

Hotel working conditions and challenges in a time of crisis: Perceptions of Spanish women managers

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Tourism
Gender perspective
Hospitality sector
Employment conditions
COVID-19

ABSTRACT

The health crisis caused by Covid-19 is also driving a social and economic crisis that has a powerful effect on the hospitality sector. The large number of women employed in the sector means that the consequences of the crisis may have a disproportionate impact on female employment in hospitality. The objective is to analyse the experience of women hotel managers, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, from the perspective of theories that consider gender as a social construction.

We have applied a qualitative methodology based on the analysis of 19 semi-structured interviews with women in positions of responsibility in hotels and hotel chains in Spain during the coronavirus pandemic.

There are gender conditioning factors shaped by social construction, which have influenced the working conditions of women managers in the hotel sector, both before and during the pandemic.

1. Introduction

The studies carried out on gender and employment in hospitality are still few in number. As Cañada, Julià, and y Benach, J. (2019) pointed out, international scientific literature on hospitality and jobs has focused chiefly on human resources management oriented towards efficiency in the sector. This has meant that working conditions in hospitality in general, and specifically in terms of gender, have received less attention. The practical implications of the research undertaken therefore leave a gap. Mooney (2020) proposes working on several aspects: from applying contemporary gender theories in the study's design to incorporating the context in which it is developed to understand the significance of the results. Contemporary gender theories used in the workplace enable research to move beyond individual-centred gender inequality and to understand the organisational processes that create, reinforce and reproduce inequalities. Examples include the following theories: (1) "symbolic gendered orders theory" on socially normalised symbolic behaviours, these behaviours promote the inclusion or exclusion of women in the workplace (Gherardi, 2013); (2) the "Teflon effect" theory, (Simpson & Kumra's, 2016) shows gender bias in unequal performance appraisal outcomes; (3) the evolution of glass ceiling metaphors into glass slipper metaphors (Jordan, 1997; Mooney, 2020) provides

insight into inequalities and barriers produced by the dominance of male role models in job design and promotion processes.

This study is framed within the theories that understand gender as a social construction (Mooney, 2020). The main objective of this work is to know the experience of hotel managers, contrasting their perception of working conditions before and during the pandemic. The study constitutes the first exploratory analysis that integrates the perspective of contemporary gender theories in the hotel work environment with an unprecedented context in the history of international tourism development: the global 'great lockdown'. The results provide an insight into the policy and business implications that both governments and companies need to be aware of to continue guaranteeing equal opportunities in the workplace.

The structure of the research is based on a review of the main topics researched concerning hospitality employment and gender before the start of the pandemic. It begins with a review of the research and contributions that have been published on the health crisis, with particular emphasis on how they address the effect on female employment in the hotel sector and their projection of strategies and scenarios in a post-Covid world. This was followed by 19 semi-structured interviews with women managers of hotel companies. Finally, the results articulate theoretical and practical implications that allow us to understand

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critical aspects of inequality in the hotel workplace. These are aspects that still need to be solved despite the regulatory advances that have been introduced. Moreover, it is observed how inequality and vulnerability in the case of many women have intensified during the pandemic.

2. Literature review

2.1. The challenges for pre-Covid employment in tourism from a gender perspective

One of the claims of feminism still unresolved in most countries is equality in the work environment (Abellan-Calvet, Izcara-Conde, López-Ballart, & Salvador-Almeida, 2021; Dashper, 2019). Since the early 2000s, it has been a subject that has been studied in different productive sectors (Liff & Ward, 2001) and more specifically in the hospitality sector (Boone et al., 2013; Elhoushy & El-Said, 2020; Fan, Im, Miao, Tomas, & Liu, 2021; Mooney, 2020). In this area, Mooney (2020) reviews the different gender approaches that have influenced tourism research on the work environment. On the one hand, the biologically based perspective identifies sex with biological characteristics and gender as a socio-cultural categorisation associated with the biological sex of each person. On the other hand, the socially constructed view understands gender as a form of social organization where the roles established in the hierarchical social order are reproduced, and the privileges of dominant groups in terms of gender, ethnicity and class are perpetuated (Mooney, 2020).

Structural gender theories delve deeper into this idea, and Risman and Davis (2013) help to understand this gender construction through three levels. The individual level involves internalised gendered behaviours (male/female) at various stages of life that construct each person's identity. An example of learned gender behaviour would be 'caregiving' that becomes a self-imposed barrier to women's professional lives (Boone et al., 2013; Liff & Ward, 2001; Segovia-Pérez, Figueroa-Domecq, Fuentes-Moraleda, & Muñoz-Mazón, 2019). At the interactional-cultural level, on the other hand, the existence of expectations of different roles according to gender (male/female) influences interactions and conditions people's behaviour. As a result, women may be under-represented in leadership positions (Liff & Ward, 2001) and may even have an impact on their empowerment (Almathami, Khoo-Lattimore, & Yang, 2022). Finally, at the institutional level, inequalities are observable in private organisations through practices such as job design or performance evaluation and in the public sphere through formal legislation. One example is labour legislation, which establishes job availability assuming that workers do not have responsibilities associated with caregiving. In any of these three dimensions, the social construction of gender can be modified by the cultural context, as in China with the Confucian influence (Fan et al., 2021) or by the political-cultural context as in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Almathami, Khoo-Lattimore, & Yang, 2021). However, when the literature has studied the organisational system of the gender generation process, not much attention has been paid to dimensions such as organisational culture, peer interaction and individual identities (Je, Khoo-Lattimore, & Yang, 2022).

Applying the social construction of gender in the work environment, it is possible to consider the existence of gender systems, where the conception of gender is not identified with individuals but is the result of organisational processes (Dashper, 2019; Mooney, 2020). Thus, gender inequalities and their dimensions linked to ethnicity and class are rooted in the reproduction of a hierarchical system of power relations within organisations (including companies), often maintained through informal networks and practices (Liff & Ward, 2001). This, in turn, determines organisational hierarchy and operational procedures. Therefore, labour inequalities are rooted in structural inequalities in society.

This means that, institutionally, power and resources are directly related to men, and vertical and horizontal segregation situations are encouraged (Stockdale, 1991 in Jordan, 1997; Boone et al., 2013;

Santero-Sanchez, Segovia-Pérez, Castro-Nuñez, Figueroa-Domecq, & Talón-Ballester, 2015). Vertical segregation is also associated with the impostor syndrome or the feeling of marginalisation. This explains why the design of management positions and performance evaluation follow male patterns (Dashper, 2019; Liff & Ward, 2001). According to Liff and Ward (2001), a fictitious image can be generated of the ideal profile of a top management leader as a "super-human workaholic", which can lead to candidates being discarded before they even show up for a job interview. As a result, in addition to encountering the glass ceiling when it comes to promotion, they may feel less comfortable in the process (glass slipper), as Mooney (2020) points out.

Other problems arise from or coincide with this segregation and have widespread effects on women's employment in the hotel sector. Those which have been subject to closer scrutiny are the *salary gap* (Mooney, 2020; Morgan & Pritchard, 2019; Thrane, 2008), which either derives from salary inequalities associated with the type of work carried out, unequal conditions to negotiate promotions or directly from discrimination in pay, visible in situations where women earn less than men when occupying the same position and doing the same work. One of the critical aspects of solving this problem is that all workers have equal access to information (Liff & Ward, 2001).

The socially ingrained view of women as caregivers and the consequent difficulty in balancing work and private life is another characteristic trait of the hospitality sector that has been widely studied (Blomme, van Rheede, & Tromp, 2010; Duffy, Kline, Mowatt, & Chancellor, 2015), with specific studies on companies in the accommodation sector (Chen, Ayoun, & Eyoun, 2018; Zhao & Namasivayam, 2012). As some studies have shown (Blomme et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2018), the conflict between work and family can force highly qualified workers to leave a company, so there is a risk of losing talent, which may even spill over into other sectors.

Women also require greater flexibility because the family has traditionally had a more significant role in developing women's professional careers. The amount of work related to family life and caring still falls mainly on women because they are rooted in social norms for gender that generally assign them this role (Abellan-Calvet et al., 2021; Liff & Ward, 2001; Power, 2020). In societies with a tradition of tourism, like Spain, around 70% of housework tends to be carried out by women (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020). This implies that women experience a double inequality based on the social construction of gender (Mooney, 2020; Risman & Davis, 2013; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019): (1) the inequality of occupation roles that are reproduced in the work environment; (2) the inequality of roles that occur in the family environment and that has an impact on the professional trajectory. In this sense, one of the measures that can facilitate this work-life balance is remote work. However, there are difficulties in its implementation in the hotel sector, even in those positions where presence is not essential (Moro, López, Ordaz, & Moro, 2014). In addition to the difficulties inherent in the hotel sector, it should be noted that it can have associated negative implications, such as blurring the boundaries between the work and domestic spheres (Villamor, Hill, Ernst Kossek, & Foley, 2022).

Specifically concerning management and director positions in the hotel sector, studies such as that of Boone et al. (2013) or Carvalho, Costa, Lykke, and Torres (2019) identify elements that are, in principle, less visible and which favour the inertia in favour of segregation, describing them as "invisible obstacle course" or "hidden discrimination" practices in gender within these organisations. According to the authors, they are based partly on established beliefs, such as assuming that women are more inclined to dedicate themselves to family life or that women are less competent than men to occupy management and director positions, and partly on the existence of masculine bonding practices that exclude women from promotion and employment selection processes. In this sense, techniques such as mentoring women who want to aspire to managerial positions can empower women according to their goals (Dashper, 2019).

Finally, beyond social construction, factors specific to the sector in

which the work activity is carried out influence this inequality. In the hotel sector, the lack of *job security* is a decisive factor that affects the tourist sector in general due to the large proportion of seasonal employment, temporary contracts or outsourced work. This type of contract is more common in female, young and immigrant workers in companies with a medium to large workforce (Albarracín et al., 2010 in Cañada et al., 2019). The consequence has been increasingly precarious employment through the intensification of the work, the perception of low salaries and difficulty in accessing benefits such as paid holidays, unemployment benefits or sick pay and finally, a pension on retirement (Abellan-Calvet et al., 2021).

This study applies the approach that understands gender as a social construction and considers the different dimensions that structure gender and perpetuate inequalities in the context of the health crisis. These theoretical approaches to gender explain the links between the structural causes of gender inequalities rooted in society and the effects on the quality of female employment (Fig. 1).

2.2. Covid's impact on female employment in hospitality

The hotel sector was one of the most affected because of the direct impact on the main activity of this type of business (García-Gómez, Demir, Díez-Esteban, & Bilan, 2021). In Spain, most hotels closed entirely at the end of March 2020 when the Spanish Ministry of Health declared a state of alarm to control the response to the health crisis caused by COVID-19, enforced the closure of all tourist accommodation facilities to the general public (Vargas, 2020). Considering Spain's high dependence on tourism, these closures had an immediate effect on employment, causing an increase in temporary furlough schemes (e. g. Record of Temporary Employment Regulation) and permanent losses (Cañada & Murray, 2021; La Moncloa marzo, 2021a; La Moncloa, 2021b; Abellan-Calvet et al., 2021). After these closures, the sector has experienced a modest recovery coinciding with the reopening of hotels (early June 2020) and the use of technology to encourage remote working (Filimonau, Derqui, & Matute, 2020; Huang, Makridis, Baker, Medeiros, & Guo, 2020). However, the recovery has not been constant, as, throughout 2021, more closures have affected the different Spanish regions unevenly.

In this context of crisis, women have been one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of their stability in the labour market in the hospitality and tourism sector (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020; Baum, Mooney, Robinson, & Solnet, 2020; Chen, 2021; Lopes, Sargento, & Carreira, 2021; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015). The causes of this vulnerability are, in part, associated with individual and interactional dimensions of gender (Risman & Davis, 2013). In this regard, it has been identified that mothers with children are the people who have been most exposed to unemployment in the hospitality sector (Landivar, Ruppner, Scarborough, & Collins, 2020; Carli, 2020; Collins, Landivar, Ruppner, & Scarborough, 2020; Nivakoski & Mascherini, 2021). This is explained by the fact that in the family environment, the responsibilities of care and household chores have been borne chiefly by women during the pandemic (Carli, 2020; Chen & Mooney, 2020; Nivakoski & Mascherini, 2021). More specifically, Collins et al. (2020) estimate that in the U.S., mothers with young children have reduced their work hours much more than fathers. In 2020, this situation was aggravated to coincide with the closing of the schools (WTO, 2020).

In the area of women managers, these family burdens have been perceived to be a more remarkable lack of commitment on the part of these women than men (Baum et al., 2020). In this context, telecommuting may seem to be a solution to improve work-life balance, not only because of the flexibility provided by this mode of work but also because it may have favoured greater involvement of fathers during the worst months of the pandemic and set a precedent for reducing gender imbalances in domestic responsibilities (Carli, 2020). However, several experts point out that it may also represent a future limitation for women either because of digital barriers (Khoo et al., 2023) or in terms of labour perspectives for those positions where presence is rewarded, such as in the hospitality sector (Bluedorn, Hansen, Shibata, Caselli, & Mendes Tavares, 2021; Nivakoski & Mascherini, 2021).

Regarding the impact on the quality of employment, the positions in the hospitality sector which have been most affected are those which require the physical presence of the employee, and these are often women (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020; Chen & Mooney, 2020; Martínez-Gayo, 2021; WTO, 2020). Despite this premise, it must be affirmed that not all hotel sector jobs depend on physical presence. The positions most closely related to management and back-office work in hotels are more

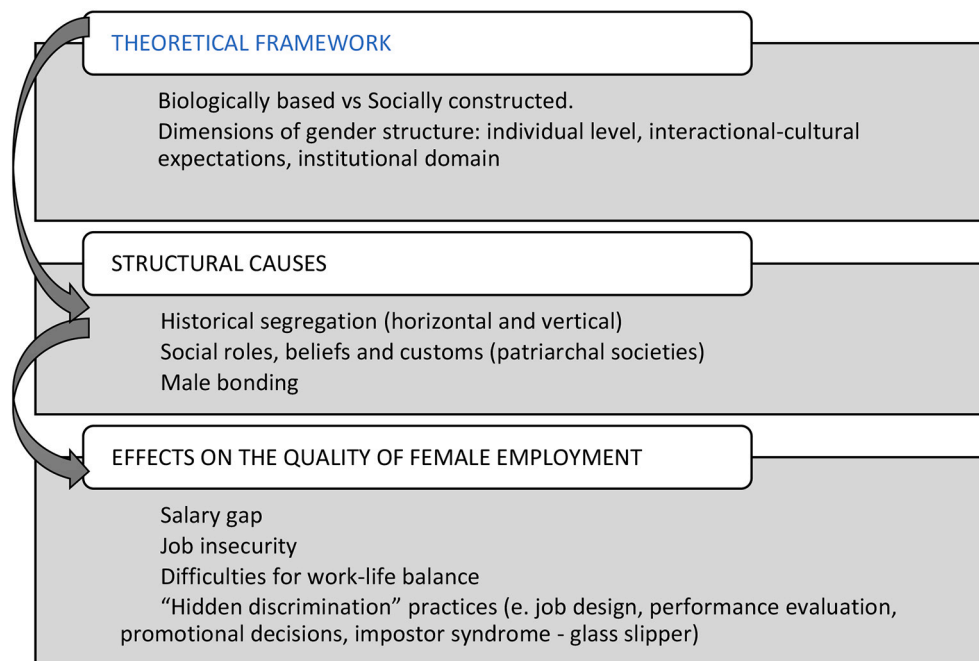


Fig. 1. Summary of the main theoretical approach, structural causes for the gender gap and its effects on the quality of female employment. Source: Prepared based on Jordan (1997), Risman and Davis (2013); Santero-Sanchez et al. (2015) and Mooney (2020).

suitable for adapting to remote work (Chadee, Ren, & Tang, 2020). Similarly, research conducted at managerial levels reveals that companies led by women have been more affected by the COVID crisis than those led by men (Torres, Maduko, Gaddis, Iacovone, & Beegle, 2022). Among the reasons for this more significant impact, Torres et al. (2022) point out that women-led companies are less likely to obtain public aid, according to the data, possibly due to the lack of social networks. However, each country has its characteristics, and this study emphasises the importance of conducting studies that analyse the data according to country, company size and the sector in which the activity is carried out.

There is, therefore, a consensus in the studies carried out during the pandemic regarding the intensification of the gender gap in this period in the hotel sector. The leading causes of this gap (Fig. 2) are, on the one hand, the pre-existence of social roles, beliefs, and customs (Collins et al., 2020; Landivar et al., 2020; Nivakoski & Mascherini, 2021) inherent to patriarchal societies and, on the other hand, the characteristics of employment in the hotel sector women (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020; Martínez-Gayo, 2021; WTO, 2020). In turn, this influences the quality of female employment leading to job insecurity and difficulties in work-life balance.

Faced with this situation, some countries have adopted protection measures. For example, the actions taken by the Spanish government to protect workers have been aimed at all workers in general, such as the Record of Temporary Employment Regulation (La Moncloa, 2021b) or measures to support the tourism sector in terms of taxation. As for vulnerable groups in the labour field, they have focused more on young people than women. On the other hand, from the organisational point of view, several studies indicate the importance of organisational resilience during the pandemic in the hospitality sector (Filimonau et al., 2020; Gioumpasoglou, Marinakou, & Zopiatis, 2021). However, the measures that have been taken so far have had little real implementation in tourism organisations (Je et al., 2022) or have been carried out superficially, identifying “femwashing” practices (Khoo et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

In this research, we have applied a descriptive methodology that analyses the situation of women in the context of a health crisis, establishing classifying categories and observing the connections between them (Penalva-Verdú, Alaminos, Francés, & Santacreu, 2015). In addition, the internal procedures of Grounded Theory have been applied, involving propositions based directly on the data (Glaser, Strauss, & Strutzel, 1968). More specifically, there were 19 semi-structured interviews carried out with female directors and middle managers in hotels in Spain. The interviews were conducted by two female interviewers from the tourism area in the context of a research project IMPETUEMFE (Impact of the Pandemic on Tourism in Spain: Implications for Women's Employment in a Female Sector) financed by

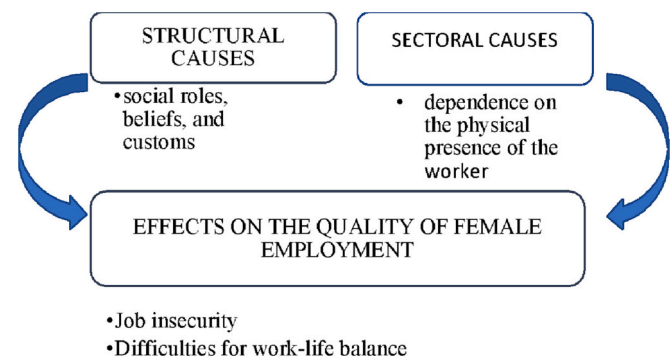


Fig. 2. Summary of the main causes for gender gap and its effects on the quality of female employment during the covid pandemic. Source: Prepared by authors.

the Fondo Supera Covid. It should also be noted that the fact that the researchers were women made the interviewees feel more comfortable and understood when it came to expressing their situation.

3.1. Profile of the sample

The sampling method used is the one that Marshall (1996) called the Judgement Sample, in which the researcher selects the most appropriate sample to respond to the research question. The selection criteria for the sample were established in advance (Flick, 2012), including a socio-economic criterion (working in hotels in a managerial or middle management position) as well as the gender (women) of the interviewees. Several sectoral and employment standards were also applied to ensure that all interviewees were hotel professionals in management positions. However, to compare the different opinions and ensure heterogeneity in the sample, there was no prior stipulation on the category or type of hotel. The sampling process ended when all the information was completed (Penalva-Verdú et al., 2015) and when the theoretical saturation was reached (Strauss & Glaser, 1967).

The sample for the present study consists of 19 women who occupy either director or middle management posts in various types of hotels (Table 1). Almost one-third of the interviewees (26%) work in independent hotels, while the remaining 74% work for hotel chains. As regards the hotel categories, 16% work in 3-star hotels, 37% in 4-star and 26% in 5-star hotels. The remaining 21% work in the central services of the corresponding hotel chain. As regards experience in the sector, most have more than ten years of experience, and the average number of years worked in the industry comes to 18.2 years. To identify the components of the sample, as well as to preserve their anonymity, a coding system (pseudonyms) was generated for the interviewees consisting of the letter “E” followed by a number (Table 1). The identification of the respondent is followed by “:” followed by a number that identifies the text selected for the analysis of results (Atlas.ti). Thus, E1:3 refers to text three selected from interview 1.

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

	Position occupied	Type of hotel	Category	Years in the sector
E1	Director Assistant	Independent Hotel	5*	14
E2	Commercial director	Hotel chain	5*	20
E3	Director of Marketing and Sales	Hotel chain	5*	22
E4	Commercial director	Hotel chain	4*	30
E5	Director and owner of a Boutique hotel	Independent Hotel	5*	28
E6	Operations Director of a hotel chain	Hotel chain	Central services	28
E7	Head of Accommodation and Quality for a hotel chain	Hotel chain	Central services	18
E8	Chain Director of Revenue Management	Hotel chain	Central services	13
E9	Sales director	Hotel chain	4*	16
E10	Hotel manager	Hotel chain	3*	7
E11	Hotel manager	Hotel chain	4*	25
E12	Head of reception	Independent Hotel	3*	18
E13	Hotel Manager	Hotel chain	5*	12
E14	Hotel manager	Hotel chain	4*	6
E15	Head of reception	Independent Hotel	4*	18
E16	Operations Manager for a hotel chain	Hotel chain	Central services	25
E17	Hotel and restaurant manager	Independent Hotel	3*	15
E18	Hotel manager	Hotel chain	4*	20
E19	Operations Director	Hotel chain	4*	11

Source: Prepared by the authors.

3.2. Design of the interviews

The interviews were designed around four main blocks of open questions (for more information on the interviews, see appendix I “data collection”). The first two blocks were designed following the study of Segovia-Pérez et al. (2019) and Fan et al. (2021): on the one hand, containing questions about the professional trajectory of the interviewees and the characteristics of the hotel where they work, on the other hand (second block) holding inquiries related with working conditions and their perception of equality before the pandemic. The third block follows the same content structure but adapted to the context of the pandemic, while the fourth block tries to compile the future challenges for women in the hospitality sector.

3.3. Data collection

After the interviews had been validated, the participants were contacted through the business network LinkedIn, explaining the purpose of the research and inviting them to participate. The potential participants were then contacted via email to agree on the interview's date, time, and format. Most of the interviews were held online, using video conferences, and took between 45 min and 1 h to complete. The interviews were conducted in Spanish. They were recorded and transcribed. This process took place between the months of November 2020 and May 2021.

3.4. Procedure of analysis

As can be seen in Fig. 3, the process of conducting and analysing the interviews consisted of several steps. Once the interviews had been held and transcribed, they were analysed in Spanish using the Atlas.ti programme. Then, the data were coded using ad-hoc or open coding, and the text segments were compared against these codes and integrated into categories (Flick, 2012). This allowed us to identify significant ideas, concepts or meanings and use the structure of the initial topics (interview script) to generate the “master structure” for the coding. Based on this structure, axial coding was carried out, identifying relationships between the categories obtained in the open coding and their sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). Subsequently, the categories were reviewed and grouped into new categories (constant comparative method) to be analysed and contrasted with the theory finally.

The process described can be represented in a data structure (Table 2) proposed by Corley & Gioia (2004). This process (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) is composed of a first-order analysis where a multitude of incidents (first-order categories) emerge. Subsequently, a second-order analysis is carried out where the incidents are grouped into categories or concepts that may come from literature (i.e. “salary gap”, “work-life balance”, “job stability”) or arise without theoretical references (i.e. “change in work conditions”, “contingency measures”). Finally, once we reach theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 2002), we group the previous categories into “aggregate dimensions”: “work Conditions pre-Covid”, “work Conditions during Covid” and “challenges post-COVID”.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Perception of working conditions challenges for pre-Covid employment in hospitality

Three aspects in the analysis of the perception of working conditions stand out: work-life balance, salary gap and job stability.

4.1.1. Work-life balance

Concerning the **balance**, the general perception is that there has been some progress in terms of flexibility in shifts, timetables for starting and ending work, regularity in the place of work, adaptation or reduction of the working day, etc., not just through the introduction of standards that make these mandatory but through other changes such as the social and cultural perception of combining motherhood with a management position: “culturally, at the time it was: ‘either you are a mother or a manager’, this has changed a lot (E6:13)”. Even so, most of the interviewees say that while their companies do not make any distinction, it is still women who continue to predominate among those opting for measures to reconcile work and home life. This shows that while changes in regulations are helping to advance the right to balance work and home life, their penetration in society is occurring at a slower rate. Women still bear the more significant part of the burden of housework, whether this means bringing up the children or caring for dependent persons, as one of the interviewees affirms:

“however much you try to share the work with the child's father, the fact that I have to travel still represents a problem: taking them to the nursery next to my office, I take her, and I pick her up; whenever I have to travel I need to work out a way for someone else to do it [...] that's where you still see the difference” (E7:15).

On the other hand, the interviewees say that the nature of the sector itself makes it more challenging to implement some measures. They consider it “a very demanding job that is hard to combine with the family [...] we must travel a lot, go to fairs, visit clients and more. If you have young children, it may not be easy” (E4:22). They also say that the type of job they carry out can condition the extent to which this balance can be guaranteed.

They feel that society needs to continue advancing and incorporating effective balancing measures. In some cases, the age for motherhood has been postponed to allow for the consolidation of a professional career. However, promotion to director positions makes reconciling family responsibilities with job duties harder and can affect women's emotional stability.

“I became a mother one month before I was 39 [...] Shortly after finishing my maternity leave; I joined the hotel chain. For a while, I had to manage both the increased responsibility of my position with maternity and COVID. More work-life balance measures should be implemented because, in the end, you either feel guilty for not working hard enough for your company or for not paying enough attention to your child.” (E7:17–19).

On the other hand, there are problems such as horizontal segregation “There is total feminisation, all the admin, booking staff, secretaries, etc. are women” (E2:16). In the hotel businesses, departments “like maintenance have more men [while] the department where there are more women is that of housekeeping” (E9:13). As regards the vertical segregation, the

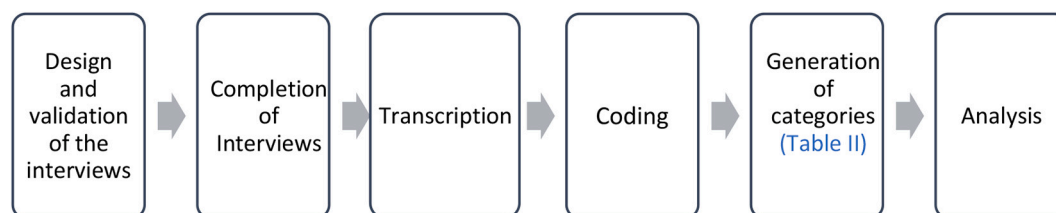


Fig. 3. Data analysis procedure.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the methodological procedure of this research.

Table 2
Data structure.

3rd Order Themes	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some developments on flexibility at work The majority of people requesting conciliation are women Sector-specific characteristics that make work-life balance more difficult Delaying motherhood to reach managerial positions Collective labour agreements as wage equality measures Lack of transparency in management positions Social and cultural constraints Specific features of the sector that hinder stability Loss of job opportunities for women of reproductive age Increased vulnerability for women in crisis contexts Exponential increase in the amount of work Situation of uncertainty Workers who feel unsafe Difficulties in managing emotions (stress, anxiety...) Constraints resulting from school and pre-school closures Obstacles to women's re-entry into the workplace Differences in working conditions according to the position held in the hotel sector The impact of the prevalence of a business culture that encourages presence in person The role of technology as a home-based working tool Internal communication management Training as an empowerment tool during the lockdown Working from home as an opportunity for flexibility and work-life balance Improving the remote working culture Improving training for the empowerment of women Improving training to enhance women's employability Measures to support women to break the glass ceiling Need for regulation to establish boundaries between work and personal life Specific equality measures to increase the representation of women in managerial positions Increase transparency in all positions to reduce the salary gap. 	<p>Work-life balance</p> <p>Salary gap and hidden discrimination practices</p> <p>Job stability</p> <p>Change in work conditions</p> <p>Balancing work and family during the lockdown</p> <p>Working from home during the lockdown</p> <p>Flexibility</p> <p>Training</p> <p>Contingency measures</p>	<p>Work Conditions pre-Covid</p> <p>Work Conditions during Covid</p> <p>Challenges post COVID</p>

Source: prepared by the authors.

prevailing situation is that the proportion of women is the same as or lower than the proportion of men. Most interviewees agree that there are differences between the top management and the company's management "The positions that men still occupy are those of top management such as chain director and others, although there are already some cases of women reaching these positions" (E13:10).

4.1.2. Salary gap and hidden discrimination practices

As regards the perception of a **salary gap**, most interviewees

consider that there are no significant gender-based differences in salary in the positions where a collective agreement regulates the payment. However, there is a disparity in answers regarding equal pay in directorship positions, mainly due to the need for more transparency. As one of the interviewees pointed out, "I have not detected the existence of a salary gap between men and women in more operational posts because they are usually regulated by agreement, but in senior management positions, it depends on how they negotiate their conditions" (E13:11).

Social and cultural constraints are seen as possible factors in salary inequality, in some cases because they consider women less ambitious and in others because they encourage society to disapprove of openly ambitious women. One of the interviewees expressed it as:

"There are differences in salary between men and women doing the same job [...] when a man gets a job, the first issue raised is: how much will I earn? [...] When women do this, it is frowned upon because women have been brought up to work for the common good, not for money. Therefore, it looks bad when a woman who has been promoted wants to talk about her salary before anything else" (E2:18).

One more question linked to the social and cultural climate refers to pre-existing social bonds that influence incentive payments. One of the interviewees says that "as regards the salary, there is favouritism, not so much in the salaries as in the incentives" (E3:12).

4.1.3. Job stability

Regarding **job stability**, the nature of the hospitality sector makes it hard to maintain stable contracts. Destinations, activities or positions that are strongly affected by seasonal work tend to be filled by temporary or fixed period contracts, even when they are management positions, as one of the interviewees explained: "They offered me a job as the manager of a 700-room hotel in Mallorca, [...] During this period, because I had a fixed-term contract, I was working off-season in a hotel in Berlin, also as a manager. It was a time of hard work and lots of stress" (E13:2). motherhood can also be a factor that increases instability, according to the experience related by one of the interviewees, "in some cases, I did not get the job because I was a woman at a fertile age" (E2:13). Other interviewees also reported similar situations of discrimination or harassment affecting their female colleagues at work. "The advisor [of the company] even got rid of one person because he said that she would not stop having kids" (E1:43). Finally, there is a feeling that crises do have a disproportionate effect on women:

"This is my third crisis. I started work in 89, so I went through the crisis of 92, the financial crisis and now this one. The positions that are most severely affected in a crisis like this are the ones that women occupy. I mean that the company prefers to remove women managers than men. In my case, what has saved me is my age and the fact that I have no family responsibilities of any kind. Otherwise, I am sure I would be out" (E2:12).

There is a need to examine how the health crisis has affected the perception of working conditions.

4.2. Perception of working conditions during the COVID crisis and crisis management

The closure of nearly all hotels in Spain at the end of March meant that many workers were furloughed without a clear idea of when they would return to work. In other cases, only a skeleton staff was retained for essential hotel maintenance and to handle client cancellations. This often led to an exponential increase in the amount of work:

"The working conditions have changed dramatically [...] There were 4 of us working in this department, and now there is only me [...] for the same money, or even less, you have to do more work even though there are fewer clients. This summer, I have worked 18-hour shifts without a break, which has affected my stress and quality, as well as my time to relax and rest" (E2:5).

While some hotels remained open as medical facilities or with minimum services, causing **insecurity and stress** among the workers who had to come to work in these places.

“*March and April were arduous when there was no one in Madrid, and you couldn't go out in the streets, the hotel near the airport stayed open [...] There were some challenging times when we had to send people home or help them because they couldn't breathe, with a lot of stress*” (E6: 24).

For the managers, one of the most complex issues was the control of their employees' emotions during the most challenging months of the pandemic, not only because of stress but also because of temporary layoffs.

The gradual opening of hotels after their total shutdown has yet to happen through a steady increase but through a fluctuation determined by the measures imposed in the country's different regions in response to the epidemiological figures. “*They opened with 60% of the workforce in July and August, in September this fell to 30%, and in October it fell again to 5% of the staff*” (E2:9).

4.2.1. Balancing work and family during the lockdown

Balancing work and family during the closure was very difficult for the workers with children because the schools were all closed, and many of the interviewees said that it was tough for women because they had to do more of the housework.

“*balancing was tough, I have twins, and it complicated everything. I was only working part-time during the closure, but at least two hours were very intense, but my husband was an essential worker at the same time, so I had to look after the children and try to balance that with my work. It was tough (...). Now that the nurseries are open, it is much easier*” (E3:9).

This situation has also impeded the return of women to work after the furlough; in comparison with men, “*we have had to look for people who are more productive or more flexible, and this is difficult because not everyone can be flexible [...], so they have asked us if they can remain on furlough longer so they can look after their children*” (E6:19).

4.2.2. Working from home during the lockdown

Regarding **working from home**, there are differences between the interviewees who work in central services and those who work in hotels. The latter says that, even when they occupy management positions and have no direct contact with the clients, a business culture still values being present, making balancing work and life more difficult.

“*Attendance is still seen as important; even when we are closed, they ask us when we return to the hotel. I don't have a problem with going now because once I have taken the kids to the nursery, I can go [...] I believe I waste more time in the office, where there are more distractions, than in my home; I am more efficient at home*” (E3:7).

Working from home has been encouraged more in the central offices, although there are some situations where this does not guarantee a balance between life and work. “*We don't need to spend so much time in the central offices; we have adapted to working from home [...] We have been doing it for a while, and we have enough tools to work from the office or home [...] my experience is that there was very little respect for the timetable when we started working remotely*” (E6:25). Even so, the interviewees agreed that this made it much easier to combine work and family life.

All the interviewees agree on the role of technology in enabling them to adapt to working from home and be even more efficient. Another critical aspect in handling the crisis has been the excellent management of communications on the part of the company, and, with few exceptions, all the interviewees point out that contact with the workers has been good.

The female employees who have been furloughed for extended periods and are yet unable to return to work have taken advantage of this time to train themselves at their own expense “*I am still furloughed, so [...] I am taking advantage of this time to improve my qualifications*” (E12:5). Or it may be paid by the company. This training could even be identified as a tool to make women more competitive in the job market and to fight against inequality “*we must be prepared and competitive, and I think this is one way to fight against inequality*” (E15:18).

4.3. Challenges to improve women's equality in the hotel labour market in the future

Motherhood remains one of the questions that many companies still have not integrated or understood. **Flexibility** is still pending in many cases: “*the biggest challenge comes when you decide to be a mum when you start to have problems earning a promotion, for the company to trust you, to see you as capable of doing your job, of balancing your life. Flexibility is essential for director positions*” (E3:18). However, flexibility affects life as a couple more broadly, even without family responsibilities: “*The problem arises when it falls to us to sacrifice our professional career for the benefit of the man who is our partner. It will be difficult until our responsibilities are fully shared*” (E2:29).

While **working from home** has improved this flexibility, it is crucial to have specific regulations “*the hours that people work when connecting from home have to be regulated rationally to prevent it imposing on their private life*” (E6:35). Many of the interviewees allude to the lack of culture in Spain on this subject and how the pandemic has made us change. However, we are still far from other countries, and there is still a long way to go (see E3:7).

The situations described above mention **training** as an essential pillar for improving the position of women in the hotel sector. In this regard, all the interviewees agree that training was reinforced during the pandemic due to inactivity at work. Still, they indicate that it would be necessary for this training to have continuity and to be established as something systematic. Regarding the subject matter of these training programmes, it is essential to highlight that the content should go beyond the knowledge needed for the sector and focus on other issues that can help empower women: “*training in matters of gender and leadership are fundamental*”. (E2:29). In adapting these courses to the needs of employees, it is essential for human resources to make an effort to find out what these needs are.

Besides training, some interviewees indicated the importance of supporting women to reach managerial positions by overcoming the glass ceiling. To this end, they propose that companies implement special temporary measures such as quotas for the representation of women in management positions.

Finally, another major challenge has been the salary gap. Although the above measures can indirectly help reduce this gap, most interviewees allude to the importance of making salaries available to the public. As one of the interviewees shows, “*What we are seeing is that they are not entirely honest even when they do publish them [salaries for each position] because they use bonuses and supplements*” (E2:31–2). In other words, companies should be more transparent in terms of salaries.

5. Discussion

The results show that the gender approach as a social construct (Mooney, 2020) better explains the evolution of the challenges and concerns faced by women in the work environment. This evolution is possible because female and male behaviours change simultaneously as society changes, affecting the different levels that structure the construction of gender (Risman & Davis, 2013; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019). As the results show, progress is perceived in reducing inequality of opportunities in certain areas. However, the demand for effective equality in the work environment remains unresolved (Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, & Disegna, 2019; Elhoushy & El-Said, 2020; Je et al., 2022). The difficulties women have faced in the hotel sector, as revealed by the specialist literature, come up again in the interviewees' discourse. The results confirm that historical social and cultural structural causes, like segregation by posts or social roles, have direct repercussions on the perception of the quality of female employment (Jordan, 1997; Mooney, 2020; Risman & Davis, 2013; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015) or even in access to jobs (Almathami et al., 2022).

At the individual level, it is detected that there are learned roles that condition the behaviour of female workers and act as constraints. These

limiters, rather than being the result of self-imposed barriers (Boone et al., 2013), result from a demotivating environment that implies overexertion to achieve desired professional objectives. Thus, there is a normalisation of the existing inequality in the design and evaluation of job performance in the work environment, which perpetuates horizontal and vertical segregation and the feeling of a glass slipper (Jordan, 1997; Mooney, 2020). On a personal level, women naturally assume greater responsibility for care and housework (Abellan-Calvet et al., 2021; Power, 2020). This makes many women delay the age of motherhood until they have achieved a sure consolidation of their professional careers, or even for those who are already mothers, to express feelings of guilt due to the difficulties of reconciling family and work. During the pandemic, these acquired roles have led to an intensification of the workload at home (Landivar et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Nivakoski & Mascherini, 2021; WTO, 2020; the Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020) and, together with the situation of insecurity, have had effects on the emotional health of female workers (increased stress).

At the interactional-cultural level, the interviewees perceive a certain change in society. From their point of view, we have gone from the taboo and incompatibility of the family-work binomial (Liff & Ward, 2001) to its normalisation and the progressive integration of the work-life balance. However, they continue to perceive the existence of stereotypes in the work environment, of which we can highlight the following: (1) the belief that women are less committed to work or business because they prioritise family care, a belief that intensified during the pandemic for women managers (Baum et al., 2020); (2) women of childbearing age perform less well and are therefore less profitable, an issue that negatively impacted women during the pandemic when it came to reintegrating into the workforce; (3) the perception that women are less ambitious and therefore less likely to apply for management positions or to negotiate salaries; (4) in management positions, patriarchal male behaviour and skills are expected, which fuels the glass slipper phenomenon. Homosociality also appears in the results as 'hidden discrimination' practices when behaviours affecting promotion, hiring or salary negotiation are noted (Carvalho et al., 2019; Elhoushy & El-Said, 2020). Also interesting is the effect of personal decisions affecting the career path outside the company, within the interaction with the partner, for instance, regarding the balanced sharing of care and household tasks.

Finally, the importance of regulating work-life balance and equal pay in operational positions has been pointed out at the institutional level. However, it is still perceived as insufficient because opposing organisational practices persist in companies, including (1) the opacity of remuneration in managerial positions; (2) the lack of knowledge and skills on equality; (3) the use of male patterns for job design and performance evaluation. At the state level, during the pandemic, public regulation made it possible to contain layoffs through tools such as the Record of Temporary Employment Regulation. However, restrictions on activity in schools or nurseries led to an increase in caregiving tasks, which increased the difficulties of reconciliation and even prevented many women from returning to work (WTO, 2020; the Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020; Landivar et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Nivakoski & Mascherini, 2021). Good and bad practices adopted during the crisis can be distinguished among the business measures.

On the one hand, the reinforcement of communication, the technological adaptation to facilitate teleworking or the possibilities of increasing skills through training are positively observed (Chadee et al., 2020; Filimonau et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020; UNWTO, 2020). On the other hand, other negative aspects have been the lack of crisis management skills, emotional attention to staff, increased workload, and non-compliance with schedules (teleworking diluted working and resting hours). The pandemic has intensified emotional and mental health problems across the board. Many workers have been overwhelmed in the workplace, and many directors and managers have had to deal with high stress and emotional complexity (Chen, 2021), sometimes feeling disoriented.

In other words, during the worst months of the pandemic (lock-down), working conditions have changed, and women have been a particularly vulnerable group (Alon et al., 2020; Baum et al., 2020; Chen, 2021; Lopes et al., 2021). As seen in the literature review and the results of this study, such vulnerability is conditioned, on the one hand, by pre-existing structural practices of inequality before the pandemic (Dashper, 2019; Liff & Ward, 2001; Mooney, 2020). On the other hand, this situation is further accentuated in sectors like hotels, where many jobs are incompatible with working from home or flexibility (Chadee et al., 2020). The presence requirement is essential for many basic operational positions (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020; Martínez-Gayo, 2021; WTO, 2020) and some directors and middle management positions. This is where national legislation has a significant role to play in the enforcement of specific measures. For example, it can establish standards to enable flexibility in working hours to favour compatibility and shared responsibilities between men and women and guarantee that they do not have a negative effect on workers (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2020; UNWTO, 2020).

6. Conclusions and implications

According to the experiences gathered in this article, we can affirm that there are gender conditioning factors formed from the social construction, which have influenced the working conditions of women managers in the hotel sector, both before and during the pandemic.

From a theoretical point of view, the results reinforce the existing theory on gender in relation to its conception as a social construction structured in three dimensions. In the Spanish case, learned roles have been identified in the individual dimension. These roles, on the one hand, normalise inequality in the design and evaluation of job performance and, on the other hand, can have repercussions on the development of feelings of guilt for the lack of work-life balance. This sense of guilt may have been exacerbated during the pandemic when work-life balance became much more complex and caring tasks intensified, not only with the family but also with employees who needed ongoing communication and emotional support. In the interactional-cultural dimension, we distinguish elements that condition the professional trajectory of female managers. More specifically, we refer to stereotypes in the work environment related to male leadership models and others linked to the private domain, referring to the sharing of care and other household tasks. These stereotypes are perpetuated because care tasks continue to fall on women, directly impacting their image in the professional sphere as less productive. As a result, women's professional development and access to managerial positions are limited. In the institutional or organisational dimension, business practices are identified that can render ineffective regulation efforts around equality, as in the case of the opacity of remuneration in management positions.

The arrival of the pandemic has led to the appearance of additional factors that influence the perception of the quality of women's employment. Confinement meant the dissolution of space and time between work, family, and personal spheres, causing overlapping. This circumstance has positive connotations due to the increased awareness of care in the family and business spheres. However, it also requires more experience and skills in the Spanish business sector to manage teleworking. This has led to more significant difficulties in coping with work-life balance, increasing stress levels and endangering the mental health of these managers.

From a practical point of view, to eliminate the imbalances detected, it is necessary to make an effort in which companies and society must be involved. This implies applying a series of policies in training plans at all levels so that women and men can acquire the same competencies. At the grassroots level, it is essential to incorporate the gender approach in schools by promoting critical thinking among students and involving families. The university should make an effort to introduce the gender perspective in the subjects that make up the various curricula in tourism and hospitality. For complete education and training, companies must

also be involved in this process through training programmes offering more technical knowledge and skills essential in crises.

Second, reinforcing corporate equality plans is also necessary to plan, implement and evaluate measures to achieve equality in companies. In some countries, such as Spain, its implementation is mandatory in medium and large companies. However, this practice can be extended to smaller companies in an adapted format, as with safety and health at work programmes. One of the measures that can be effective is the establishment of quotas; in this sense, the European Union has established a Directive (EU 2022/2381) that requires a minimum quota of 40% for the underrepresented sex.

Third, State has a vital role in generating a context that implements measures that favour a fairer distribution of these duties easier (such as balancing maternity and paternity leave, awareness campaigns, etc.). It will also have a decisive role in gradually eliminating the hidden discriminatory practices and promoting greater transparency in negotiating conditions and remuneration for all positions, whether for senior management or operational functions. In Spain, for example, collective bargaining agreements have favoured equal pay by establishing income according to job classification. However, traditionally, the remuneration of management and senior management positions, as well as their salary complements and payments for extraordinary work, have been excluded from the application of these agreements. In mid-2021, a specific regulation came into force to promote effective equal pay for women and men, which establishes the obligation to draw up a salary register, including management positions and all types of salary supplements, and to carry out salary audits to detect unequal pay practices. Given its recent implementation, monitoring its effectiveness in the coming years will be interesting.

Fourth, equality measures must be coordinated with mental and emotional risk prevention measures. The pandemic has shown that it is an issue that needs to be reinforced at all levels, both for men and women. But in the case of women, this pandemic situation can be linked to other emotional problems, such as more significant stress and feelings of guilt due to conciliation problems and the lack of equal recognition concerning other colleagues. Finally, it is necessary to promote the designation of women in management and responsibility positions and within the board of directors. Companies and governments must prevent health crises, such as COVID-19, or other future crises, from becoming a throwback in applying company policies that guarantee gender equality and the protection of the quality of employment.

The evolution of the hotel sector towards business models more firmly based on technological innovation will help to create more jobs that are more compatible with working from home. There has been progress in regulations and investment in the case of Spain, which deserves monitoring in the coming years to see its effect on the hotel sector.

There are limits to this study which can be overcome by work that follows various new directions in the future. First, it was completed during a health crisis, so it would be interesting to continue monitoring how certain critical aspects in the perception of the quality of female employment change as the hospitality sector returns to total activity and normality. Secondly, the results are limited to the situation of the hotel sector in Spain. While it is one of the leading international destinations and has its characteristics of the country's culture, comparison with other similar studies in the future would be interesting. Another issue that has been identified is the lack of gender studies in the hotel sector from a positive perspective; this represents an opportunity to analyse in the future the good practices being carried out in hotel companies regarding gender. Finally, using a qualitative approach raises the possibility of a contrasting study using quantitative methods.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Clara Martín-Duque: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Supervision. **Yolanda Romero-Padilla:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original

draft, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the assistance received from the research project “Impact of the pandemic on tourism in Spain: Implications for women's employment in a female sector” (ref. PR33/20-22942) in order to translate the paper. We would also like to point out that the article has been written within the framework of this project financed by CRUE Universidades and Banco Santander through the program “Fondos Supera COVID-19”. Likewise, we would like to thank the participation of the interviewees that has allowed us to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation of women in the hotel sector in Spain. The funding sources had no other involvement, in particular for the conduct of the research and the preparation of the article.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2023.101153>.

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