



**HesaMag+**

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# 'You're not paid to think': the hotel workers without a voice

The lack of involvement of employees in decisions regarding how their own work is organised is a common problem in many sectors. Yet there are some particularly precarious jobs that combine to form an explosive mix of a heavy workload and zero capacity to influence. In the Spanish holiday resort town of Benidorm, hotel staff are facing such circumstances in their daily working life. In part due to their classification as 'manual workers', they are viewed as mere followers of orders, an attitude which exposes them to psychosocial risks that are seriously damaging to their health.

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Benidorm is widely known in Europe as a tourist destination. Social media networks are crammed with tourists' photos of their holidays in the town, which is situated on Spain's Mediterranean coast. This part of the leisure sector is supported by an army of workers in the hospitality sector who are exposed every day to a serious psychosocial risk of high job strain. Clara Llorens Serrano,<sup>1</sup> a sociologist from the Trade Union Institute for Labour, Environment and Health (ISTAS) and a lecturer at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, explains that exposure to high job strain 'occurs when someone has more work than it is possible for them to do – in other words, the person faces high demands in terms of quantity, yet has little influence on job-related decision-making or, to put it another way, little or no control over their work'. This is the famous 'job demands-control model', developed in 1979 by US sociologist Robert Karasek to explain the effects of strain and autonomy at work on health.

Health risks derived from exposure to job strain are extensively documented in scientific research. Llorens has spent decades documenting and preventing psychosocial risks as a member of the team that developed the COPSOQ assessment and prevention method, and is well acquainted with its effects. 'Since the late 1970s,' she explains, 'we have had research that shows, among other things, that high workplace stress increases the risk of coronary heart disease by between 17 and 31%, the risk of a heart attack by between 22 and 58% and the risk of depression by 77%. In other words, this is a serious occupational and public health issue. In January 2022, figures showing the relationship between someone who has a demanding job over which they have little control and certain illnesses were published for the European Union. The findings show that 17% of depressive illnesses and 4% of cardiovascular diseases are related to high workplace stress.'<sup>2</sup>

1. 'Update of the fractions of cardiovascular diseases and mental disorders attributable to psychosocial work factors in Europe' <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00420-021-01737-4>
2. Clara Llorens Serrano is one of the authors of a report on psychosocial risks published by the ETUI in 2022 and available in English on [www.etui.org](http://www.etui.org): Llorens Serrano Cl., Narocki Cl., Gual Cl., Helfferich B. and Franklin P. (2022) *Psychosocial risks in the healthcare and long-term care sectors. Evidence review and trade union views*, ETUI, Report 2022.04.

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\* The names have been changed.

↓ **Hotel chambermaids are in a vulnerable position when it comes to customer complaints.**  
Photo: © Tania Castro

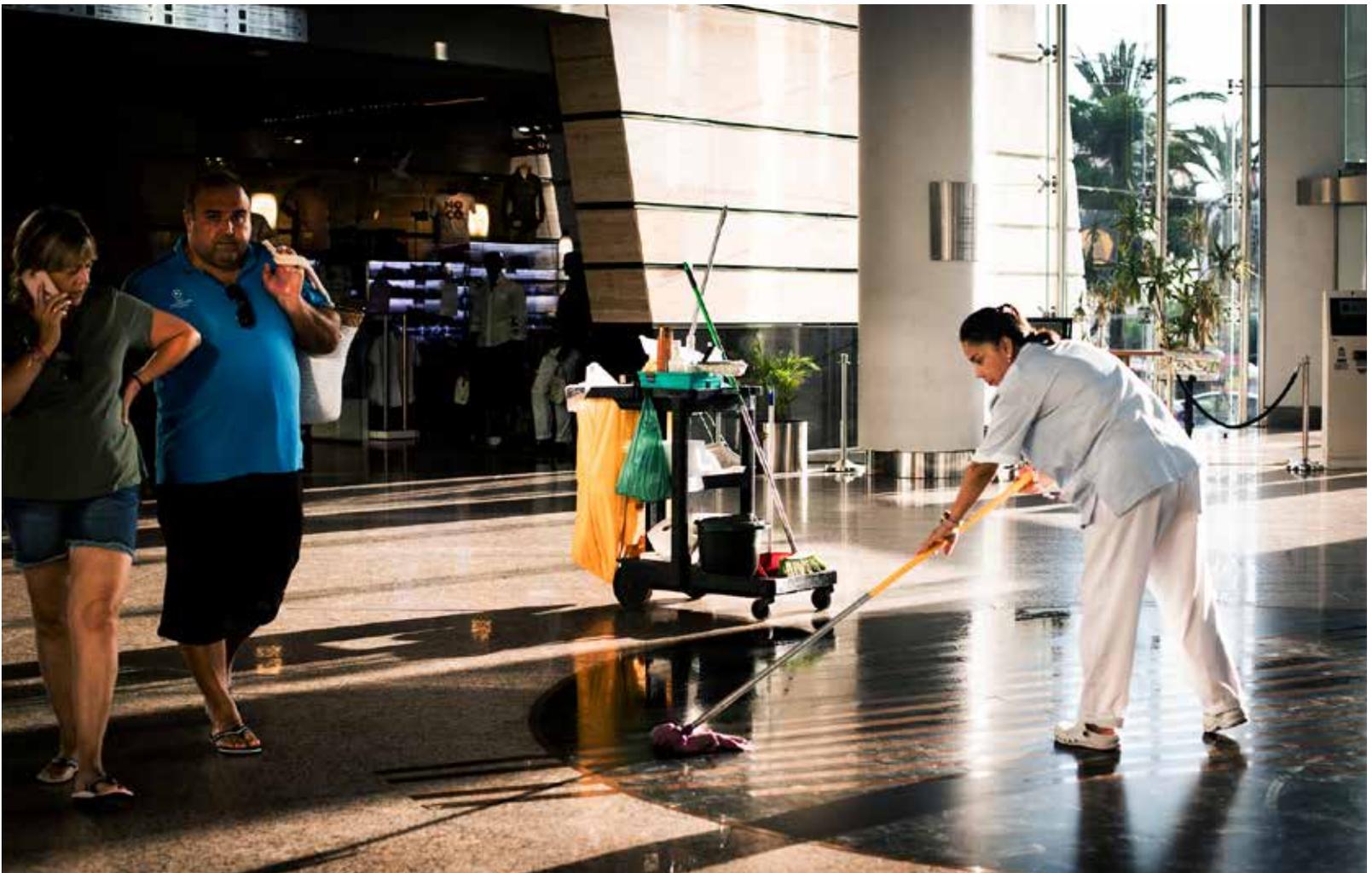
### Excessive workload in the hotel industry

Working in highly stressful conditions is the daily reality for Aurora\* who has more than 20 years' experience cleaning rooms in a large Benidorm hotel. Her contract is for five hours of work a day, six days a week. On 17 August 2022, the day she spoke to *HesaMag*, the work allocated to her included cleaning 23 double rooms, five of which required a special effort because they were 'changeovers', i.e. rooms where the guests were changing.

In the 2010s, Spanish female hotel cleaners, who dubbed themselves *Las Kellys*, began to organise and campaign against their excessive workload, attracting attention from the media and on social networks. In response to the campaign, in 2017 the Valencian Occupational Health and Safety Institute (INVASSAT) carried out an investigation into the circumstances of chambermaids in the Comunidad Valenciana, interviewing 1 639 chambermaids

in 192 hotels. The study estimated that the average time taken to clean a room was 29 minutes for a double 'changeover' room and 19 minutes for a double room with no changeover. Applying this calculation to Aurora's day (300 minutes), she should have been expected to clean five changeover rooms (145 minutes) and eight normal double rooms (152 minutes), but her list included 10 double rooms more than the number predicted by the average INVASSAT calculation.

Aurora's circumstances are not unusual: Merche\* and Celia\* report the same room-cleaning ratios. All three chambermaids stated that poor, top-down work organisation further complicated the job of cleaning, which was already very tough because of the speed at which it had to be done and the unnatural postures that had to be adopted to do it. Merche spelled it out: 'I'm 51 and I'm exhausted. The work rates are so tough that I'm dead on my feet when I get home. We're surviving on anti-inflammatories and anti-depressants.'



## Lack of control

The INVASSAT study provided data that clearly show that the job of a hotel cleaner is very demanding in all areas of the sector where the workers have no power to influence things. According to the study, chambermaids are forced to adopt unnatural postures in 98% of jobs. In 80% of cases they felt they lacked control over timing in their working day, and considered the work rate being demanded of them disproportionate.

Creativity is one of our core characteristics as human beings. It is almost inevitable that, when we carry out a task, we come up with an idea to make improvements in terms of the time taken and quality of the result. The knowledge gained from experience is vividly encapsulated in the Spanish adage *quién la lleva, la entiende* – ‘walk a mile in my shoes’. But these women are deprived of any involvement because they are subject to a highly top-down, inefficient work organisation.

‘Co-ordinators who do a poor job make our jobs hell,’ says Aurora frankly. ‘You would expect that, when I go up to the floor of the hotel where my rooms are, all the bed linen would be in the office ready, but that’s not what happens. I have to do four trips to get it, and there’s just the one service lift for 18 floors. You’d assume that the hotel would do a stock take and there’d be no shortage of soap or towels, but here we are in high summer, and there’s not enough soap, towels or laundry bags. In a hotel, chambermaids come face to face with customers. How do you tell a guest in a four-star hotel that you’ve run out of laundry bags for the wardrobes?’

Merche says that when she’s made suggestions for changes to her supervisor the response has always been the same: ‘You’re not paid to think.’ ‘If they allowed you to have an opinion or make the odd suggestion...’ she explains. ‘But they don’t. Put something forward, and you get a rollicking because it’s not your job to tell your boss how to do theirs.’ Celia says that, after

20 years in the same hotel, she’s learned how to fake a smile and won’t let her bosses’ unfair treatment get to her. ‘If you tell them what’s not working, they do everything they can to get rid of you,’ she says. Celia has experienced bullying for not keeping quiet, and so to prevent a recurrence, she has wangled a place on the evening shift where she has greater autonomy because she’s practically on her own.

In large hotels, restaurant waiters are the male equivalents of chambermaids. The restaurant is usually a buffet which is often at maximum capacity. The waiters also lack control over their work and have to deal with the demands of exacting customers by themselves. Take Víctor\* for example. He has 15 years’ experience working in catering and

↓ Benidorm attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists every year.  
Photo: © Tania Castro



tells us that he's been asking the *maitre d'* at his restaurant for more glasses for at least two weeks: 'We need at least 85 more glasses. He doesn't even have to go and buy them: he's got them downstairs in the cellar, but unless he tells me to I can't go and get them. Every day, I find I'm having to serve a customer's cold drink in a hot glass that's just come out of the dishwasher. The customers complain, justifiably, and I wish the ground would swallow me up.' This experienced waiter has just been assigned the hotel owner's son as an assistant: 'I asked for help, and they gave me the owner's son. It would almost be better to be working on my own because I can't give him instructions and he doesn't help me. But hey, that's the way things work; I'd been asking them to buy wine-bottle openers for three weeks, and "the kid" managed to get them in just one day.'

### **In the line of fire of customer discontent**

Websites such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com have increased the pressure on hotel staff considerably. Normally, only angry customers write reviews, and screenshots of complaints are forwarded on hotel staff WhatsApp groups by management, often crushing workers' self-esteem. Luisa opens her WhatsApp group and shows a screenshot forwarded by the housekeeper. It's a message from a customer who says that there was fluff under the bed and that the rooms hadn't been thoroughly cleaned. 'I'd like to be able to clean them thoroughly, but in 10 minutes it's just impossible,' she sighs, helplessly.

The effect of social networks also extends to the buffet-restaurant where Victor serves wine and cold drinks. 'Different types of customers come in to eat,' he

explains, 'Some are on an all-inclusive rate – they wear a wristband, and some have to pay for their drinks. When I tell a customer that they need to pay for drinks, they often get angry and there's a bit of a row. One time, the customer went to reception to complain and, to my huge surprise, came back into the restaurant clutching a piece of paper that said his drinks were included. I was incredulous and nervous because of the argument with the customer, who was now looking at me defiantly, but I knew I was in the right, so I phoned reception to find out what had happened, and the receptionist's reply floored me: "No, you were definitely correct, but they booked through Booking.com, and if I hadn't given in to him he'd have given us a bad review.'"

Chambermaids can be particularly vulnerable to customer complaints, as exemplified by a story Merche recounts: 'The hotel was providing accommodation to a basketball team, and the coach's laptop went missing. Who did they accuse? The chambermaid. Not only are we exploited, we're also viewed with suspicion. By a stroke of bad luck, the room had been cleaned by a new girl on trial. The customer got angry and accused us.' The receptionist and deputy housekeeper went to speak to the customer to try to get him to have a good look for the computer and talk to the team, all youngsters, to see if it was a prank. The hotel management dismissed the chambermaid with no explanation and reprimanded the deputy housekeeper for speaking to the customer. The receptionist wasn't punished, but the cleaner was, and she ended up leaving the hotel because she couldn't bear the humiliation. 'They assume we have no voice,' says Merche. 'And if we use it to try and sort an issue out they punish us.'

### **No acknowledgement of harm and no risk assessments**

The chambermaids are being supported both by traditional trade unions and grassroots assembly-based organisations such as *Las Kellys*. Yolanda García, the spokesperson for Benidorm's *Las Kellys*, confirmed that the improvements promised by the government in recent years were not worth the paper they were written on: 'There's no glass ceiling for us, we just want to rise above the sticky floor,' she says. 'There's no chance anything will change, not even on really basic things like acknowledging harm. In August 2018, the central government and social actors agreed on the recognition of occupational diseases affecting chambermaids, but it came to nothing because Royal Decree 1299/2006, which sets out the table of occupational diseases, has not been amended. Insurance companies and the INSS [Spanish Social Security Institute] deny that the musculoskeletal problems we have, such as epicondylitis or "tennis elbow", are caused by our work.'

Patricia Carrillo, General Secretary of the CCOO's Service Federation in Alicante province where Benidorm is located, says that there are no risk assessments for psychosocial issues in the vast majority of hotels: 'They do nothing whatsoever for psychosocial risks. For example, in 2019, we lodged a complaint with the Labour Inspectorate because there was an overbearing video monitoring system, and the workers in one hotel felt the management was listening in on them round the clock. It was like Big Brother. Management began to reprimand women on the basis of the recordings, with no evidence, and we reported the situation to the Inspectorate. Turned out that the Inspectorate came to the conclusion that the video monitoring was over the top and said it would take formal action, but here we are in 2022, and nothing has changed.'

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↑ In the big hotels, restaurant waiters are often the male counterparts of female chambermaids.

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*Screenshots of complaints are forwarded on hotel staff WhatsApp groups by management, often crushing workers' self-esteem.*

### The way work is organised is not set in stone

According to ISTAS sociologist Clara Llorens Serrano, the problem lies partly in permanent understaffing, a hallmark of business practices for workplace management in Spain for too long, with companies competing on labour costs in labour-intensive activities and thus generating an enormous workload; and partly in an archaic, authoritarian, Taylorist, non-participatory model of organising work that results in low levels of control. 'To the lack of staff we can add poor task planning with regard to quantity, quality and time, and inadequate technology and processes.' Llorens insists that work organisation is not set in stone: 'workers – women and men alike – have had the right to demand a change in business practices since 1996 when the Law on prevention of occupational risks was enacted, specifically under Article 15. The failure to act is unacceptable socially, because the bill

for more precarious working conditions, caused by businesses setting off on a race to the bottom and making short-term profits at the expense of working conditions that are damaging to the working population's health, is one that we'll pay for in declining health and greater GDP expenditure on the state health system.

'A healthier way of organising work is possible provided that we take on board the need to change working conditions and, often, increase staffing levels,' concludes Llorens. 'We are aware of success stories in tourism and other sectors, but two issues need to be taken on board from the outset: the participation of workers is essential, and so is improving working conditions in terms of staffing, contracts, the working day and wages. In most cases, reducing exposure to psychosocial risks involves allocating more resources and backing high-quality, sustainable business management, and not making easy money by damaging workers' health.' ●