

# COVID-19's impact on the hospitality workforce – new crisis or amplification of the norm?

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hospitality

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Tom Baum

*Department of Work, Employment and Organisation, Strathclyde Business School,  
University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK and School of Tourism and Hospitality,  
University of Johannesburg, Doornfontein, South Africa*

Shelagh K.K. Mooney

*School of Hospitality and Tourism,  
Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, and*

Richard N.S. Robinson and David Solnet

*Business School, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to highlight the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hospitality workforce *in situ* between mid-April and June 2020.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This is a viewpoint paper that brings together a variety of sources and intelligence relating the impacts on hospitality work of the COVID-19 pandemic at three levels: macro (global, policy, government), meso (organisational) and micro (employee). It questions whether the situations faced by hospitality workers as a result of the pandemic are seed-change different from the precarious lives they normally lead or just a (loud) amplification of the “normal”.

**Findings** – In light of the fluid environment relating to COVID-19, conclusions are tentative and question whether hospitality stakeholders, particularly consumers, governments and the industry itself, will emerge from the pandemic with changed attitudes to hospitality work and hospitality workers.

**Practical implications** – This raises questions about hospitality work for key stakeholders to address in the future, some of which are systemic in terms of how precarious labour forces, critical to the global economy are to be considered by policy makers, organisations in a re-emerging competitive market for talent and for those who chose (or not) to work in hospitality.

**Social implications** – This paper contributes to ongoing debates about precarious work and the extent to which such practices are institutionalised and adopts an “amplification model” that may have value in futures-orientated analysis about hospitality and tourism.

**Originality/value** – This paper is wholly original and a reflection on the COVID-19 crisis. It provides a point of wider reference with regard to responses to crises and their impact on employment in hospitality, highlighting how ongoing change, fluidity and uncertainty serve to magnify and exacerbate the precarious nature of work in the industry.

**Keywords** Workforce, Hospitality, Precarity, COVID-19

**Paper type** Viewpoint



## Introduction

This “Viewpoint” offers a critical assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the global hospitality workforce, recognising the complex diversity of the sector across scale, purpose, ownership and place. At the point of first writing this paper, mindful of rapid, nearly daily

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changes, governments of many jurisdictions imposed virtual or total closedown on most of their hospitality businesses while in other locations closure was forced on operations for commercial reasons as customers could no longer travel. Although steps were undertaken later in the northern hemisphere spring and early summer in many countries to ease lockdowns on businesses, hospitality was frequently amongst the last sectors to return to anything close to what they were before, with tight operational constraints imposed by social distancing for customers and staff. Responses by governments to COVID-19 has varied hugely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and is subject to rapid change. While countries such as Australia and the UK closed all restaurants and cafes (except for takeout/takeaways), others like Sweden permitted them to remain open to the public for much longer.

Other locations, including in the USA, relaxed lockdown rules on hospitality businesses but have as had to re-impose them as cases of COVID-19 increased in some states. Countries in the Global South were initially able to avoid the impact of large numbers of confirmed cases, but this has changed over time so that, at the time of writing, cases in countries such as Brazil and India continue to rise rapidly, with a major impact on hospitality and tourism businesses and their workforce. It is also less clear how hospitality businesses in the Global South have been impacted by the pandemic, especially in the informal sector where levels of visitor dependency will vary greatly by sector. What is evident, globally, however, is that the situation on the ground for hospitality businesses and their workforce, in most countries, remains highly fluid, underpinning their precarity and vulnerability to external crises.

As a result, we along with other “rapid response critical commentators” (Gössling *et al.*, 2020) recognise the extremely challenging conditions which many hospitality businesses face as a result of the global pandemic. Our focus, however, is on the tough, potentially tragic, impacts that resultant action by governments and businesses had on members of the hospitality workforce, whether such closure is imposed on operations or is of their own volition. Baum (2006) introduced the concept of “social distance” to illustrate the wide social, cultural and economic gap between consumers and workers in hospitality in many countries. It is, perhaps, ironic that this term is now widely used to justify the need to cut off completely the livelihood of these employees. In our assessment, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the hospitality workforce are an *amplification* of existing known challenges experienced by this group rather than the manifestation of something new, in terms of their precarious existence in the workforce, their low levels of remuneration and poor working conditions.

The collateral results of actions taken to control, suppress and eliminate the COVID-19 pandemic at a national and international level have had very immediate consequences for hospitality from a business, consumer and workforce perspective. The virtual shut-down of international travel; the curfew of residents within their local communities and, indeed, residences; and the closure of airline routes, resorts, hotels, restaurants, pubs, clubs and leisure facilities have been headline news in many countries for a relatively short period, while the consequences for other sectors of the economy have been much more muted. For example, RTE (2020) reports that, in Ireland, within days of the Government’s enforcement of closure of restaurants, pubs and clubs, 140,000 workers had been laid off, of which 120,000 were hospitality workers. Similar outcomes are reported across countries and continents, from Hong Kong to France and California. Some reports highlight the brutal reality of the consequences for employees, who may lose both their jobs and their homes as a consequence of government advice and economic pressure (Brooks, 2020). Evans and Over (2020) highlight the consequential plight of the most vulnerable in society and, while their focus is rightly on the poorest countries of the Global South, the arguments they put forward are equally applicable to those at the margins of developed economies as well, in many cases

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the non-contract and undocumented workforce upon which hospitality, in particular, depends, whether in the “traditional” informal or the emergent gig economies (Robinson *et al.*, 2019a).

It is important to note that the impact of COVID-19 on hospitality employment mirrors that during previous pandemics (such as SARS and MERS) (Belau, 2003; Yang and Chen, 2009) and other crises [such as the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami (Henderson, 2007)]. However, what is of significance during the COVID-19 2020 pandemic is the scale of the impact across both place (geographical spread) and time (the anticipated period to full hospitality industry recovery). Indeed, Zeng *et al.* (2005), in addressing the impact of SARS on areas such as employment, specifically see these as short term. Whether the same is true of COVID-19 remains to be seen, but somewhat unlikely given international tourism is unlikely to reach pre-COVID-19 levels until 2023 according to some market researchers (Flynn, 2020).

Government responses have been interesting, in some instances apparently abandoning free market ideologies to offer support to businesses and to some of the individuals directly impacted by the consequences of COVID-19 and by attempts to control its spread. Such responses include tax and financial support for businesses, wage subsidies and changes in the rules governing sick pay entitlements to enable workers to self-isolate in the event of sickness rather than remain in the workforce. While such measures are of some value to those who benefit, bearing in mind that sick pay in the UK, for example, can be less than £100 per week, government action fails totally to address the vulnerabilities of those working outside of formal employment contracts, such as in the gig economy although, ironically, some gig sectors, notably in food delivery, are seeing growth as a consequence of the crisis (Riordan *et al.*, 2020).

The sudden availability of labour released from hospitality and tourism employment has created opportunity for other sectors such as supermarkets (Wood, 2020) and agriculture (HopsLabourAdmin, 2020) who are now seeking to recruit temporary workers from this pool. This begs questions about skills thresholds for these varied vocational areas but also about the geographical mobility of these workers to fill vacancies that have arisen. One of the causes of vacancies in areas like fruit-picking (and, in all probability, in the longer-term in hospitality as well) has been the call of governments for its citizens to return to the national “mothership” at this time of challenge. Will they return once things pick up again?

In this paper, we address the employment impacts of the COVID-19 virus in the hospitality industry at three levels according to Baum *et al.*'s (2016) taxonomy – the macro level of government and international agency policy and response as well as the global response of multinational organisations; the meso level of the hospitality firm; and the micro level of the individual and the impact in terms of their social and cultural context. In doing so, we recognise that there is overlap between the three areas and that COVID-19 has exposed the “fuzzy edges” within these classifications. Our paper seeks to highlight the COVID-19 crisis as an *amplification* of existing challenges within hospitality work rather than a reflection of something that is new and caused by the pandemic. We look to a future where lessons have been learnt by all stakeholders and there are real improvements in work, its status and the working environment in the hospitality industry.

### Macro level

At the macro level, the structural features of the hospitality industry induce significant levels of precarity and vulnerability for hospitality workers (Robinson *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b), many of whom depend on the wider tourism industry for employment. While our focus in this article is on the hospitality industry, the almost instantaneous impact COVID-19 had on community embedded hospitality businesses cannot be ignored. While hospitality

operations were once the heartbeat of localities, for example the British pub (Lugosi *et al.*, 2016), increasingly they have become dependent on tourism. Limiting and suspending international, and then domestic flights, were amongst the first actions many governments, globally, implemented as the COVID-19 situation unfolded. This effectively arrested tourism. A late March forecast from *Statistica* (Lock, 2020), predicted the loss of 75.8 million tourism jobs worldwide. Given the majority of roles in tourism are traditional hospitality jobs in accommodation and foodservice the inextricable link between the two industries cannot be ignored. Indeed, by 5 April 2020, vacancies for Australian hospitality and tourism jobs had declined by 84% relative to the same period 12 months earlier, against the all industries average of 65% (Seek.com.au).

Modern economies are also characterised by key features that impact on labour conditions. Amongst dominant neo-liberal market ideologies, (Larner, 2000), gradually permeated from the global North to the South, the gaps in wealth between the rich and the poor (Keeley, 2015), arguably those that receive service and those that serve, has widened greatly. Political and economic power, for the moment, is generally concentrated in the former. This has some profound impacts on the working poor, or precariat (Standing, 2011). First, wages privilege knowledge workers and those that possess tangible commodities with the consequence that those that perform service work, or transact ephemeral and perishable products, earn comparatively and significantly less. Lead data suggest service workers collectively are in the frontline of both the health and economic risks from COVID-19 (Villarreal, 2020) and gaps in inequality are being cleaved open (McGreal, 2020).

Moreover, hospitality workers, generally with limited levels of educational achievement (Marchante *et al.*, 2005), are among the lowest wage earners in all industry comparisons (Casado-Díaz and Simón, 2016). As COVID-19 unfolded the alternative employment options for hospitality workers, due to their lower education, was limited. Moreover, due to their low earnings many hospitality workers were surviving on a “pay cheque to pay cheque” cash-flow basis, with no savings upon which to fall back. The crisis abruptly ended their cash-flows. Although the sector is large in terms of numbers of businesses and employees, due to low wages, low margins and high competitiveness, the contributions to the economy, at between 5 and 10% GDP (Bénassy-Quéré *et al.*, 2020) are low in comparison to other industries. Governments may find supporting hospitality (tourism) politically expedient as it focuses on shoring up other sectors in the economy.

Compounding the industry norm of low wages, job security is a perennial problem as a result of, *inter alia*, seasonality, contingent and non-standard work forms and preference for the utilisation of cheaper worker cohorts, for example youth (Robinson *et al.*, 2019b). Despite efforts by governments to introduce minimum wages in some economies, resistance from hospitality employers remains high (Walmsley *et al.*, 2019). In policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis in various jurisdictions, generous packages were offered to both businesses and individuals. Australia’s JobKeeper initiative for instance, promised to guarantee lost jobs, but employees had to have been with their current employer for 12 continuous months to qualify (treasury.gov.au). With annual turnover rates amongst the highest of all industries (Dogru *et al.*, 2019), and approaching 75% (Ann and Blum, 2019), COVID-19 thus *amplified* the effects on contingent and precarious workers. Moreover, particular segments of the labour market, for example older workers who are key to the hospitality industry (Jenkins, 2018), were excluded from these packages altogether in Ireland (McQuinn, 2020). Other hospitality workforces, for example temporary migrants, are also ineligible for state support (Riordan *et al.*, 2020), although migrants are the preferred labour choice as they are controllable, malleable, cheaper and more easily exploited due to a superior work ethic than that of the local workforce who often do not want to work in hospitality (Stead, 2020).

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Contrarily, hospitality businesses have responded by augmenting employment contracts with welfare benefits, but the evidence is that such support lags behind other sectors (Chandra, 2019). Hospitality workers typically overcome various barriers to employment by mobility, with many gravitating to urban centres or even moving overseas to find work (Robinson *et al.*, 2014). Of course, COVID-19's domestic lock-downs and grounded airlines prevents this institutionalised response from hospitality labour markets and represents one of many unpalatable paradoxes facing the hospitality economy (Baum *et al.*, 2019).

Other hospitality workforces find themselves without any recourse to support. The crisis has exposed the vulnerability of workers employed in what had been one of the fastest growing sectors in hospitality and tourism, the cruise industry. Most of the global cruise fleet are now idle, but their workforce find themselves without the protection of government-sponsored employment support schemes because virtually all such ships are registered with "flags of convenience" in countries such as the Bahamas and Liberia, to reduce tax liabilities and, crucially, circumvent labour laws in the countries from where the bulk of their clientele originate (Bloom, 2020).

Not widely considered as a structural feature of hospitality is the often unregulated nature of market entry for business. The low barriers to entry to work in the sector are well-known (Baum *et al.*, 2016), but the hurdles for business ownership are also low. This has two effects. First, that there is a high level of business failure (Parsa *et al.*, 2005) and second that supply at any one time is over-saturated with many more businesses than market demand can support (cf Ni and Alon, 2010). This ordinarily spreads employment opportunities, hours and job security increasingly thin. On the other hand, large corporations, for example MNC hoteliers, have greater capacity to retain their workforces. As COVID-19 unfolded, management appeared to have a far better chance of retaining their employment within these large entities. Conversely, as business closures occurred, operational staff became instantaneously obsolete and so redundant. During both lockdowns and recovery, "the fundamental economic challenge is to bridge the financing and employment for the particularly harshly hit sectors – tourism, entertainment and hospitality" (Posen, 2020, p. 206). Already, there are signals that the uber rich and large corporations are profiting from COVID-19 (Neate and Jolly, 2020), and they will be well positioned to finance recoveries on their terms. Amazon and Walmart, while being heavily criticised for the lack of protective clothing for workers, are experiencing extraordinary levels of growth from online sales.

Aggravating all these factors, and again in relation to the rise of the neo-liberal modern state, is collectivism. Traditionally, there has been little to no effective collective organisation and action in the hospitality industry (Cobble and Merrill, 1994; Williamson *et al.*, 2017). In Australia, hospitality is classified under the United Voice union, which was previously called the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union and prior to that the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union. These nomenclatures semantically capture the disparate and fractured nature of collectivism in the sector. In the USA, only 3% of hospitality workers belong to a union compared to the all-industries average of 11% (Lowery *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, one of the sectors in which wage theft is most prevalent is the restaurant industry and, with virtually absent representation, victims find little solace in the legal system that is unwelcoming of class actions and invariably dismissive of claims (Milkman *et al.*, 2010; Ruan, 2012). Although recent efforts have aimed to increase representation and effect collective bargaining, progress is minimal (Bolton, 2019). The inability to mobilise during COVID-19 due to limits on public meetings and lock downs further dampens collectivist efforts. Although collectivism could feasibly be mobilised via

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online channels, poor educational levels and the limited digital literacy and connectivity of many hospitality workers renders this unlikely.

Militating against collectivism and indeed mobilising any form of worker organisation has been the rapid rise of the so-called sharing economy, now more aptly manifest as the gig economy. Hospitality employees who are engaged as individual contractors in food delivery services serve as an exemplar of the non-representation that characterises most of the industry (Lowery *et al.*, 2019). Perhaps counter-intuitively, lead data show that AirBnB has increased rates of direct and indirect hospitality employment, although the authors themselves question the nature of that employment and its effects on other hospitality jobs (Dogru *et al.*, 2020). This then rather circles back to many of the key structural tenets outlined thus far, that make the hospitality employment value proposition precarious. Regardless, the early signs are that AirBnB as a sector has collapsed (Dolnicar and Zare, 2020) but demand for food delivery, like other delivery services, has exploded. However, it benefits food producers and manufacturers rather than hospitality businesses in the lockdown measures introduced by most OECD countries.

### **Meso/organisational level**

This section appraises the meso or organisational level actions that have emerged, or been *amplified*, as a result of COVID-19. Here, we draw on widely ingrained assumptions about work and organisations, where human resource management is premised on a *relationship* between organisations and employees and where psychological (and social) contracts exist between parties. Rousseau's (1989, p. 123) work on psychological contracts argues that such contracts exist between employer and employee and that "an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement [...] a promise has been made and a consideration offered in exchange for it". This well accepted employment principle assumes a set of "reciprocal obligations" that often do not exist in sectors that employ so many part-time employees to combat dramatic swings in demand (see points above about precarious employment), but virtually *none of which* remain now in the COVID-19 impacted hospitality sector.

Implied reciprocal obligations have always had tenuous meaning in industries regarded as providing transient jobs, such as hospitality. The reality is that the nature of contemporary service work had been undergoing radical changes well before COVID-19, relegating traditional employee–organisational relationships as a relic of a time past. The growth of short-term employment contracts, outsourcing to specialist employment companies and the gig economy mean that there are few contracts, real or psychological, between employees and organisations (Subramony *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, and perhaps ironically, we know that new generations of workers shy away from such arrangements (Golubovskaya *et al.*, 2019), even when offered. This is further exacerbated by the complexity of multi-stakeholder arrangements in many hotel operations (investment portfolios owning the land and building, management companies operating the property, asset managers to ensure returns). All of these factors call into question the validity or applicability of psychological contracts in hospitality employment. The COVID-19 crisis has not so much *created* a decline of employee-organisation relationships but rather has *amplified* the effects previously confirmed as negative for lower levels of hospitality work.

### *“Employers of choice” still trying*

Economists and governments have encouraged employers to try to keep paying employees so that as many as possible remain hooked into jobs. There have been many global programs to facilitate organisations and employees to stay together. For example, the US

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Treasury Department created the Employee Retention Credit, designed to encourage businesses to keep employees on their payroll, a refundable tax credit for 50% of up to \$10,000 in wages paid by an eligible employer whose business has been financially impacted by COVID-19 ([US Department of the Treasury: United States Government, 2020](#)). It is also unclear how subsidies such as this operate for jobs within the tipping zone of hospitality businesses where core wages are frequently very low. Unfortunately, when there is little or no revenue, supplemental support to keep employees on payroll is impractical and near impossible. This has led to the re-emergence of terms like “furlough” and “stand down” and new terms such as “business hibernation” implying that many organisations are trying their best to keep a tether to their workforce. The terms “deep slumber” and “hibernation” have been used by New Zealand’s Tourism Industry Association (TIA) which has forecast the loss of 100,000 jobs (New Zealand Herald/Newstalk ZB, 2020, April 8). It should be noted that the quality of the lost jobs is somewhat questionable, as previously, Chris Roberts, Chief Executive of the TIA, has stated that the entire tourism industry [in New Zealand] has relied on “a business model, dating back decades, of having a huge part of the workforce on the minimum wage” ([Bricker et al., 2019](#)). However, it is clear that in the COVID-19 crisis, even “employers of choice” who pay “the living wage” to their employees, are left with few resources to harness.

Not surprisingly, evidence is emerging that the culture and values of those firms known to be employers of choice, who practice “people first” approaches ([Solnet, Kralj and Baum, 2013](#)), continue *to try* to do so despite extreme troughs in revenues for an uncertain period. These “employers” believe that the war for talent ([Golubovskaya et al., 2019](#)) will resume at some stage, even if somewhat differently, and seem to be doing more than others despite severe limitations and resources. Examples include extending healthcare benefits and paying employees even when not working for an extended period. In addition, many preferred employer organisations have been able to leverage their hospitality and service culture training to help find temporary assignments across other businesses such as groceries, online services, couriers and health care. Supermarkets in particular have been using relationships with hospitality firms to fast track temporary hiring ([Hospitality and Catering News, 2020](#)), with a streamlined application process for employees of one company who are on leave without pay to submit expressions of interest for another in need. Restaurant businesses are benefiting from the dividends of a booming grocery and fast food segment with grocers and restaurant owners creating new partnerships to help each other mitigate the ongoing impact of the coronavirus outbreak. Fresh Market is among the latest grocers to offer jobs to furloughed restaurant and hospitality workers.

The unfortunate reality here is that hospitality employers are unable to easily match the actions of some industries in responding to the COVID-19 crisis (working remotely, video conferencing and staggered start times), yet many are finding ways to put common sense measures in place to support employee needs. These examples serve employees but also ensure the survival of some businesses. Examples include cashless payments, click and collect practices, physical distancing between customer and employee, improved sanitation practices and most importantly voluntarily extending sick leave allowances (particularly important given radical statistics in the USA reveal seven in ten low-wage workers do not receive paid sick leave). Gig economy workers such as pizza deliverers and UberEats drivers find themselves at a much higher risk of coming into contact with people infected with the virus, because they are classified as independent contractors. Most do not have health benefits and job protections of their white-collar counterparts ([Riordan et al., 2020](#)). Notably, it is encouraging to see that some of these large “sharing economy” firms are offering compensation to drivers for up to 14 days if they are diagnosed with COVID-19 or if they are

quarantined by health authorities. Lyft purportedly will do the same for an unspecified amount of time. At the point of this publication however, there are still many unknowns about how effectively these benefits are being distributed, with complaints surfacing, perhaps unsurprisingly, about the difficulty in accessing these benefits (Sonnemaker, 2020).

Many organisations and collectives are now looking for creative ways to generate revenues to stay afloat, thereby employing people and ensuring a future for the business. For example, Miami Eats is a collection of restaurants working together to promote delivery and/or take-out menus to encourage residents to support local restaurants struggling to stay open. Coffee shops and cafes around the world are radically innovating their website and mobile ordering systems. And a number of quick service and fast casual chains are selling groceries and some of their ingredients as groceries, keeping revenues flowing, employment opportunities and community goodwill where grocery stores have been inundated (Taylor, 2020).

### **Micro level – individuals and the vulnerability of the already vulnerable**

Previously, we have written about the unsustainable and precarious employment arrangements and poor working conditions of many workers in the hospitality sector (Baum and Mooney, 2019; Robinson *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). While the COVID-19 crisis has *amplified* disadvantages for the most vulnerable groups, younger workers and women have experienced heightened precarity and disadvantage due to severely reduced accommodation demands, school and pre-school closures, forced shut down of hotels and hospitality businesses and hospitality workers' exclusion from many state financial safety nets previously outlined.

As hospitality workforce researchers have repeatedly warned, the precarious status of workers in hospitality (Tapia and Alberti, 2019; Baum *et al.*, 2016; Williamson and Harris, 2019) renders them shockingly vulnerable to crisis situations, as they are excluded from emergency solutions. As fragmented industry businesses closed their doors, the immediate future of the millions of migrant workers who formed the backbone of operations globally, from India's street vendors to Australia's baristas (Borrello, 2020) was thrown into disarray. Many directly sponsored by their employers lost immediate protection, with local employees' job security prioritised. In Australia, non-citizens were barred from government benefits until protests from neighbouring states caused partial policy reversals (Turner-Cohen, 2020). Where employers abruptly declared themselves bankrupt or ceased trading, erstwhile workers were left with few means to verify historical earnings to access government benefit payments. In New Zealand, workers who had never previously accessed welfare services (most migrants), were unable to apply for assistance as they did not have a personal identifier number for welfare payment, and phone lines they were directed to contact went unanswered (RNZ Share, 2020). Historically, undocumented women migrants are the most vulnerable of precarious workers (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Tapia and Alberti, 2019), paid "cash in hand" in the grey economy (Scharff and Ryley, 2020), they have no claim to benefits. The intersections of youth with precarious migrant worker identity and inflexible student visa status (with limited employment options and restricted availability) have also intensified disadvantage. International students availing of the open-all-hours shift work patterns in hospitality (Goh and Okumus, 2020; Solnet and Hood, 2008) already suffering wage theft and exploitation from undocumented working patterns (Berg and Farbenblum, 2017; Stringer, 2016) lost their homes as well as the income they needed to cover the costs of their studies (Rushing, 2020).

Notwithstanding evidence of deprivation affecting all hospitality workers, we will use women – the group highlighted in most previous studies – as the most vulnerable and



disadvantaged as our “dying canaries in the [hospitality] coal mine”. Hospitality work at its lowest levels is dominated by women, particularly migrant and minority women (Baum *et al.*, 2016; Kensbock *et al.*, 2016), engaged in food and beverage services, food preparation and the servicing of rooms. Unchallenged gender inequalities for women in hospitality include lesser job security, poorer quality jobs and lower pay than men for the same work (Acker, 2006; Santero-Sanchez *et al.*, 2015). In many Western countries, accommodation services provided women, especially solo mothers with school age children (Baum *et al.*, 2016) with the opportunity to work during the day (Kensbock *et al.*, 2013; Mooney *et al.*, 2017); however, as observed, motels, resort or Airbnb rooms were among the first casualties of travel restrictions and border closures (Smith, 2020). On examining who was excluded from the emergency support provided by the US Employee Retention Credit (coronavirus related benefit packages) discussed at meso level, an analysis of US labour statistics from gender advocate group, the Fuller Project (Scharff and Ryley, 2020), showed that the hospitality, retail and healthcare employees, which experiencing the most layoffs were “hitting women much harder”. The Fuller Report highlights that women were unable to continue working once schools closed, in some cases some weeks before hospitality premises were ordered to close; thus, women from the onset formed the highest percentage of new claimants for social security. The Fuller Report revealed that single Black and Latino mothers (more likely to be employed in the 80% of hospitality businesses exempted from providing Employee Retention Credit were unable to access government emergency employment aid (Scharff and Ryley, 2020). In New Jersey alone, 40% of claimants came from the food service sector. Statistics confirm the enduring and compounding intersectional effects of gender, race and class for women of colour (Holvino, 2010) in low-quality jobs in hospitality. Gender intersecting with other vectors of disadvantage further magnifies material and emotional penalty (Acker, 2006; Kensbock *et al.*, 2016). Where accommodation was tied to employment, migrant employees lost homes, livelihoods and the legal right to stay in countries with closed borders (Brooks, 2020).

In hospitality, COVID-19 also *amplified* existing gender inequalities for the small privileged group of women employed in supervisory or managerial positions in the sector (Dashper, 2019; Segovia-Pérez *et al.*, 2018), jobs viewed as more secure in economic downturns. In pre-COVID-19 times, because women were primarily responsible for reproductive labour in dual career families (Cha, 2013), executive women were stereotyped as lacking the “flexibility” to be considered effective managers in hospitality and tourism (Costa *et al.*, 2017). During COVID-19 social restrictions, childcare intensified to form “a burden that has become even more all-consuming amid physical distancing and self-isolation” (Villarreal, 2020), acerbating the perceptions that women managers are just not as “committed” as men (Clevenger and Singh, 2013). As women managers working from home are less likely to have a secluded home office away from children as well as considered primarily responsible for childcare (McCarthy, 2020), it is difficult (if not impossible) for women to maintain the deliberate concealment of caregiving responsibilities necessary to retain them in professional careers (Lyng, 2010). The double standards that see women judged as less meritorious for the same workplace behaviours as male colleagues (Simpson and Kumra, 2016), suggest that when a woman’s Zoom conference is invaded by children, it has a detrimental effect on perceptions of her professionalism, rather than providing the career affirming glow experienced by male experts whose work is visibly disturbed by children. For men such as Professor Kelly (Usborne, 2017), the interruption to his BBC interview was positioned as his wife’s caregiving lapse rather than his domestic obligation. Finally, in an unfortunate compounding twist, the disadvantages experienced by hospitality’s most vulnerable women have been exacerbated by the enormous increase in

domestic violence cases, up to 700% in the UK (Townsend, 2020), also reported in Spain, France and the USA (Lyttleton, 2020), all countries that have seen catastrophic COVID-19-related job losses for hospitality workers.

### Conclusions

Hospitality work and hospitality workers have been hit by the COVID-19 crisis in many different ways, some of which are circumstantial and, arguably, unlucky. It is not coincidence that, in many countries, the hospitality sector was the first to shed their workforce in response to the closure of operations by governments and the slump in demand and may well be among the slower sectors to recruit its workforce back into employment (Flaming and Burns, 2020). Hospitality is an industry that has long-standing experience of managing the impact of stochastic demand by rapid-fire recruitment and retrenchment of staff, exploiting low entry barriers to work and precarious work contracts. So, in many respects, what we have witnessed during the first few months of COVID-19 is an *amplification* of historical practice, hardly surprising except in the speed of its execution. What is new and particularly challenging, as we have noted, is the manner in which government schemes to address the employment consequences of COVID-19 are framed in a way that excludes a substantial number of hospitality workers because of the nature of their working contracts (or absence of them), the legal system under which such contracts operate (as in the case of cruise ship employees) or the time that they have been in employment with their current company. These indicators of social vulnerability are compounded because many hospitality workers come from a social demographic (poor, minorities, women, undocumented migrants) that have, to date, suffered disproportionately from the direct medical and wider social effects of COVID-19 and may not have the resources or status to seek assistance when they require it most urgently.

Therefore, based on our analysis of the current environment across global hospitality and the consequences our conclusions have for the workforce employed in the sector, we identify a number of conclusions acknowledging that these are but tentative, relating to COVID-19 and hospitality workers.

- *Amplification of disadvantage, precarity and workplace exploitation that has existed for generations and is well documented.* Notably, the demise of employee-organisational/psychological contracts have become profoundly problematic during this crisis, but it is unlikely that the attributes of casualisation and insecurity in work, both in the gig economy and in the wider hospitality sector, will go away once “normality” returns.
- *Wholesale structural changes to industry and entrepreneurial opportunism (and their impact on work).* Emerging from this “on the other side” may be employment driven by many opportunistic entrepreneurs on one hand or a dramatic growth of the large firms, reducing hospitality SMEs in both the formal and informal sectors even further. There is already evidence that some hospitality and tourism companies, for example in air transport, are undertaking opportunistic downsizing of their workforce under the shadow of the current pandemic.
- *Win now, lose later as the paradox from partnering with other sectors (retail, agriculture, care) in sharing labour pools may be a double-edge sword in the future war for talent as hospitality workers fail to return to their sector of origin.* They may also discover more favourable and secure work opportunities in other sectors, although the most vulnerable are likely to be left little option. Hospitality will need to be far more competitive in its approach to the labour market.

- *Is increased regulation of the labour market by governments here to stay?* Going forward, governments have used the COVID-19 situation, rightly, to vary or abandon aspects of regulation in areas such as transport (rail, air) and retail (competition between supermarkets) as well as to restrict or close frontline hospitality services. The question that needs to be asked in relation to the theme of this paper is whether such governments, having sniffed deregulation, will apply similar principles to employment benefits and protection, such as the minimum wage and a broadening of entitlements?
- *Impact on the most disadvantaged communities, especially in the informal sectors of the Global South.* Informal sectors in the Global South have shown amazing resilience in the face of previous crises (for example, the Asian tsunami in 2004) and were able to recover fast. The nature of informal economy employment is such that it is largely family-based and this may be a key factor in its resilience. It is reasonable to hypothesise that we will see little or no change in the nature of post-COVID work in the informal sector.

Finally, we fully support the call by [Wen et al. \(2020\)](#) for a future-centred research agenda in the area of hospitality employment that is both multi-disciplinary in perspective, and multi-methods in the tools that are used, as the most effective way in which to fully understand the workforce impacts of COVID-19.

### Looking ahead

Developments over the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic offer perhaps a premonition about how the crisis in a work context may unwind. In China, restrictions on movement and travel were tentatively relaxed from mid-April onwards (with some increase in infections). Migrant workers are returning to the country's major cities, and workplaces are restarting operations. Employees are temperature tested when they come to work and must show a green national-health-code designation. Most receive this information as a QR code on a mobile platform designed by Alipay where a green tag indicates good health; yellow and red tags require one- and two-week quarantines, respectively. Evidence indicates that these rules are strictly enforced and that life in Wuhan, has begun returning to a semblance of normality ([McKinsey and Company, 2020](#)).

Will Wuhan's examples lead the recovery from the crisis which began there? Where does this approach leave hospitality and its employees? Hospitality work is "high touch" and that is the greatest risk to the re-entry of its businesses into the post-COVID-19 world. And yet hospitality addresses corporeal risk-prone human needs (eating, sleeping, etc.) that are at the core of normal socialisation and exchange and its operations cannot be suppressed in perpetuity. It is unlikely that we, as societies around the world, will abandon our relationship with hospitality businesses but on what terms will we engage with hospitality workers?

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**Corresponding author**

Tom Baum can be contacted at: [t.g.baum@strath.ac.uk](mailto:t.g.baum@strath.ac.uk)