

Concern about the Effects of the Pandemic Caused by COVID-19 in the Retail Sector in Spain. Differences between Men and Women

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Abstract: This study analyzed differences between men and women from a sample of retail workers in their perception of the effects that Covid-19 can have at the workplace. Participants ($n = 467$) answered an online survey including questions about sociodemographic data and perception of Covid-19. We obtained data throughout October-December 2020. The results showed that participants exhibit deep concern about the Covid-19 pandemic and its influence at the work level. Both genders exhibited deep concern about the pandemic and about how the Covid-19 had affected them at the workplace. However, women have more uncertainty in their work; they have noticed more changes at the psychosomatic level, they are more afraid that their employment situation will be affected by the pandemic, and they consider that their situation will worsen. In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic has similarly affected men and women in terms of their work; expectations about the future effects of the crisis caused by Covid-19 are worse for women than for men.

Keywords: perception; economic impact; COVID-19; pandemic; retail sector; Spain

1. Introduction

The pandemic caused by Covid-19 is generating essential changes in organizations and in the ways of working. Restrictions on citizens' mobility and quarantines decreed by governments to stop contagions in the population are causing decreases in forecasts for economic growth and predictions of a new economic crisis.

In Spain, one of the most affected sectors is the retail sector. According to a recent study carried out by Oliver et al. (2020), the retail sector is the third most affected sector, only behind the hospitality and the construction sectors. 9.3% of the participants who had or were in danger of losing their job/business were working in the retail sector (only 5.3% of participants who did not think they will lose their jobs working in the retail sector) [1]. Over the last decade, the retail sector has significantly increased its value in the market: job offers have increased approximately to 132,000, and its value-added increased by 4.1% in the manufacturing industry [2]. It is also necessary to highlight that the retail sector in Spain is the sector that has most contributed to women's job placement. Women represent more than 50% of the retail sector job positions, and in organizations such as Inditex, Tendam, or Mango, women represent between 60% and 80% of middle managers and management positions. However, in 2019, the retail sector suffered a 20% drop in revenue compared to 2007. Nowadays, and due to economic difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, experts expect an additional 35-40% drop in 2020, according to an EY and The Boston Consulting Group study. This drop in revenue will imply immediate consequences on the retail sector: more than 65,000 people from the retail sector will lose their job due to the closure of sales points and smaller businesses' disappearance [3].

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Over the last year, several studies have analyzed citizens' situations and perceptions related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their business. Bartik et al. (2020) conducted a survey to assess the pandemic's impact on retail companies in the United States. They found a significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic as 43% of businesses were temporarily closed, employment had fallen by 40%, and 38% reported facing insolvency at their work [4]. Fairlie et al. (2020) exhibited similar results: immigrant businesses were the most affected by experienced losses of 36%, followed by female-owned businesses hit by 25% [5]. Lemieux et al. (2020) exhibited that the sector that has suffered the most job losses (in Canada) was the retail sector [6]. On the other hand, Duarte et al. (2020) showed that uncertainty and financial impacts are the predominant concerns among workers, and more than 60% reported making changes to their daily work routine [7]. Recent studies also exhibit significant differences between men and women in the effects that Covid-19 can have at the workplace: women face large losses and less aggregate weekly hours [6,8-11].

In Spain, recent studies [1, 12] have analyzed the Spanish citizens' situation and perception related to the Covid-19 pandemic (social contact behavior during the confinement; personal economic impact; workplace situation and health status). Results exhibited a significant economic impact due to the covid-19 pandemic in small businesses since 47.3% of participants working in small (1-9 workers) companies reported having been financially affected, and 19.4% reported facing insolvency at their work. Also, women were more affected by job losses and furloughs.

As mentioned above, many studies have analyzed the financial impact of the Covid-19 on retail workers. However, there is little research, at least that we know, on workers' individual experiences; their personal and labor situations, and attitudes toward the impending economic crisis. Therefore, the present study aims to evaluate the levels of concern manifested by retail workers in the context of the Covid-19 in Spain and determine if differences exist between men and women. We expect that Spanish retail workers show similar results to their international colleagues. Also, since women seem to be more financially affected than men, we expect to find significant differences.

2. Materials and Methods

A prospective cross-sectional design was established, which involved a random sample of 467 retail sector workers. The sample's mean age was 33.56 years old, ranging from 18 to 61 years old, 188 males and 279 were females. Approximately 70% of the participants work in a large multinational company with more than 250 employees. To participate in the study, it was necessary to have been in the job for at least one year.

Participants answered an online survey (administered throughout October and December 2020) that consisted of the following instruments:

Socio-demographical variables: Participants had to indicate their age, gender, job antiqueness, and size of the company.

Perception of Covid-19: participants answered questions related to how they perceive the Covid-19 pandemic and how they think it affects or it has affected their job and their mental well-being. It consists of 8 multiple choice response items, with a Likert scale from "totally disagree" (0) to "totally agree" (5):

1. I am not worried about the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. The Covid-19 pandemic creates uncertainty in my job.
3. I have noticed physical changes (lack of sleep, muscle aches, irritability...) since the Covid-19 pandemic.
4. I fear that my work situation will be affected by the pandemic.
5. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected several aspects of my work activity.
6. Now I work more than before the Covid-19 pandemic.
7. The work environment of my work is not the same since the Covid-19 pandemic.
8. I think my work situation is going to get worse due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Results

First, we calculated descriptive statistics for all measures. Table 1 shows the mean for all the items for the Covid-19 survey. The scores of the eight questions related to the influence of the actual Covid-19 pandemic show that participants exhibit deep concern about the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact at the work level. Items 4 and 5 showed the highest punctuations, exhibiting that uncertainty and daily work routine changes are the principal concerns among retail workers.

To explore the differences between men and women on the perception of Covid-19, we computed a One-Way ANOVA. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation for all measures. Comparison of the responses given by gender showed that women have more uncertainty in their work (men = 3.4 vs. women = 4.1); they have noticed more changes at the psychosomatic level (men = 3.1 vs. women = 3.6); they are more afraid that their employment situation will be affected by the pandemic (men = 3.6 vs. women = 4.2) and they consider that their situation will worsen (men = 3.4 vs. women = 3.9) ($p \leq 0.001$ in all cases).

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation (SD) for responses to Covid-19 questions by gender.

	Men		Women		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Item 1	1.79	1.26	1.75	1.29	0.35	0.729
Item 2	3.47	1.54	4.07	1.35	-4.48	0.000
Item 3	3.15	1.48	3.62	1.49	-3.37	0.001
Item 4	3.69	1.45	4.21	1.24	-4.16	0.000
Item 5	4.45	0.96	4.41	1.06	0.36	0.720
Item 6	3.24	1.47	3.04	1.59	1.39	0.166
Item 7	3.58	1.36	3.74	1.37	-1.23	0.219
Item 8	3.48	1.36	3.90	1.32	-3.34	0.001

4. Discussion

The present study showed that retail workers exhibit deep concern about the Covid-19 pandemic effects on their job. According to existing literature [7] uncertainty and daily work routine changes are the main concerns among Spanish retail workers. Even though results showed that both genders exhibit deep concerns about the pandemic and similar levels of how the Covid-19 pandemic had affected them at the workplace, we found significant differences between men and women. Women's expectations about the future effects of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are worse than men's. Recent studies found significant differences in the financial impact between men and women, higher for women [5-11]. These findings could explain the significant differences in concern and daily work effects found in this study.

The present study has practical implications, as well. One important recommendation for retailing companies is to efficiently manage their workforce concerns regarding the Covid-19 pandemic: (1) renegotiate employees' contracts in case of temporary closure, (2) ensure their permanence at the company for at least 6 months after the competition of the Record of Temporary Employment Regulation (RTER), (3) ensure that objective dismissals made after 6 months will not lead to collective dismissals, (4) allow the increase in annual overtime hours in order to resume regular activity, (5) make opening and working hours more flexible and (6) make tasks more flexible among the entire workforce.

This study has limitations. Since we did not assess the baseline level of concern about their job retail workers had before the pandemic, we could not compare prevalence changes. Further studies on both identification and interventions workers from other sectors to prevent and reduce deep concern about their job are needed.

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