

# A preliminary evaluation of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic could have on female employability in the tourism and hospitality sectors in Italy

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**ABSTRACT:** The article focuses on the analysis of preliminary data regarding the challenges that female employability in the tourism and hospitality sectors in Italy has faced and will continue to experience as a result of the economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. A review of the literature shows the precarious nature of the female employability opportunities that were already inherent in the industry. The research surveyed 54 male and female employees in the tourism and hospitality sectors regarding perceptions and expectations of work security and future job opportunities. The results revealed that no significant differences were found regarding job opportunity expectations between male and female respondents in general. The gaps in expectations became significant, however, when household, pressure obligations such as childcare, care of relatives or household duties are taken into consideration. These expectations seem to be less for the male respondents. These preliminary results suggest a need for governmental policies to aid in the provision of household support.

**KEYWORDS:** crisis, expectations, female workforce, lockdown

## Introduction

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reported that during the first quarter of 2020 \$195 billion were lost in export revenues from international tourism, and there were 180 million fewer arrivals as compared to the same period of last year (-44% of international tourist arrival). According to the UNWTO's current scenarios, international tourist arrivals could decline between 58% and 78% in 2020, which would translate into a loss of up to \$1 trillion in international tourism receipts (UNWTO, 2020). The International Air Transport Association's (IATA) figures confirm this drop off, reporting an 80% fall in flights by early April (IATA, 2020). The World Travel and Tourism Council calculates that over 100 million jobs in tourism and travel are currently at risk. In 2019, the tourism sector in Europe grew by 4%. This trend has been halted by the COVID-19 crisis and, from January to April 2020, international tourist arrivals showed a 44% decrease. Despite the fact that the EU Commission established the reopening of internal borders from 15 June 2020, the drop in tourist arrivals was inevitable for Italy as well, with an impact also on the "collateral" sectors, since the expenditure of foreign tourists represents an important item not only for hotels and tourist facilities, but also for restaurants and shops. Italy, a country which owes about 13% of GDP to tourism, welcomed a very small portion of international tourists in the

2020 holiday season. According to ENIT (the Italian agency for tourism), international visitors staying overnight should decrease by 49% (equal to 31 million visitors) and the country will return to pre-COVID-19 levels in 2023. The country will have to face a big challenge: according to the data relating to the balance of payments, in Italy the revenue from international travel in 2019 reached €44.3 billion, equal to 41 per cent of services exports and about 8 per cent of total GDP. In 2019, the expenditure of foreign travellers in Italy had continued to increase at a sustained rate (6.2 per cent), driven by tourists from European countries and North America. While Italy's industrial production may restart quickly as confinement measures are lifted, tourism and many consumer-related services are projected to recover more gradually, having a negative effect on the aggregate demand in the economy. These negative impacts will also have an impact on the labour market opportunities of employees of different categories working in tourism and hospitality businesses.

Globally, women represent the majority of the workforce in tourism: in 2019, women were 54% of people employed in tourism (UNWTO, 2019). Across the world, women make up most workers in the tourism industry, though they tend to be clustered in low-skilled jobs. Women are more likely to be entrepreneurs in tourism than in other sectors of the economy, thanks to lower entry barriers, yet they are still not the majority of the self-employed workforce in the sector (International

Labour Organization [ILO, 2020]. When women build their enterprises, however, these businesses are mainly small. Given the high percentage of female employment in tourism, especially in low-skilled activities, women are likely to be hit the most by job losses (UNWTO, 2019). Since most women in the tourism sector are employed in low-skilled or informal work, they are going to feel the economic shock to tourism caused by COVID-19 quickest and hardest (UNWTO, 2019). Globally, the April 2020 data released by the World Travel and Tourism Council showed that 100 million people were at immediate risk of losing their jobs globally. A third of them were directly employed in travel and tourism; 60% of them were women. This could mean that currently up to 20 million women working in the industry could be unemployed and without an income.

## Literature

Figuroa-Domecq et al. (2015), Morgan and Pritchard (2019), and Rivera Mateos (2018) evidenced the scarce literature on tourism gender research. Tourism gender research remains marginal to tourism enquiry. The job market in the tourism sector is often characterised by a combination of poor wages, job insecurity and long working hours (Back et al., 2011). The tourism industry seems to provide lower quality employment opportunities as well, when compared to other industries (García-Pozo et al., 2012; Lacher & Oh, 2012; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015). At a global level, most of the tourism workforce is female, though they also display a low labour mobility (Marchante et al., 2007), a high degree of occupational segregation (Campos-Soria et al., 2011), and a high level of gender wage discrimination (García-Pozo et al., 2014). Furthermore, working in the tourism sector is often associated with disadvantageous pay and working conditions, shift work, lack of training opportunities and gender discrimination (Ladkin, 2011). In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries, women represent 55.9% of the tourism workforce, even though they work in worse conditions than their male counterparts (Stacey, 2015).

Literature shows that tourism is a highly gendered industry (Kinnaird et al., 1994; Kinnaird & Hall, 1996; Rinaldi & Salerno, 2020) and that women are mostly employed in unskilled, low-paid jobs. Due to gender stereotyping and discrimination, women indeed tend to be employed in jobs such as cooking, cleaning and hospitality. As happens in many other business sectors, even in tourism there is both horizontal and vertical gender segregation of the labour market (Santos & Varejão, 2007). Horizontally, women are placed in different occupations with respect to men, being employed in jobs like waitresses, flight attendants, cleaners and travel agency salespersons, while men are employed as pilots, gardeners, drivers and construction workers. Vertically, in the tourism sector the typical gender pyramid is quite common: women are employed in lower levels and occupations with few career development opportunities, while men dominate key managerial positions (Muñoz-Bullón, 2009; Boone et al., 2013). Indeed, many women are located at the base of the pyramid, being employed in low-paid, part-time jobs, and very few of them reach the top (Richter, 1995). As the literature underlines, the tourism sector (like most industries) shows a gender gap in many areas, such as salary (Levy & Lerch, 1991; Cukier, 1996; Fleming, 2015; Casado-Díaz & Simon, 2016) or job opportunities (Seager, 2003; Rinaldi & Salerno, 2020), just

to mention a few. In tourism, even recruitment practices are influenced by gender roles, as noted in a feminist analysis of "ideal tourism worker" discourse (Costa et al., 2017). Carvalho et al. (2018) found in their study that in order to increase credibility, top female managers of tourism organisations perform in a gender-neutral way that is embedded with male identities.

In this sector, the literature shows both vertical and horizontal segregation and a consistent leadership gap (Kogovsek & Kogovsek, 2015; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015). As for the topic of women's under-representation in leadership positions in the tourism sector, the literature is quite scarce (Boone et al., 2013; Costa et al., 2017). In general, there is a lack of literature using a feminist approach on the horizontal and vertical segregation of women in the tourism sector (Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Lacher & Oh, 2012; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015; Pritchard, 2018). Some studies focus on the inefficiency of the recruitment processes (Doherty & Manfredi, 2001), on the low educational levels of women (Burrell et al., 1997), on the difficult equilibrium between work and family life (Ng & Pine, 2003), and on the legal framework that allows different contract opportunities for men and women (Doherty & Manfredi, 2001). Tourism employees are expected to work long and unsocial hours (Blomme et al., 2010). Flexible work times may increase gender inequalities in paid employment, as there is a tendency to construct temporal flexibility as inherently different for men and women, and as something that is used by women specifically to balance work and family (Sullivan & Smithson, 2007; Brumley, 2014).

## Methodology

The tourism industry is one of the most affected sectors of the economy worldwide at the moment because of measures taken by governments in order to stem the spread of the virus. Some OECD estimates on the COVID-19 impact point to a 60% decline in international tourism in 2020 in the present situation (OECD, 2020a). One of the countries where this is felt most is Italy. Due to the severe impact of the pandemic, the country has had to adhere to a strict lockdown. The lockdown started to be gradually eased in June of 2020 and then restarted in October.

This study focuses on analysing preliminary results of the possible impact that the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 has had on the opportunities for employment between genders in the Italian tourism and hospitality industries. The objective is to identify whether there are differences between genders in the Italian tourism employees' confidence in their future job prospects. This could give an indication whether the negative impact of the virus outbreak on the industry could differently affect the employability of men and women. Furthermore, the study tries to identify to what extent age and education level can further reinforce or mitigate the potential job disparities between Italian tourism industry employees.

The instrument used for the data collection was an online survey developed on Google Forms. The survey was then distributed via social media (LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook) to respondents that are employed or have recently been employed in the tourism industry via the Italian Managers' Association (Manageritalia) to their members working in the tourism sector. The data was collected between 17 June and 28 June 2020. A total of 54 responses were gathered, for an estimated population of 120 members, at a confidence level of 95%. From these respondents 70.4 % were female, 27.8% were

male and the rest (1.9%) declined to indicate gender. 84% of the respondents' age was between 31 and 64 years old, with only 18% between 18 and 30 and the rest above 65 years old. All the respondents had at least a high school diploma (29.6%), followed by respondents with an undergraduate degree (44.45%) and a post-graduate degree (25.9%). Finally, 63.5% of the respondents were employed at the time.

In this context, two hypotheses were identified:

Hypothesis 1: Since female tourist workers are mostly employed in part-time, low-skilled, worst-paid jobs, their perception about the future might be less optimistic.

Hypothesis 2: Among the unemployed, since during the pandemic, Italian schools and kindergartens were closed, women had to take care of kids, the elderly and ill people, we expect that they could believe that finding or keeping a job in the tourism sector could be more difficult.

The methodology specifically included:

- A descriptive statistical analysis of the sample and of the features of the collected data set on the current and future job perspectives in the Italian tourism industry;
- A correlation analysis with independent variables of gender, age and education level and the dependent variable of job prospects; and
- A statistical comparison of the differences in perception of job security in the short term between genders in the context of household obligations.

### Discussion

A recent OECD report includes tourism among the sectors that will be hit the most by the coronavirus crisis (OECD, 2020b). With this research, the goal was to analyse the perspectives of the Italian workers in the field of tourism, trying at the same time to assess whether their gender could affect the forecasts.

Under the first hypothesis, Italian female and male workers in tourism were asked what the probability was of keeping their job in the following six months. As a whole, 47.6% of female and male respondents believed that they would be able to maintain their professional position in the following six months, while only 30.9% answered that they were afraid about losing their job (Figure 1).

When we tried to verify the influence of the gender of the respondents on the answers using a Spearman correlation, despite our hypothesis, results were quite counterintuitive. Indeed, the job prospects seem not to be affected by gender (Table 1). 69% of the respondents were not concerned or very slightly concerned regarding the prospects of losing their employment in the next six months.

Under hypothesis 2, we also asked the unemployed whether there was the possibility for them of finding an occupation in the tourism sector in the coming six months. What we found is that among the unemployed (both female and male) the chances of finding a job were perceived as quite low: most of them (67.9%) answered that it would be highly unlikely (Figure 2).

Related to hypothesis 2, the question was asked whether the respondents perceived that their family obligations such as taking care of children, the elderly or chronically sick would have a major impact on their ability to maintain their employment in the next six months. In this case, the Mann-Whitney U test indicated that there are indeed differences in perceptions between the female and male respondents. As the data in Table 2 shows, the female respondents are slightly more concerned about their job security when taking into account familial obligations.

TABLE 1: Spearman correlation factors influencing jobs prospects for employed people in tourism (N = 54)

Job prospects		Spearman's rho		
		Gender	Age	Education
Gender	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.485**	0.216
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	<0.001	0.116
	N	54	54	54
Age	Correlation coefficient	0.485**	1.000	0.316*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001	-	0.020
	N	54	54	54
Education	Correlation coefficient	0.216	0.316*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.116	0.020	-
	N	54	54	54

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

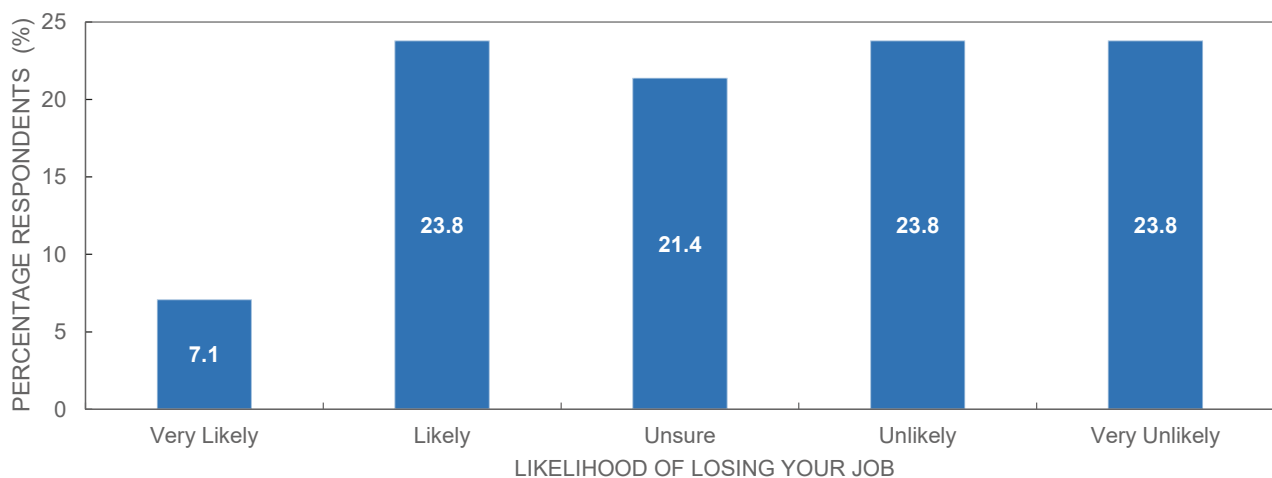


FIGURE 1: What is the possibility of losing your job in tourism in the next six months? (Employed people)

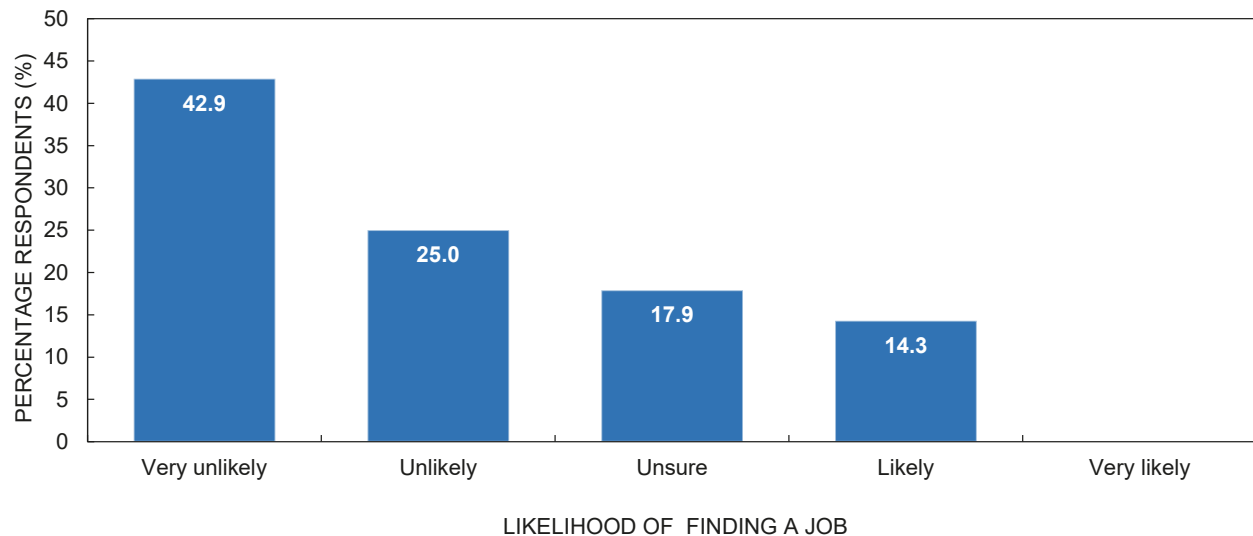


FIGURE 2: What is the possibility of finding a job in the tourism sector in the next six months? (Unemployed people)

TABLE 2: Mann-Whitney test on gender differences in perceptions regarding job security for the next six months with family obligations

Ranks	Gender <sup>a</sup>	N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks
Job prospects for employers with family obligations	M	13	21.77	283.00
	F	30	22.10	663.00
Total		43		
Mann-Whitney U	192.000			
Wilcoxon W	283.000			
Z	-0.082			
Asymp. significance (2-tailed)	0.035			
Exact significance [2*(1-tailed sig.)]	0.048 <sup>b</sup>			

<sup>a</sup>Grouping variable: gender

<sup>b</sup>Not corrected for ties

In this case, part of the second hypothesis is confirmed, specifically that the female respondents currently employed feel more at risk about job security than their male counterparts. While this result is to be expected and is not necessarily a result of the COVID-19 lockdown, it does suggest that this could be a barrier to entry of female employees in the industry.

This is also suggested by Table 3 which shows a higher percentage of female employees not actively seeking employment when compared to their male counterparts. The data does suggest that the female respondents — due to household commitments — have to some extent withdrawn from the tourism sector workforce. At the time of data collection during the second half of June, the schools and other higher education institutions were still closed in Italy.

## Conclusion

As indicated by the literature, the economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown will not be equally spread among genders, especially in the tourism industry. The article seeks to understand whether this is reflected in the opinions and experiences of employees in various positions in the Italian tourism industry.

TABLE 3: Gender comparison regarding active seeking of employment in tourism

If not employed, are you actively seeking employment?		No	Yes	Total
Gender F	Number	8	9	17
	Per cent	47.1%	52.9%	100%
M	Number	3	8	11
	Per cent	27.3%	72.7%	100%
Other	Number	1	0	1
	Per cent	100%	0%	100%
Total	Count	12	29	
	Per cent	41.4%	58.6%	100%

The research showed that there are no real differences in job opportunities based on gender. This becomes apparent when certain obligations from the employees' households are investigated. In this case, the home pressure such as taking care of children or the elderly does contribute to an increased exclusion of the female workforce. While this effect needs to be further investigated as the economic crisis unfolds, it represents a policy signal in an effort to redress the damages inflicted on this vital industry for Italian economic growth.

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