

# WOMEN IN HOSPITALITY

*Challenges, Networks & the Path Forward*

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Research into Women's Experience in Hospitality and the Role of Women-Only Networks

Based on in-depth interviews and postcard data gathered from women running independent restaurants in Brighton.

# Why this matters

“

*Safe space rather than a testosterone-fuelled battlefield.*

— Event participant

“

*Our voices get lost in the noise so often.*

— Event participant

“

*Having not known that this existed until recently — I am so grateful. It has made me feel so accepted and strong.*

— Event participant

“

*No one else is going to uplift us.*

— Interview participant

*These are the voices of women working in hospitality in Brighton.*

# Our research, your stories

## 8 In-depth Interviews

Women running independent restaurants in Brighton.

## Postcard Data

Two questions answered anonymously at Women in Hospitality events — with 36 responses capturing candid, real-time insight

## What We Explored

What challenges do women in hospitality face? · What support do WONs provide? · How can WONs be strengthened to better support women's career progression?

PART ONE

# The Challenges

*What women in hospitality actually face — and why the sector amplifies every barrier.*

# Some women face compounding barriers

*Challenges are shared by many — but they intensify for women at multiple intersections of disadvantage.*

*Brighton is socially welcoming and inclusive — particularly towards LGBTQ+ communities. Yet participants noted it is not geographically or ethnically diverse, which limits the lived experiences represented in the sector.*

## All women in hospitality

*Confidence barriers · appearance expectations · exclusion from informal networks · unclear career pathways*

## + Mothers & caregivers

*Unsociable hours conflict with caring responsibilities · the sector rarely offers the flexibility needed*

## + Women of colour & underrepresented groups

*Underrepresentation at leadership level · lack of visible role models · limited ethnic diversity across the region · additional barriers for disabled and neurodiverse women*

# Barriers that keep coming up

## Leadership Norms

Traditional male-dominated leadership cultures persist — women feel pressure to constantly prove their competence.

## Emotional Exhaustion

Working harder and holding themselves to very high expectations leads to exhaustion.

## Caregiving Responsibilities

Unsociable hours and inflexibility make balancing hospitality work with caring for children or family extremely difficult.

## Harassment

Experiences of harassment. Still a lived reality. Women 'get used to the system' before realising it was never okay.

## No Clear Career Path

Most people in hospitality learn 'on the job'. Without structured pathways, access to networks and mentorship becomes critical.

## Confidence Barriers

Shaped by longstanding industry norms, not personal failing. Lack of visible role models and recognition compounds this over time.

## Appearance Expectations

Different, unspoken standards apply to women's presentation. Felt but rarely spoken about — an invisible but real barrier.

## Exclusion from Networks

Men bond informally after work, in closed social circles. Women are often left out, limiting their access to opportunities.

# The structural vagueness of this sector hurts women more.

“

*You have to do at least 20–30% more than a man to achieve the same role — to be respected. It's not equal. But it makes you tougher and more prepared.*

— Interview participant

“

*There's no clear career path. You go from place to place hoping you learn enough. And so finding someone who'll give you time to learn and nurture that — it's a rarity.*

— Interview participant

“

*As soon as you show any emotion, a male boss says 'you're hormonal, you're weak, you can't handle this.'*

— Interview participant

“

*It's lots of lucky moments for you as a woman to break through and be given a chance.*

— Interview participant

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*The sector's learn-on-the-job culture amplifies every other barrier women face, because men compensate through the informal networks women are excluded from.*

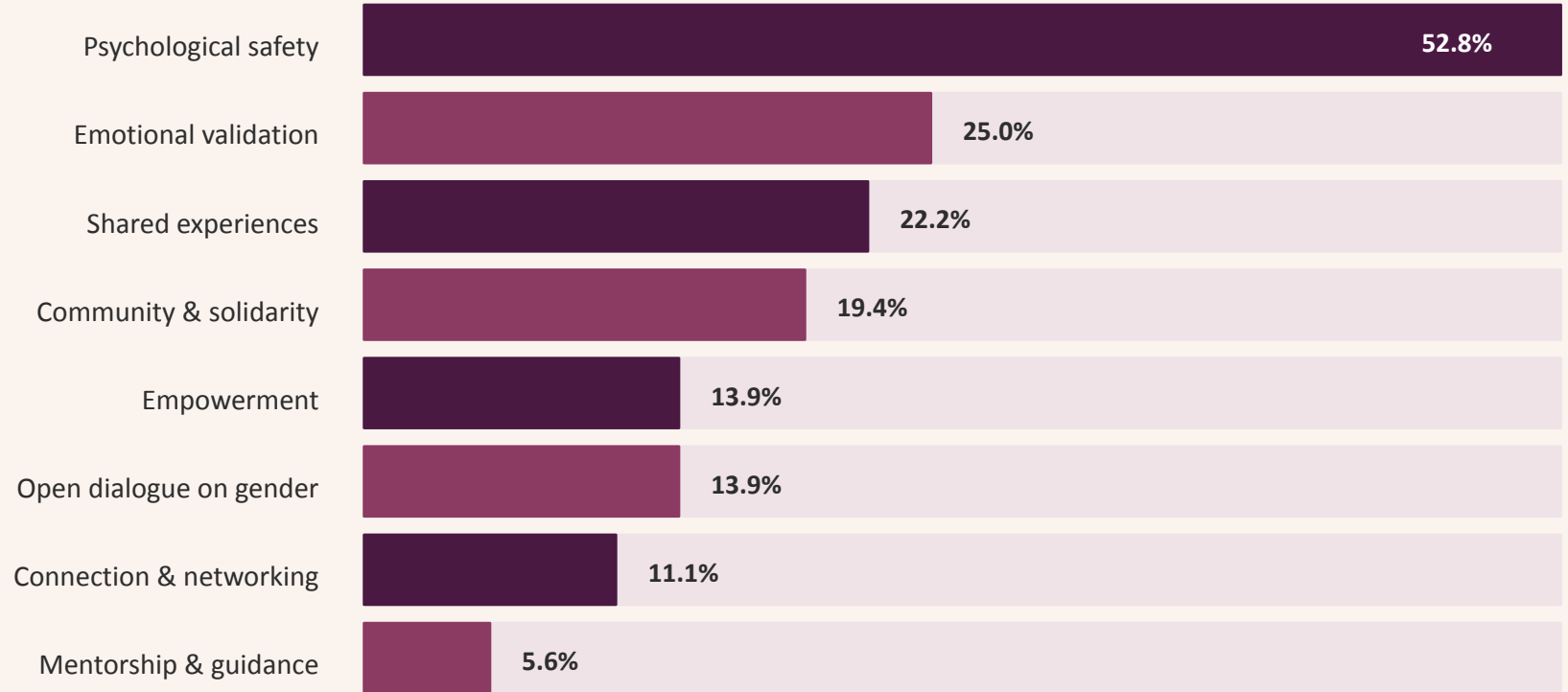
PART TWO

# The Power of Women-Only Networks

*What WONs are already doing brilliantly — and why it matters.*

# What women value most in WONs

Postcard question: 'What is the best thing about being part of a women-only network?'



# The safe space that changes everything

“

*I feel understood when I walk into that room. It gives you courage — you can say things that maybe you wouldn't say anywhere else.*

— Interview Participant

“

*When there's a man in the room, it very much changes. The sharing of emotion just would not have happened.*

— Interview Participant

“

*Women have become more proactive in supporting each other.*

— Interview Participant

“

*I keep an eye on a WhatsApp group. If someone acts inappropriately, that information is shared very quickly. It keeps people safer.*

— Interview Participant

*WONs are doing the psychosocial work brilliantly — filling a gap the sector refuses to address.*

PART THREE

# The Gap

*Where WONS fall short — and what women are asking for.*

# Challenges within WONS

*The same themes appeared consistently across interviews AND the postcard data:*

## **Mentorship: Wanted, Rarely Delivered**

Only a few responses cited mentorship as a strength of WONS, but it tops the wish list. It is highly valued but currently informal and patchy.

## **Too Infrequent, Too Unstructured**

'More regular meetings' was the top request. Women want ongoing community, not one-off events.

## **Close-Knit Groups**

Few noted younger women feel shut out by a 'clique of older owners'. Networks risk becoming echo chambers if they don't actively diversify.

## **Strategy Without Implementation**

'There are discussions of strategies but not exactly about how to implement them.' — The room agrees on what needs to change, but leaves without a plan.

## **Low Awareness**

Getting women to join is itself the challenge. Several interviewees had never heard of relevant national networks until prompted.

## **Difficult to Attend**

Time, distance, and the relentless pace of hospitality make even well-intentioned women skip events. Online continuity is essential.

# Building on what already works.

## WHAT WONs DO WELL

- ✓ Safe space for open, honest conversation
- ✓ Peer support and emotional validation
- ✓ Shared experience reduces isolation
- ✓ Building professional connections
- ✓ Confidence through encouragement
- ✓ Access to role models & inspiration

## OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP

- Structured, stage-specific mentorship
- Regular events + online continuity
- Practical, implementation-focused support
- Welcoming newcomers & younger women
- Greater visibility and outreach
- Wellbeing & mental health integration

*WONs are already doing vital work — these are the next steps, not corrections.*

PART FOUR

# The Potential

*How WONs can go further — actionable strategies from the women themselves.*

# Make mentorship real, not aspirational

## #1

*Mentorship was the #1 most-requested improvement.*

### Outsource mentorship

Don't wait for it to happen organically. Connect members to programmes like Help to Grow, external mentors, and coaches. *"Mentorship doesn't have to come from within the network."*

### Stage-specific matching

Early career, new management, ownership — each needs different support. Match mentors to mentees based on career stage and specific need.

### Peer mentoring circles

If formal mentorship is out of reach, structure peer support. Small groups with a focus topic. *"Could we offer to donate an hour a month to support another female in practice?"*

### Role models & case studies – Celebrate publicly

Women of colour who have progressed were specifically described as trailblazers. Sharing real journeys builds belief that progression is possible.

# Building community beyond events

*Regular connection — not just individual events — is what builds lasting community.*

01

## Regular in-person events

2–3 times per year, with a consistent format women can plan around. Purposeful — not just social.

02

## Online between events

WhatsApp groups or similar keep the conversation alive. Women want to stay connected, seek advice, and share opportunities in real time.

03

## Facilitated introductions

Name badges, guided mingling, social connectors. Reduce barriers for newcomers, younger women, and those from different backgrounds.

04

## Training and development

Provide practical skills sessions for career development, adding a learning dimension alongside community and connection.

05

## Wellbeing alongside development

Integrate wellbeing activities — mindfulness, peer support, connections to specialist services — as part of the broader offer.

# Protect the space. Expand the conversation.

*Both needs can coexist — they are not in conflict.*

## **KEEP: Women-only safe space**

The safe space is not negotiable. Women share things in WONs they won't share anywhere else — about harassment, about self-doubt, about feeling like an imposter.

*“If there had been men at the last event, there would not have been that sharing of emotion.”* — Interview participant.

Protect this. It's the foundation of everything else.

## **ADD: Selective male ally events**

Separately, create deliberate spaces where men can listen, learn, and be educated about the challenges.

*“Working together to make a change — men need to understand what women go through to be part of that change.”* — Interview participant.

*“A few select voices from other genders. Men are in power structures and a lot of the time they have the power to instigate change.”* — Event Participant.

Two formats. One community.

# Skills, visibility & collective voice

## Skills & Confidence Development

WONs can connect members to training, subsidised programmes, and external coaches — not deliver everything themselves. Key areas: confidence-building, financial management, leadership pathways into ownership. Sharing real experiences and case studies from women in the industry builds belief in what is possible.

## Visibility & Collective Advocacy

WONs can amplify individual voices into a collective one. Increase visibility through social media and ongoing engagement. Engage employers, industry bodies, and policymakers. Campaign for clearer career pathways, better harassment reporting processes, and more flexibility for caregivers across the sector.

# A WON that goes the distance

**1**

## Safe Space

Women-only core events.  
Protect it unconditionally.

**2**

## Structured Mentorship

Matched, stage-specific,  
outsourced where needed.

**3**

## Regular Connection

Events + online continuity.  
Building community, not events.

**4**

## Inclusive by Design

Younger women, women of colour,  
neurodiverse, LGBTQ+, diverse voices,  
newcomers actively welcomed.

**5**

## Skills & Pathways

Connect to training, coaching,  
and career development support.

**6**

## Collective Voice

Advocate upward. Drive change  
beyond the network itself.

***“No one else is going to uplift us.  
We need to support each other.”***

— Interview Participant

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*This research was only possible because of the generosity and honesty of the women who shared their stories.  
Thank you.*