where informal mentoring is often overlooked (Pacheco Figueroa and Alvarez Lemus, 2025). We also draw on feminist organizational theory to illustrate how institutions perpetuate patriarchal norms that affect perceptions of mentor credibility and leadership. Scholars such as Allen *et al.* (2004) and Wolf and Brenning (2023) argue that women are expected to provide emotional support while facing structural disempowerment, impacting the effectiveness and recognition of mentoring relationships and hindering professional advancement. The integration of RCT and Kram's framework has significantly shaped our interview protocol and coding methodologies, providing a solid foundation for interpreting emergent themes throughout the study. This constructivist grounded theory methodology enriches our contributions to discussions of fairness, agency, and the relational dynamics inherent in mentoring, especially for women navigating the complex landscapes of the hotel industry.

Methodology

Recruitment and sample selection

This study employed purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 75 female employees from the hospitality sector in urban Odisha, Eastern India. Eligibility criteria included self-identification as female, current employment in hospitality, prior engagement in professional mentoring, familiarity with organizational mentoring practices, and self-reported absence of significant psychological distress beyond typical workplace stressors. Sampling was guided by theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006) and monitored through memoing and coding logs. Recruitment occurred via professional networks and referrals to ensure diversity in age, experience, type of organization (e.g. hotels, resorts, restaurants), and hierarchical level. Participants received informed consent forms and interview questions via secure email prior to interviews, which took place from August to November 2024, either by telephone ($n = 68$) or in person ($n = 7$), lasting 50–90 min. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo Version 10 software. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of respondents.

Team of researchers

The research team consisted of four scholars with expertise in psychology, organizational behavior, and qualitative methods. This included two senior faculty specializing in mentoring research, one grounded theory expert, and one doctoral researcher. All members identified as feminist researchers and reflected on how their values influenced the research process. To promote reflexivity, they held pre-research sessions to identify biases and discuss positionality, particularly regarding same-gender mentoring and systemic barriers faced by women. They documented their assumptions through a reflexive memoing protocol, with interpretations

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

Dimension	Category	Percentage
Age	20–30	25%
	31–40	44.44%
	41–50	30.56%
Gender	Male	0
	Females	100%
Industry	Manufacturing	66.67%
	Information technology	33.33%

Source(s): Authors' findings

undergoing internal audits and peer debriefing. The team acknowledged several biases, including: (1) the belief that insufficient organizational and peer support hinders female-to-female mentoring; (2) the view that societal and organizational structures complicate same-gender mentoring; and (3) a commitment to objective data interpretation. They also explored power dynamics between interviewers and interviewees, considering philosophical disagreements and identity differences.

Research design

This study adopted a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach, as outlined by [Charmaz \(2006\)](#), which emphasizes the co-creation of theory through researcher-participant interactions. CGT was employed to investigate processes shaping the phenomenon of interest, focusing on causal conditions, strategies, intervening factors, and outcomes ([Creswell, 2013](#)). Unlike traditional grounded theory by [Strauss and Corbin \(1990\)](#), which prioritizes data alone, CGT recognizes the significance of context, participant relationships, and researcher positionality, leading to active meaning-making and constructed interpretations. The analysis drew on [Kram and Isabella \(1985\)](#) mentoring theory and Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT), applied iteratively after initial coding. Kram's theory identifies two core mentoring functions: career-related support (sponsorship, protection, challenging assignments) and psychosocial support (companionship, acceptance, counseling, role modeling), along with four mentoring relationship stages: initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition. Initial coding was informed by Kram's categories, which facilitated the analysis of mentoring data. Employing the constant comparative method, researchers systematically compared interviews to refine codes and identify challenging themes. Theoretical sampling captured diverse perspectives, enriching the emerging theory. Reflexive memos documented insights and positionality, aligning findings with Kram's constructs. Ultimately, the grounded theory delineates key elements and challenges of women's mentoring experiences, noting alignment and divergence with established roles. A conceptual research model, depicted in [Figure 1](#), was developed based on emergent literature and collected memos.

Data collection and analysis

To prepare for our interviews, we developed specific questions based on theoretical frameworks that focused on mentee perspectives regarding mentoring, the challenges of selecting a female mentor, and desirable mentor attributes (see [Appendix A](#)). Our semi-structured interviews used open-ended questions to allow participants to provide detailed insights ([Charmaz, 2006](#); [Strauss and Corbin, 1990](#)). We analyzed data using a constant comparative method to refine our interview questions and coding. The lead author and the fourth team member independently coded each interview before reaching a consensus on interpretations. The psychological backgrounds of the team members enriched the data interpretation, while the second and third authors acted as internal auditors to provide feedback and help resolve discrepancies ([Charmaz, 2006](#)). Utilizing grounded theory ([Strauss and Corbin, 1990](#)), we followed three coding stages: open, axial, and selective coding. The concluding collection of concentrated codes, systematically arranged into overarching themes and categories, includes detailed definitions and representative quotations from participants. This comprehensive presentation can be found in [Appendix B](#). In the open coding phase, we identified key categories from initial transcripts ([Creswell, 2013](#)). The first and fourth authors conducted line-by-line coding on the first five interviews ([Charmaz, 2006](#)). During the axial coding phase, we refined categories and developed subcategories, collaborating after coding several transcripts to discuss interpretations. The selective coding phase allowed us to create a cohesive narrative connecting categories and subcategories ([Creswell, 2013](#); [Strauss and Corbin, 1990](#)), culminating in a theoretical framework focused on female-to-female mentoring dyads.

A limited set of codes, including "Connection" under the category of Personal Touch and "Challenging" within Desired Qualities, emerged during the open coding process. However,

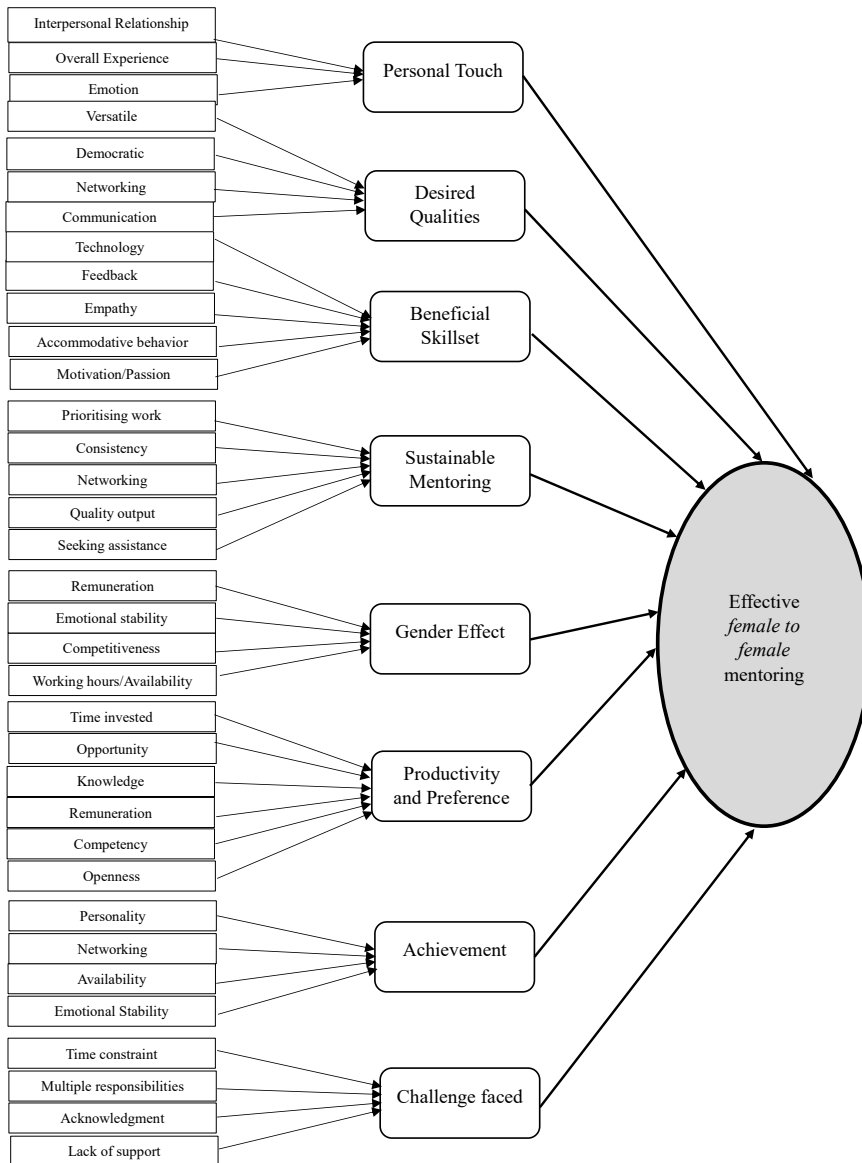


Figure 1. Proposed research framework. Source: Authors' own work

these codes were referenced by only a minimal number of participants and did not exhibit the necessary diversity or conceptual richness required for theoretical saturation. Given their conceptual overlap with more robust and well-developed categories, such as Interpersonal Relationship, Overall Experience, and Versatile, these codes have been retained in the comprehensive codebook (see Table 2) but have not been elevated to distinct constructs within the final conceptual model. This approach ensures the model retains its parsimony while providing full documentation for the benefit of readers.

Table 2. Research constructs/codes

Category	Construct/Codes
Personal touch	<i>Interpersonal relationship</i> • It is the most crucial aspect to maintain, where simply sharing a good bond leads to the transaction of information and communication • This aspect makes the process of choosing a mentor easier • “A good rapport makes all the difference- I won’t share unless the bond feels natural.”
	<i>Overall experience</i> • The experience of a mentee or mentor always affects the choice of a mentor • “I have seen women who have mentored others positively, and that shaped my preference.”
	<i>Emotion</i> • When one’s emotion at work is comprehended, the bonding becomes more muscular • Empathy is high, mainly in women • “She understood how I felt even without me saying much. That kind of empathy matters.”
	<i>Connection</i> • We cannot find much relevant information about the dimension
Desired qualities	<i>Versatile</i> • Versatile individuals tend to perform better under time constraints • “She could juggle operations, training, and still be there for the team. That’s inspiring.”
	<i>Challenging</i> • One or two participants of the study mentioned this aspect
	<i>Democratic</i> • The Freedom of speech gives space to multiple opinions and is every individual’s expectation • “She listened to everyone, not just the seniors. That gave me the confidence to speak.”
	<i>Networking</i> • Networking gives rise to multiple opportunities, and work can be done easily • “She was so well-connected- things moved faster when she stepped in.”
Beneficial skillset	<i>Communication</i> • Effective communication is an essential aspect of mentoring and leadership • “Her clarity in talking helped me see problems in a new way.”
	<i>Empathy</i> • This quality is expected from every leader, which makes them more likable and preferred by mentees or the team • “She knew when to push and when to just listen. That made her stand out.”
	<i>Technology</i> • Very few respondents mentioned technology, stating that it might help
	<i>Feedback</i> • The freedom and acceptance of feedback helps individual assess and promotes growth • “She never made feedback feel like criticism. That’s why I grew under her.”
	<i>Accommodative behavior</i> • We expect a behavior which is adaptive and accommodative
	<i>Motivation/Passion</i> • In the field of mentoring, the role of motivation is immense where the workload is high, even post-work hours • “She worked even after hours without complaining. It motivated us to push ourselves.”

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Category	Construct/Codes
Sustainable mentoring	<i>Prioritizing work</i> • An individual can only sustain in the field of mentoring where one's priority is work • "You can't sustain mentoring unless you genuinely make it a part of your job." <i>Consistency</i> • Consistency is the challenge for most individuals (mentors) to continue the taken-up task • "She was great initially but got too busy later. That drop in consistency affects us." <i>Networking</i> • Today's time is all about connections; those with good networking skills tend to get more opportunities <i>Quality output</i> • A mentor is usually judged based on one's output produced • "A mentor is only valued if results are visible—no matter the effort." <i>Seeking assistance</i> • We are struggling to find much information
Gender effect	<i>Remuneration</i> • The difference in remuneration based on gender is evident in multiple sectors • The difference, despite equal opportunity and effort, needs to be addressed • "Men with equal roles get better pay and are still expected to mentor. For women, it's extra work." <i>Emotional stability</i> • The stability of emotion is a challenge in some cases of females; at the same time, lack of emotion is an issue for males in the field of mentoring • "She was emotionally strong but still judged harshly for being 'too sensitive.'" <i>Competitiveness</i> • Not much difference was seen between both genders in mentoring <i>Working hours/Availability</i> • Men tend to be more available than females as mentors • "Female mentors often leave early or juggle kids, so they're seen as unavailable."
Productivity and preference	<i>Time invested</i> • Times invested results in productivity but doesn't necessarily determine the preference for choosing a mentor • "She gave time, and that built trust, but I still didn't choose her due to team politics." <i>Opportunity</i> • In most cases, mentees do not get an opportunity to choose their mentors • Female mentors are expected not to gather many opportunities for mentees as networking is challenging for females • "We don't always get to pick our mentors—it depends on who's willing and free." <i>Knowledge</i> • This aspect did not make much of a difference in choosing mentors <i>Remuneration</i> • It differs concerning the output or results achieved <i>Competency</i> • This dimension tends to impact the productivity of males and females when they are fixated on solving problems in a particular way • "She knew her stuff, but her approach didn't align with how I work." <i>Openness</i> • The willingness to share information and provide guidance contributes to productive results

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Category	Construct/Codes
Achievement	<i>Personality</i> • Personality of a mentor should be targeted to achieve success, and also the nature to help others if present is very beneficial • “Her calm presence and focus on helping others made her a natural mentor.” <i>Networking</i> • It helps get more opportunities and leads to better productivity by inculcating multiple perspectives • “Because she was known across departments, she created more opportunities for me.” <i>Availability</i> • Mentor’s availability for mentees during need boosts their achievement motivation <i>Emotional Stability</i> • Emotion is constant, but those who have a grip over it and progress towards success tend to achieve more • “She didn’t react impulsively. Her emotional control helped me gain perspective.”
Challenge faced	<i>Time constraint</i> • This issue is prevalent in female mentors • The multiple obligations are the underlying cause of time constraints • “With kids and work, mentoring was one more responsibility I had no time for.” <i>Multiple responsibilities</i> • The responsibilities multiply for working females • Productivity at times is a challenge due to multitasking • “We are managing too much—house, job, mentoring—it becomes exhausting.” <i>Acknowledgment</i> • Females experience a lack of acknowledgment despite complying with the expected and given responsibilities • This leads to low motivation to mentor, causing them to adhere to the given task • “Even after mentoring juniors, I never got formal credit for it.” <i>Lack of support</i> • Mentoring as a profession demands time, making it difficult for women to multi-task and manage • Family and societal support is expected by career-oriented women, which individuals fail to provide in most cases, and a woman is expected to manage it all • “I had to handle it all—family expected me to manage, not ask for time.”

Source(s): Authors’ findings

Academic integrity and trustworthiness

To ensure data trustworthiness, we began by examining our biases to promote objectivity (Charmaz, 2006). Prior to data collection and analysis, we documented team biases to minimize subjectivity (Creswell, 2013). The second and third authors audited the coding process conducted by the first and fourth authors, providing feedback on consensus coding. We conducted rigorous audits to confirm data reliability and documented the development of themes and subthemes, which were reviewed by an external auditor with 2 decades of grounded theory experience to validate our findings (Mertens, 2015).

Findings

This study examines how women professionals in Indian organizations perceive female-to-female mentoring, their preferences for these relationships, and the challenges they face. Interviews with 75 women in the hospitality industry revealed two key themes: relational expectations in female mentoring and barriers to same-gender mentorship. The findings,

grounded in Kram and Isabella (1985) mentoring framework and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), highlight the tension between the desire for supportive relationships and the cultural and organizational challenges that complicate them. Participants emphasized empathy, personal connection, and shared gender experiences when selecting mentors. They valued interpersonal connections that promoted open communication and effective guidance and preferred mentors with significant professional experience. Female mentors offered critical insights from their own experiences, helping mentees navigate challenges and avoid pitfalls. This underscores the vital support mentors provide through coaching, exposure, and sponsorship.

Female-to-female mentoring dyad: expectations and opportunities

Participants provided various reasons for selecting a mentor, with many female participants preferring cross-gender mentoring and emphasizing their identity as women. Approximately 45 noted the unique challenges women face, particularly their underrepresentation in leadership roles, which they attributed to a “dream gap” reflecting the disparity between women’s potential and available opportunities.

Participants expressed a preference for mentorship that balances professional credibility with emotional connection. Analysis of their feedback revealed three key themes related to Research Question 1 (RQ1): the Beneficial Skillset, Desired Qualities in Mentorship, and the Personal Touch. These themes underscore the complexity of the mentor-mentee relationship, highlighting the need for both technical expertise and interpersonal connections in effective mentorship.

Personal Touch: A group of approximately 57 participants emphasized the significance of interpersonal relationships in female-to-female mentoring. Mentees value strong personal bonds with their mentors, which enhance communication and create a supportive environment for sharing advice and concerns. An approachable mentor effectively guides mentees through professional challenges, fostering trust and open communication, which simplifies the mentor selection process. Mentees seek mentors with similar career paths who can provide valuable insights, and they especially appreciate those with diverse experiences that relate to their unique situations. Essential elements of successful mentoring include emotional understanding, empathy, and strong connections.

She seemed to understand me and what I was going through, not only at work but also as a woman juggling a lot of different things. (Participant 16)

Instead of merely giving me instructions, she paid attention to what I had to say. I felt comfortable discussing topics I wouldn’t often discuss with others. (Participant 8)

Desired qualities in mentorship: The study examined the preferences of 66 participants for female mentors, highlighting a strong inclination towards versatile women in senior management with a strong work ethic. Participants emphasized the importance of adaptable mentors who challenge them to grow beyond their comfort zones. They valued mentors who set high standards and encourage risk-taking, seeing these traits as essential for building resilience and confidence. A democratic approach to mentoring was preferred, with mentees wanting an inclusive environment that values their input. Networking was identified as a key quality for mentors, as it creates opportunities and improves efficiency. Effective communication is also crucial; mentors should clearly articulate ideas and provide constructive feedback to help establish expectations and deliver actionable guidance.

Mentors that push me beyond my comfort zone are truly inspiring to me. I want someone who genuinely thinks I’m capable of more. (Participant 35)

She presented me with unexpected challenges. I was initially alarmed, but after some time I understood that she recognized something in me that I had not. (Participant 12)

Beneficial skillset: The study identified key skills essential for effective female-to-female mentorship: empathy, technological proficiency, openness to feedback, adaptability, and

motivation. Empathy is crucial, as 41% of female mentees find empathetic mentors more approachable, fostering supportive relationships. Technological proficiency (noted by 9% of respondents) enhances communication and allows for remote sessions. Openness to feedback encourages reflection and development, helping mentees overcome gender-specific challenges. Finally, adaptability enables mentors to meet the diverse needs of their mentees while creating a supportive growth environment.

Those who don't pretend to know everything make the best mentors. I felt like it was a two-way street because mine also asked for my opinion. (Participant 51)

The most recent findings explored both interpersonal and structural strategies aimed at enhancing the effectiveness and longevity of mentorship programs for women. The insights derived from this analysis provide a comprehensive response to Research Question 3 (RQ3), which was investigated through the lenses of Productivity, Preference, and Sustainable Mentoring. These themes underscore the critical factors that can foster meaningful and enduring mentorship relationships in this context.

Sustainable mentoring: This study highlights that many female mentees (approximately 26) view the prioritization of mentoring responsibilities as crucial for their development. Engaged mentors foster supportive relationships essential for mentee growth, while mentees value consistent availability, which builds trust and reliability. Networking is also significant; around 19 mentees appreciate mentors who can facilitate professional connections for career advancement. Mentors are often evaluated based on their work quality, with roughly 37 mentees seeking those who uphold high standards and inspire excellence. Additionally, a willingness to seek help is valued, as mentees respect mentors who demonstrate humility and a commitment to continuous learning and improvement.

I was impressed by her dedication! Without making me feel like a burden, she offered me her time. (Participant 29)

She constantly reminds me to focus on my work and not worry about the rest. I'm here to assist you in finishing your work. (Participant 47)

Productivity and preference: The research highlights factors influencing the productivity and sustainability of female-to-female mentoring relationships. It shows that meaningful engagement is more important than session length. Mentees (around 33) see no significant knowledge difference between male and female mentors. Demonstrating tangible achievements enhances the mentoring relationship's value. Additionally, flexibility in problem-solving and open information sharing lead to more productive outcomes.

She taught me how to gracefully address client concerns, a skill I now impart to my juniors. The effect and lessons you've learned stick with you. (Participant 25)

My mentor gave me more than just answers. It was simpler for me to implement them at my own job when she explained to me how she came to them. (Participant 18)

Anticipated challenges preventing females from choosing same-gendered mentors

The research highlights a myriad of critical challenges impeding the development and continuance of female-to-female mentorship dyads. It is imperative to address these challenges to foster an environment conducive to the flourishing of female mentors and mentees.

Many participants viewed female mentors positively, but several challenges hindered same-gender mentoring relationships. These challenges fall into two main themes: "Challenges Faced" and "Gender Effect." Together, they respond to Research Question 2 (RQ2) and reveal the complex dynamics influencing women's mentoring experiences.

Gender effect- The analysis explores the impact of gender on mentoring relationships. A key concern is the gender pay gap, with about 29% of female mentees reporting pay disparities despite similar efforts and opportunities, which diminishes the value of female mentors. Addressing this inequity is essential for encouraging female-to-female mentoring. Emotional stability is another challenge; female mentors often show emotional sensitivity that fosters empathy, while male mentors tend to lack this engagement. The study found no significant competitiveness differences between genders, indicating that female mentors can create a supportive yet competitive environment. Additionally, male mentors are generally more accessible, while female mentors often face external responsibilities that limit their availability, hindering female mentoring connections.

I know a female mentor is already under a lot of strain, so sometimes I'm hesitant to approach her. I don't want to put her under further stress. (Participant 12)

Challenges faced- Time constraints significantly challenge female mentors. Feedback from about 57 female mentees reveals that many mentors struggle to balance personal and professional responsibilities, limiting their mentoring availability. This can diminish mentoring effectiveness and discourage mentees from seeking female mentors. To enhance mentor success, organizations should provide flexible scheduling and support. The demands of multiple roles often compromise the quality of mentorship, as noted by female mentees. Additionally, a lack of recognition can reduce mentor motivation and willingness to engage, further affecting mentees' pursuit of guidance.

The majority of women here face unique difficulties. Sometimes they don't have the time or energy to coach others. (Participant 41)

This study effectively addresses the primary research questions. It highlights the importance of mentees' emotional investment, trust development, and relational compatibility in relation to Research Question 1 (RQ1), which focuses on women's perceptions of same-gender mentoring partnerships. Research Question 2 (RQ2) identifies the structural and sociocultural challenges in women-to-women mentorship, including emotional labor, organizational silence, and institutional constraints. Furthermore, Research Question 3 (RQ3) elucidates the conditions that enhance the effectiveness and longevity of these partnerships, emphasizing the role of proactive mentoring interventions and the developmental benefits for mentees.

Discussion

Recent scholarly investigations into public service, corporate leadership, healthcare, and higher education have examined the intricate dynamics of female-to-female mentoring relationships (Mertens, 2015). These studies reveal that while such mentoring pairs provide crucial support, role modeling, and identity affirmation, they also contend with relational tensions, emotional labor, and structural disempowerment. Eagly and Carli (2008) underscore the importance of relational authenticity and reciprocal vulnerability in effective mentoring, while Kruesi and Bazelmans (2023) characterize mentorship as undervalued "care work." Much of the literature tends to focus on mentors and mentees in positions of relative power, often within Western frameworks. In contrast, our research explores these dynamics through the experiences of female mentees in the Indian hospitality sector, contributing valuable insights to the discourse on female mentorship within service-oriented and hierarchical contexts.

Relational expectations and mentor selection preferences

The findings indicate that female mentees prioritize relational compatibility, psychological safety, and emotional intimacy in their selection of female mentors. This focus on trust and empathy aligns with relational-cultural theory, which emphasizes mutuality and

authenticity as critical for meaningful relationships. Participants often described mentors with phrases like “listened without judgment” and “shared their struggles,” supporting the argument by [Bradford et al. \(2021\)](#) that female mentorship typically emerges from collective resilience and shared marginalization experiences. The “Personal Touch” theme highlights the importance of emotional connectivity over traditional positional authority. Mentees prefer mentors who exhibit transparency, empathy, and a commitment to mutual growth. This preference is echoed in the themes of “Beneficial Skillset” and “Desired Qualities in Mentorship,” which stress the need for mentors to possess both professional skills and strong interpersonal capabilities. [Maguire et al. \(2025\)](#) reinforces this by asserting that effective female mentors balance authority with approachability, particularly in emotionally intensive fields like hospitality. Additionally, mentees seek mentors who challenge them intellectually and emotionally, emphasizing that relational mentoring fosters transformative change rather than mere comfort. Earlier studies ([Birks and Mills, 2015](#)) highlight that women mentors who cultivate environments for introspection, risk-taking, and feedback are crucial to shaping the career paths of their mentees, especially in gendered fields where confidence gaps exist.

Structural barriers and emotional ambivalence

Participants exhibited significant reluctance to pursue or sustain same-gender mentoring relationships, despite recognizing their potential benefits. This hesitancy arises from emotional complexities and institutional challenges, as highlighted by the themes of Gender Effect and Challenges Faced. In line with [Rampersad \(2024\)](#), who points out the often unrecognized emotional labor in mentoring, many mentees were hesitant to approach female mentors, viewing them as burdened by past strains or overwhelming commitments, which hindered the development of mentoring connections. A primary obstacle is structural disempowerment, as female mentors often struggle to offer substantial career support; mentees perceive them as lacking official authority or organizational influence. This aligns with critiques of gender hierarchies that suggest women, even in mid- or senior-level roles, lack equivalent institutional backing compared to men ([Dominguez and Kochan, 2020](#)). Such disparities diminish mentorship effectiveness and reflect broader gender dynamics in career progression. Participants also highlighted intra-gender challenges like competitiveness, distrust, and judgment, relating to the “stereotype inoculation paradox” noted in previous research ([Dasgupta, 2011](#)). The assumption that shared gender identity fosters emotional safety and effective mentorship is not universally valid, particularly in environments with limited female leadership, revealing the nuanced challenges women encounter in leadership roles.

Towards sustainable and inclusive mentoring frameworks

The final cluster, “Sustainable Mentoring, Productivity, and Preference,” presents strategies to enhance mentorship for women in predominantly male environments. Participants highlighted the necessity for accessible mentors with professional credibility recognized by the organization. This perspective aligns with current mentoring literature advocating for structural support that includes designated time for mentoring, formal acknowledgment of mentors, and integration into performance assessments ([Ntshongwana, 2024](#)). Several mentees expressed a preference for peer-based, reciprocal mentoring characterized by reduced hierarchy and bidirectional learning. This aligns with [Bhrami et al. \(2023\)](#), which notes the efficacy of mentorship in Asian service industries when grounded in relational humility, collaborative learning, and mutual respect. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of technological adaptability, particularly for women balancing professional and personal commitments. In the hospitality sector, remote and hybrid mentoring frameworks are viewed as viable strategies for broadening access to support.

Contribution

This research enriches the existing body of literature on mentoring by investigating women-to-women mentoring through the frameworks of relational agency, emotional labor, and institutional positioning. It specifically addresses the underexplored topic of female mentorship within the Indian hospitality sector, thereby filling a notable gap in academic discourse. Furthermore, this study critiques traditional mentor-centric paradigms that often presume a unidirectional flow of knowledge by prioritizing the perspectives and experiences of mentees. Additionally, it acknowledges the constraints of relational-cultural frameworks in the context of pervasive systemic inequities, while simultaneously reaffirming their theoretical significance and applicability. This study elucidates the nuanced considerations that mentees in service-oriented, gendered sectors encounter when selecting or sustaining relationships with female mentors. It underscores the critical interplay between institutional viability and emotional compatibility, a contrast to findings derived from research in more formalized or empowered domains. By foregrounding these complexities, the research bolsters the argument that effective mentoring is not merely the result of individual or relational dynamics; rather, it is profoundly shaped by systemic factors, including visibility, power dynamics, recognition, and cultural legitimacy. These elements collectively inform the mentoring experience, suggesting that it is a structurally mediated phenomenon rather than a solely personal endeavor.

Implications

Theoretical implications

This study advances the discourse on mentoring and gender by introducing a refined framework that incorporates mentee inquisitiveness into established mentoring models. Historically, literature on mentoring, particularly [Kram and Isabella \(1985\)](#) framework, has predominantly focused on mentors' roles in facilitating their protégés' career advancement and psychosocial well-being, often positioning mentees as passive recipients of guidance. This research challenges that view, positing that inquisitiveness enables female mentees to critically assess potential mentors, thereby underscoring their proactive role in the mentoring relationship. Furthermore, the study enhances Kram's framework by emphasizing the significance of the pre-dyadic phase, where the perceptions of mentees influence the initiation of mentoring relationships. By conceptualizing inquisitiveness as relational agency, the research introduces a crucial dimension, particularly in same-gender dyads within male-dominated fields such as hospitality. Mentees' evaluations of a mentor's emotional availability, trustworthiness, and professional trajectory highlight strategic considerations that mitigate relational risks.

Additionally, this research enriches Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) by illustrating how gendered organizational structures influence relational development. While RCT emphasizes mutuality, empathy, and authenticity in mentoring relationships ([Ragins, 2016](#)), the findings reveal that these principles are frequently undermined by institutional factors. Senior female mentors face emotional fatigue and hierarchical rigidity, compounded by cultural expectations that foster competition among women, which obstructs the formation of empowering relationships. By framing relational disconnections as structural challenges shaped by gender dynamics, the study refines our understanding of inquisitiveness as influenced by relational dynamics. It contributes to feminist organizational theory by encouraging further exploration of the complex relational networks in mentoring, focusing on their formation, negotiation, and resistance.

Managerial implications

The findings of this study have important implications for hospitality firms seeking to establish inclusive and effective mentorship programs. Female mentees prioritize relational availability,

psychological safety, and emotional connection over technical expertise and hierarchical status. Therefore, mentorship initiatives should align with these preferences to better support female mentees. Organizations need to shift from rigid hierarchical mentoring models to frameworks that recognize the relational dynamics vital for effective mentorship, particularly among women. Research indicates that mentees value mentors who demonstrate approachability, empathy, and emotional engagement. Thus, mentoring programs should focus on pairing mentors and mentees based on shared professional values and communication styles.

Additionally, many female mentees hesitate to seek guidance from female mentors due to biases concerning emotional burdens and perceived authority. This highlights the necessity for organizational awareness, as leaders must understand the challenges faced by female mentors. To enhance mentor availability and mitigate burnout, organizations should redistribute tasks and formally acknowledge mentoring responsibilities in performance evaluations. Mentees respect mentors who exhibit perseverance in overcoming barriers. Organizations can also diversify mentoring by implementing peer mentoring and narrative-driven sessions, especially in male-dominated sectors like hospitality. Investing in ongoing mentorship programs is essential for fostering a supportive culture. Targeted training for mentors and mentees, along with workshops led by senior women, can enhance inclusivity. By adopting these strategies, hospitality organizations can create equitable workplaces and improve women's representation in leadership, thereby facilitating positive change within the industry.

Implications for policy and economic impact

The findings of this study carry considerable implications for both organizational and financial strategies within the hospitality sector. To bolster employee retention, enhance job satisfaction, and facilitate career progression elements intrinsically linked to the reduction of turnover costs and the elevation of service quality, organizations can strategically harness the insights gained regarding the multifaceted challenges and advantages associated with women-to-women mentoring. At the policy level, the integration of mentorship as a mechanism for workforce development and the advancement of gender equity may inform both governmental and industry-led initiatives, including Skill India, the National Tourism Policy, and various Gender Sensitization Programs. Furthermore, the establishment of standardized mentorship frameworks and the provision of incentives for female mentors could significantly reinforce institutional policies within hospitality organizations, fostering an environment conducive to inclusive leadership development.

Limitations and scope for future research

Although this research offers significant insights, several limitations must be considered. The findings may not be generalizable due to a small sample size and narrow organizational focus. Future studies should utilize larger, more diverse samples across various industries. The reliance on self-reported data from female mentees raises concerns about social desirability bias; thus, incorporating data triangulation from multiple sources, including interviews with female mentors and organizational stakeholders, could enhance validity and provide a deeper understanding of the challenges in female-to-female mentoring. This study employed a cross-sectional approach using open-ended interviews, but future research would benefit from a longitudinal design to capture the evolution of mentoring relationships. The views of organizational leaders regarding mentorship, particularly their expectations are underexplored and merit further investigation.

Additionally, comparing male-to-female and female-to-female mentoring could elucidate the distinct challenges and benefits associated with each, contributing to a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics within mentorship. It is crucial for future research to examine how organizational culture and policies shape the challenges faced in female-to-

female mentoring relationships. A comprehensive understanding of support mechanisms, diversity initiatives, and inclusive practices will be vital for organizations seeking to enhance their mentorship programs. Lastly, assessing the effectiveness of targeted strategies to overcome these challenges would significantly advance the field.

Conclusion

The female-to-female mentoring dyad has garnered significantly less academic attention as to why female mentees, despite having the opportunity to choose female mentors where they can build a more comfortable relationship, choose an opposite gender as a mentor. The literature on mentoring is skewed towards cross-gendered mentoring, an ongoing trend. Through this study, a sincere effort is made to address the question of why there is no female-to-female mentoring. The study began by identifying the underlying causes of representation of women at the top positions and keeping in mind the gender disparity and its underlying causes in the mentoring field. The applicability of these aspects in mentoring might vary from firm to firm, but keeping these criteria as a yardstick will help individuals choose the right mentor irrespective of gender. Furthermore, the insights derived from this study hold the potential to enrich public discourse surrounding women's representation and agency within India's burgeoning service sector. By illuminating the role of informal support networks and the concept of relational career capital in gendered occupational environments, this study seeks to elevate awareness and foster discussions about the complexities of women's experiences in the workforce.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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Corresponding author

Lalatendu Kesari Jena can be contacted at: lkjena@xim.edu.in