

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

WORKERS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT: THE CASE OF CHAMBERMAIDS OF THE MAYAN RIVIERA AND COSTA DEL SOL

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The aim of this research project is to analyse the perceptions by hotel chambermaids of their working conditions in two extensive Ibero-American littoral spaces: the Costa del Sol (Malaga, Spain) and the Mayan Riviera (Quintana Roo, Mexico). Beyond their geographical and economic particularities, chambermaids at both ends work under similarly precarious conditions as a result of labour demand fluctuations.

In extensive Ibero-American spaces, the littoral mass-tourism model is often justified by the creation of jobs. However, due to the seasonality of tourist flows and labour demand, these are temporal jobs with 'flexible' work conditions, to which workers in the sector must adapt (Cerezo and Lara de Vicente, 2005).

The tourist sector is characterised by a high degree of participation of women, who are in demand to take care of cleaning in hotels, a task culturally associated to the role of women in domestic contexts (León, 2011; Torres, 2009; Cañada, 2011). These are low-pay unqualified jobs to which women from vulnerable social sectors (youngsters, immigrants) seek to have access (Lanquar, 1991) and which contribute to reinforce gender inequality and traditional women's roles (Ferguson, 2011).

The intensification and precariousness of chambermaid jobs in Spain has been a gradual process undergoing several critical phases. The problems experienced during the economic crisis of 2008 and the shortcomings of the labour reform of 2012 (Merino, 2014) have been addressed by the 2022 reform. In Mexico, the passing of the Federal Labour Law of 2012 opened up room for the legalisation of hiring modalities such as outsourcing, temporal contracts, trial contracts, and hourly payment (Roig-Munar, 2018). In 2019, outsourcing was de-regulated, which made it possible for companies to contract personnel with lower salaries, and although in 2021 changes in the law addressed this problem (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2021), there are loopholes that allow to keep disadvantageous contracts for women workers.

As a result of the intensification of their work and the increasing precariousness of their working conditions, Spanish chambermaids have to clean as many as twenty rooms in eight hours of work, sometimes more. They work under pressure, are forced to skip their breaks and sometimes even their lunchtimes (Hsieh, Apostolopoulos and Sönmez, 2016), especially during high season. In the case of Mexican chambermaids, this research project is a forerunner, as no literature is there on this problem.

To explore the perception these women, have of their own labour conditions, a survey with semi-structured in-depth interviews was conducted. A total of 32 questionnaires were applied, 18 in the Mayan Riviera, and 18 in the Costa del Sol. Only one male was included in this exercise, and he always referred to his group in the feminine. In both settings, participants were recruited through the snowball technique. Interviews were conducted from January to March 2019 in the Mayan Riviera, and from December 2019 to February 2020 in the Costa del Sol. Data were analysed with the ATLAS.TI tool.

The 18 chambermaids from Mexico (17 female, one male) worked in 5-star and 5-diamond hotels of the Mayan Riviera (Quintana Roo state) and had been hired directly by the business, some of them indefinitely and most of them temporarily, with renewal every two or three months. They are immigrants from another Mexican state who have been living in the state of Quintana Roo for over 20 years. Their age oscillates between 30 and 61 years, all of them with children (an average of two) and most of them with only primary schooling. Between one contract and the next, the hotel made these women to take an unpaid leave, which results in the loss of their labour rights.

Though the contract stipulates eight hours of work a day, these women never go out before finishing the rooms allotted to them, which in high season means working between 10 and 60 extra minutes to cover for the room quota of colleagues that didn't show up. Acceptance of this is common practice, as workers don't want to project a "negative" image to their (female) bosses and jeopardise the renewal of their contract. To go home in time, they sometimes hurriedly do those rooms they perceive as clean, and in high season, when they must clean between 16 and 18 rooms, they often sacrifice their lunchtime in order to meet their daily quota. It is not uncommon to leave the hotel at 6:00 or 7:00 pm, and if one takes into account the hour or hour-and-a-half in transportation, they end up spending almost their whole day at work, to the neglect of family duties.

The chambermaids of the Mayan Riviera have one day off a week, which they can exchange with their colleagues. However, asking for an extra day can be problematic and depends on their relationship with their boss. Only those with a permanent contract enjoy paid holidays. Others must take unpaid ones. The average income is 434 euros per month (1.5 per room, approximately), a good part of which comes from tips (143 euros, or 3 thousand pesos), which compensate for the low salary they've accepted.

In Spain, all chambermaids worked in a hotel or hostel in the Costa del Sol (Malaga), most of them in the three-star category, and they were also directly hired by the business in several modalities: permanent (with no specified time period or limit), permanent-discontinuous (during high or medium tourist season) and temporal (one, two, three or six months, depending on demand). There were a few who had been contracted by temping agencies (ETTs) and multiservice companies (externalising services) on an indefinite or temporal basis. The majority of chambermaids were Spanish, residents of Malaga, except

for six immigrants from Latin America and other Spanish provinces. Their ages oscillated between 25 and 62 years, and almost all of them have children and have completed primary schooling.

The majority of chambermaids interviewed in the Costa del Sol had temporary contracts, renewed for several months during the high season, either directly by the business, temping agencies (ETTs) or multiservice companies. Those with indefinite and permanent-discontinuous contracts directly with the business work regularly eight hours a day, 40 hours per week, and those with temporary contracts often work two to eight hours a day and aspire to having a 40-hour-per-week schedule. Permanent chambermaids in Spain clean between 23 and 25 rooms per day, and some can even do up to 38 rooms, even though they refuse to extend their hours. They know their rights and make them stand through the union or the company committee, while those with temporary contracts can do more rooms in less time, leave late, and get no remuneration for extra time.

As do their Mexican counterparts, Spanish chambermaids compensate the time dedicated to the dirtier rooms with the cleaner ones, and in the case of temporary workers, they even skip their lunchtime when work accumulates. The majority of them think the room allotment is fair, although —as with the Mexican chambermaids— chambermaids of some Spanish hotels pointed out that there is favouritism associated to the governess' preferences. As for time off, permanent chambermaids have two days a week as do most temporary ones, although some said to have only one.

Exploitative conditions among the chambermaids in Costa del Sol concentrate on those who have a contract with multiservice companies. For example, they are informed of their day or days off the night before or even on the same day, and although they are entitled to 30 days off a year, the majority of them do not enjoy this right and receive an in-lieu payment at the end of the contract. Some chambermaids feel that the company's committee does next to nothing to prevent this labour exploitation and the situation is even worse for those who work in establishments of lower category or those hired through an ETT or a multiservice agency.

In Costa del Sol, a permanent chambermaid with a direct contract with the business makes approximately 1,300 euros a month for 8 hours of work a day and does an average of 19 rooms daily; that is, 3.4 euros per room. Temporary workers, regardless of the provenance of their contract, make between 500 and 900 euros, depending on the hours and number of rooms done, and those contracted by multiservice agencies can have it even harder, making only 400 euros a month for 20 hours a week of work and 18 rooms per day (which amounts to 1.38 euros per room, less than what a Mexican chambermaid makes).

As do their Mexican counterparts, chambermaids in Costa del Sol express satisfaction for their work, which they consider easy to do and vital for the sustenance of their families and/or the payment of a mortgage. Similarly, almost all chambermaids, Mexican or Spanish, have at some point suffered some kind of mistreatment from their supervisor. It is common that supervisors (all women) treat them with little respect as a way to wield power and control. Although all chambermaids try to have a good relationship with guests (tourists), sometimes they are accused of theft.

As for health conditions, though they admit to experiencing exhaustion and stress during high season, Mexican chambermaids do not relate physical ailments to working

conditions. Conversely, Spanish chambermaids do report health problems, independently of their age and their working hours. Forced as they are to clean rooms in record time, their movements are often quick and strenuous and they experience back pain both in the lumbar and cervical regions, as well as in wrists, arms, legs and knees. They also claim to suffer anxiety and stress derived from their work and they often take painkillers, which their Mexican counterparts don't. It is easy to infer from this that the main health issue derives from the high number of rooms they have to clean. In short, the different working conditions of Spanish and Mexican chambermaids produce different health issues.

At the beginning of this research project, it was assumed that the working conditions of Spanish chambermaids might be better than those of Mexican ones, quantitatively as well as qualitatively. However, this is true only of permanent workers with a direct contract with the business, temporary workers faring much worse off, especially those hired through ETTs and multiservice agencies. As opposed to Mexico, in Spain there are various work schedules, and the ratio of rooms chambermaids must clean is very diverse. In all cases, it was detected that workers were under permanent stress and serious physical and mental health conditions, independently of the time they have been employed, something that wasn't found among Mexican workers. Moreover, although the majority of Spanish chambermaids have two days off per week —as opposed to one by their Mexican counterparts— they perceive this time off as insufficient to recover.

Apart from these differences, the perceptions of Spanish and Mexican chambermaids coincide in the following aspects: they must extend their working hours until they finish the number of rooms allotted to them in one day, which makes it impossible to plan out their personal and social life, and they often have to skip their lunchtime in order to avoid leaving late. In this way, they end up giving away from 10 minutes to one or even two hours per day to their employers —as it happens in the case of Spanish chambermaids. Though the allotment of rooms is supposed to be even, favouritism and overloading is evident, which adversely affects the wellbeing of temporary workers.

As for their relations with their immediate boss, colleagues and tourists, chambermaids usually try to avoid problems, even though they end up being blamed when a situation occurs. Despite this, almost all of them think of their job as an easy one and the only problem they perceive is the overload of activities. They also value the chance to have an extra income, which empowers them.

This study confirms the transition in the hospitality sector from a work model in which permanent and permanent-discontinuous contracts allowed some labour stability to another in which temporary ones have become dominant and working conditions are worsening (Borràs, 2015). The appearance of ETTs and multiservice agencies, especially in the Spanish case, has translated into an increasing discontent of chambermaids about the work exploitation and the work insecurity they experience, all of which is supported by a labour reform that has done nothing but sharpening inequalities. In the Mexican case, no chambermaid was found who had been hired by an external agency. It is unclear whether this is because these agencies have not yet been established in the region after the labour reform of 2019 made them legal. Be that as it may, this is expected to happen soon, with a negative impact on the already precarious and unequal working conditions prevalent in the Mayan Riviera (Moreno and Cañada, 2018).