


## The role of women in spa tourism in Spain: an invisible issue for rural development?

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**Abstract.** Spa tourism in Spain has not been addressed using a gender perspective. This situation has meant that the role of women in spas has been rendered invisible, and entailed negative consequences for rural development. The aim is to critically analyze, through a gender-based approach, the presence of women in the employment, use, and management/ownership of Spanish spas today, in order to identify the possible social, economic, and regional consequences. We have used a methodology based on triangulation, thus obtaining differentiated and more complete information. The results show a high degree of feminization of spa tourism in Spain, although female representation is unevenly distributed across the different components of the tourism system. We conclude with some strategies to promote the inclusion of women in spa tourism, fostering equality of opportunity and contributing to the development of sustainable and equitable tourism in rural areas in Spain with spas.

**Keywords:** health tourism; wellbeing; gender geography; rural areas.

### [ESP] El rol de la mujer en el turismo de balneario en España: ¿una cuestión invisible para el desarrollo rural?

**Resumen.** El turismo termal en España no se ha abordado desde una perspectiva de género. Esta situación ha invisibilizado el papel de la mujer en los balnearios, con consecuencias negativas para el desarrollo rural. El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar críticamente, desde una perspectiva de género, la presencia de la mujer en el empleo, el uso y la gestión/propiedad de los balnearios españoles actuales, con el fin de identificar las posibles consecuencias sociales, económicas y regionales. Se ha empleado una metodología basada en la triangulación, obteniendo así información diferenciada y más completa. Los resultados muestran un alto grado de feminización del turismo termal en España, si bien la representación femenina no se distribuye de forma homogénea en los diferentes componentes del sistema turístico. Se concluye con algunas estrategias para promover la inclusión de la mujer en el turismo termal, fomentando la igualdad de oportunidades y contribuyendo al desarrollo de un turismo sostenible y equitativo en las zonas rurales españolas con balnearios.

**Palabras clave:** turismo de salud; bienestar; geografía de género; áreas rurales.

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## 1. Introduction

The role of women is vital for tourism. Both historically and currently, they are one of the main drivers and promoters of tourism activity in Spain (UNWTO, 2019). At the same time, women are agents of social, and thus regional, transformation (Baylina, 2019). Patriarchy and sexism are not myths and affect women and their role in the tourism sector (Mura, 2018).

Although, since the 1990s, an increasing number of scientific studies have been conducted on the presence and activity of women in tourism, these are still virtually nonexistent in the case of spa tourism and gender at present, especially within Geography (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015; Delicado-Moratalla, 2023; Trujillo-Rodríguez & Flores-Ruiz, 2023). A geographical approach with a gender perspective (proactive, theoretical, and practical) is necessary to analyze the territorial impact and gender-based inequality of opportunities in spa tourism destinations (Munar et al., 2015; Mura, 2018). To this end, we understand spa tourism as referring to places of baths with mineral springs, not in its more modern, secondary connotation as any establishment with hydrotherapy and beauty treatments.

In this context, the involvement of women in spa tourism has not received much attention from either the academic or the private sector, despite its socio-economic and regional importance (Crecente, 2015; Torres-Pruñonosa et al., 2022). Spa tourism and the women connected to it constitute a strategic sector for rural development. Furthermore, tourism is undeniably a spatial phenomenon, which is why the study of the interrelations between gender and tourism from a geographical perspective should comprise a consolidated line of research (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000).

A lot of studies on tourism and gender have been conducted from a geographical perspective, particularly in urban areas (Rodrigues, Castro & Santiago, 2017). However, contributions regarding rural spaces are limited (García, Cànoves & Valdovinos, 2019; Cejudo et al., 2021), and even scarcer in the case of thermal tourism in rural areas. Up until now, the most studied sub-topics are those that deal with women as consumers of tourism, inequalities in the tourism labor market, and sexual tourism (Bauer, 2014; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015; Xu, 2018).

In the analysis of women as consumers of tourist activities, there are precedents that place them as part of the origins and evolution of spa tourism. However, only in the historical studies by Carribon (2009), Herbert (2009), and Naimark-Golberg (2010) are women mentioned as spa users and/or assistants in France, Great Britain and, Germany in the 18th and 19th centuries. The main purpose was more to reflect upon women's sociability and their labor as caregivers in spa establishments than to examine their role as promoters of the activity. Therefore, despite the importance of recognizing women as essential figures in the emergence of spa tourism, there is a bias in understanding their role as tourists, promoters, and agents of change since historical times.

Some of the causes of this phenomenon persist to this day. Although there is limited academic exploration from various disciplines (Hall & Gössling, 2013; Bauer, 2014; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015, Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2017, García-Rosell & Häkli, 2019), it is essential to identify and analyze them for short- and medium-term eradication and mitigation efforts.

In light of the above, this contribution is necessary, especially considering that the analyses are very general and have not been applied to spa tourism in Spain, where women play a prominent role in its origin and evolution. This issue becomes paradigmatic, moreover, if we bear in mind that Spanish spas are mainly located in rural areas with significant problems of demographic evolution in which women, who are stabilizing agents of the population, have an indisputable role to play (Maroto & Pinos, 2021). Moreover, Spain is one of the European countries with the highest number of spas, but paradoxically, there has been relatively little written about them in quantitative terms. This makes it a particularly relevant case study. Therefore, incorporating a gender approach to Spanish spa tourism with a regional perspective is a much-needed approach for learning about and understanding the reality of these tourist destinations and their geographic environment in a more complete and up-to-date way.

The development of tourism in a region can have a positive impact on employment and on business ventures, particularly for women. It is generally a sector that employs many women, but what type of employment and what impact can it have on the region? In the main, work positions are not neutral with regard to gender; instead, they are created according to their assignment to men or to women (McDowell, 1997). The study by McDowell (1997) showed that men work in the banking system because 'brains' are needed while women work in the hotel and catering industry to cover their socially accepted roles of caregiving and emotions. Might the same occur in contemporary spa tourism? What role do women play in the present-day spa tourism system?

This study is framed in a context of growing interest, on the international level, by applying gender perspective to research, as well as, more specifically, in the line of geography and tourism (Xu, 2018). Furthermore, we follow in the footsteps of authors such as Rodríguez-Sánchez (2017), who stated that gender perspective needed to be introduced into the study of spa tourism in Spain in order to discover the role of businesswomen. Larrinaga (2014) alludes to the previous study in his work on spas in Gipuzkoa. Carribon (2009) highlights the timely need to look into female employees, whom she calls "les femmes de l'ombre du thermalisme" ["women in the shadows of the spa industry"]. At the same time, the aim is to modestly contribute to the lines outlined by Figueroa-Domecq et al. (2015), providing tourist knowledge from the broader perspective of the Social Sciences, and particularly, from Geography. In addition, one cannot forget that gender equality, along with its study and valuation, is included directly in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2014).

## 1.1. Spa tourism from a geographic and gender perspective. Justification and context of the analysis dimensions

Spa tourism in Spain has a strong female presence, which has barely been analysed until now in its three dimensions: employee (supply), user (demand), and owner/manager (management).

Regarding the supply of spas, we need to point out that the hydrotherapy sector represents an employment niche for women. The work of caregiving and therapy needed in spas seem to fit into what has been socially assimilated as “feminine jobs”. At the same time, many of the thermal bath establishments in Spain are located in rural areas with high masculinization and a considerable risk of depopulation, according to EU parameters and indicators from the “Depopulation, Demographic and Equality Challenge” report (Ministerio de Política Territorial y Función Pública de España, 2018). In this context, securing female employment in these regions, tied to the spa sector, could provide relief against the heavy rate of depopulation. Moreover, despite the global popularity of spa tourism and the size of its labor force, there has been a lack of research on the workforce in general, and in Spain in particular (Frost, Ooi & Van Dijk, 2022).

In terms of the demand for spa tourism, there is a marked predominance of female users compared to male spa-goers, both in Spain (Anaya-Aguilar, Gemar & Anaya-Aguilar, 2021a, 2021b) and beyond (Roos, 2009; Little, 2013). This dimension is the most analyzed and practically the only one for which studies of the subject have disaggregated clients by sex. These investigations into demand have analyzed specific case studies at the international level: Langviniene (2014) in Lithuania, Dimitrovski & Todorovic (2015) in Serbia, Dryglas & Salamaga (2017, 2018) and Dryglas & Rozycki (2017) in Poland. However, in these studies, sex is only considered when there is a need to understand the socio-demographic profile for other reasons, rather than being the main issue, and is done in a rather superficial way. In short, the treatments and equipment have occasionally not been adapted to the physical and commercial requirements of women, even though women are the main clientele (Díaz, 2014).

Lastly, in scientific meetings and conferences on spa tourism, the relatively low female presence in management roles has been evident, compared to the male speakers invited, yet there are few studies, reflections or figures provided in the scientific discourse on this sub-topic. We have found no studies in the literature adopting a gender perspective concerning ownership or leadership in the sector (Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2017).

Therefore, these three dimensions of the spa sector need to integrate gender perspective both in scientific analysis and in business reports. Only in this way will it be possible to manage the supply of spas better in accordance with the majority demand and to cover the needs of the niche of female clients. According to Montesón & Singer (2004), knowing who visits the spa is important when it comes to deciding what to offer. Success depends on understanding the existing guests, anticipating the needs of future clients, and defining a marketable spa concept (Montesón & Singer, 2004). Hydrotherapy establishments should offer services and amenities that attract and keep female clients, gaining their loyalty.

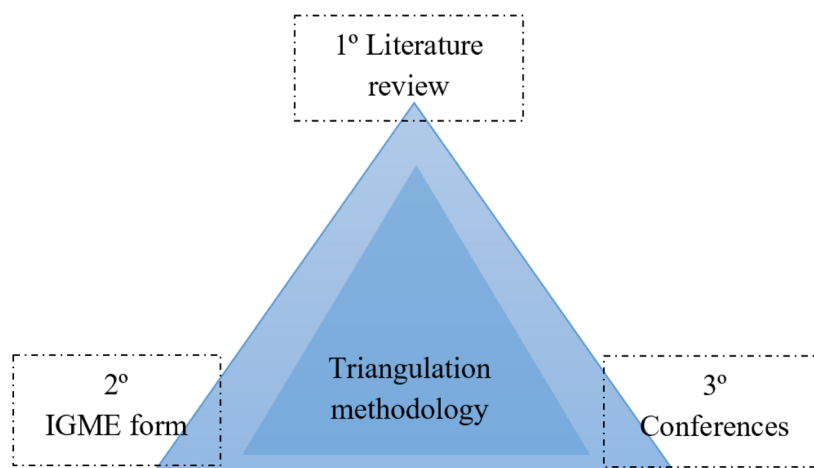
This study, therefore, could result in highlighting the importance of women in a sector that is apparently masculinized in its offer, demand and management. This can, moreover, become a benefit for spa establishments by having the opportunity of being a business with a supply that meets demand and that, at the same time, can highlight its positive impact on the locality as an establishment that employs women and is a revitalizing force in rural areas. In summary, the main objective of this study is to critically analyze, through a gender-based approach, the presence of women in the employment, use and management/ownership of Spanish spas, in order to identify the possible social, economic, and regional consequences. We therefore carry out a detailed study of the female employees (supply/offer), users (demand), and managers/owners (management) of spas in Spain today. We will also outline strategies for fomenting the inclusion of women in all the dimensions of the sector, promoting equality of opportunity and contributing to sustainable and equitable tourism development of rural areas with spas in Spain.

## 2. Materials and methods

The development of this study consists of three phases: 1) a systematic literature review; 2) a quantitative analysis of official data; and 3) fieldwork (Figure 1). Bibliographic sources were complemented with quantitative analysis of official statistics and the qualitative discourse and experiential insights gathered. This triangulation of data collection methods has made it possible to refine the understanding of certain obstacles and information gaps surrounding the topic at different levels.

First, a bibliographical analysis has been carried out with PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology (Page et al., 2021). We initially undertook a search for previous research on the subject using the key words “spa” AND “gender” in Scopus and Web of Science. This enquiry produced a total of seven scientific articles, one of which was a book chapter. For this search, only three items (two articles and a book chapter) refer to spa tourism, while the rest had to be discarded. The search continued with the key works “spa” AND “women” OR “woman”, with a total of 31 results in Scopus, and the key words “spa” AND “equality”, which produced only one result in Scopus. Of the 31, most (more than 85%) discuss the effects of treatments on women from a medical rather than tourist or business perspective. The results were similar when searching the key words “hydrotherapy”, “balneology” AND “gender”, while there were no results for the combinations “thermalism” AND “women” and “Thermalism” AND “Gender”. Although admittedly we mainly used Web of Science and Scopus seeking studies in Spanish and in English, we also consulted Dialnet and Google Scholar to broaden and complement our earlier searches.

Figure 1. Components of the methodological triangulation.



Source: the authors.

The second phase was to search for and analyze quantitative data extracted from official organizations with information on the subject. In the case of spa tourism, the institution responsible for gathering information on mineral-medicinal waters in Spain is the Geological and Mining Institute (Instituto Geológico y Minero de España, IGME), a public research body affiliated to the Ministry of Science and Innovation. Other official organizations for statistics, such as the National Institute of Statistics (INE), do not have separate information specifically on spa tourism. Aside from these, we consulted the *Vademécum III de aguas mineromedicinales españolas* of Maraver, Vázquez & Armijo (2020) to compile quantitative information.

IGME's methodology for collecting information on the total number of active spas in Spain consists of creating a form and sending it out by letter and email. This form is part of a collaboration agreement that has existed between the Institute and the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge since 2002, for which IGME gives a yearly statistical update on spas in Spain with "the most representative socio-economic data" (as stated on its website): the number of spa-goers who visit the spas and direct employment data generated by sex. The data for indirect jobs (2023), via subcontracting or maintenance, presented in this paper were released by the Institute exclusively for this investigation (prior consultation) but have not been published in the official statistics on their website. Then, the data obtained were subsequently treated to produce graphics and for their proper analysis.

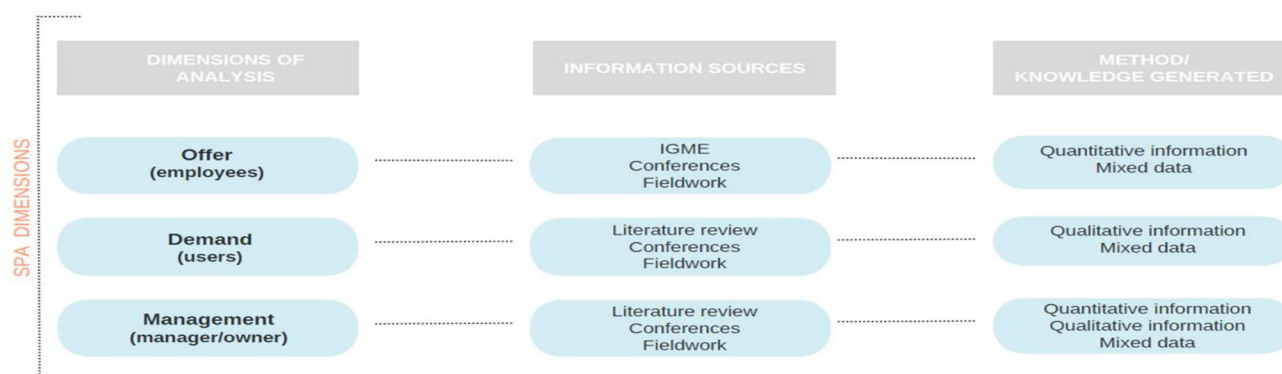
Throughout the research, data from 2023 were generally used because data from 2024 were not yet available. In addition, it must be noted that there are Autonomous Communities that have spas but are not represented in the statistics because there are not sufficient data available (IGME incorporates information when it has data on at least two establishments). Therefore, the absence of an Autonomous Community does not necessarily mean the absence of a spa.

The third phase of the research consisted of conducting fieldwork in various nationally recognized thermal establishments, with the aim of collecting first-hand information on gender dynamics within these facilities. To this end, qualitative techniques were employed, primarily in situ observation, which enabled the identification of service offerings, demand characteristics, and organizational structures from a gender-sensitive perspective, as well as semi-structured interviews conducted with directors, technical staff, and other key stakeholders involved in the management and provision of thermal services. In addition, original photographs were taken to later recall, analyze, and carefully interpret field information that could prove relevant to the study.

Concurrently, active participation was undertaken in conferences, workshops, and scientific seminars focused on thermalism, attended by subject-matter experts. During these events, systematic collection of information was carried out through presentations, roundtable discussions, and debates, alongside direct interaction with experts, researchers, and professionals in the sector. This process enriched the qualitative analysis by incorporating updated and well-substantiated perspectives on the main trends, challenges, and opportunities related to the present research.

Therefore, in this study, we use a mixed research methodology, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods or techniques. Nonetheless, we use statistical methods and quantitative information for the processing and presentation of the results. The information we have gathered makes it possible to address everything related to gender perspective in the three divisions we have identified: spa clients, workers, and managers/owners. Thus the triangulation makes it possible to obtain qualitative, quantitative and mixed information from the sources (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Summary of the interrelation between the methodology and the sources used.



Source: the authors.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Data and dialogues about the role of women in present-day spa tourism

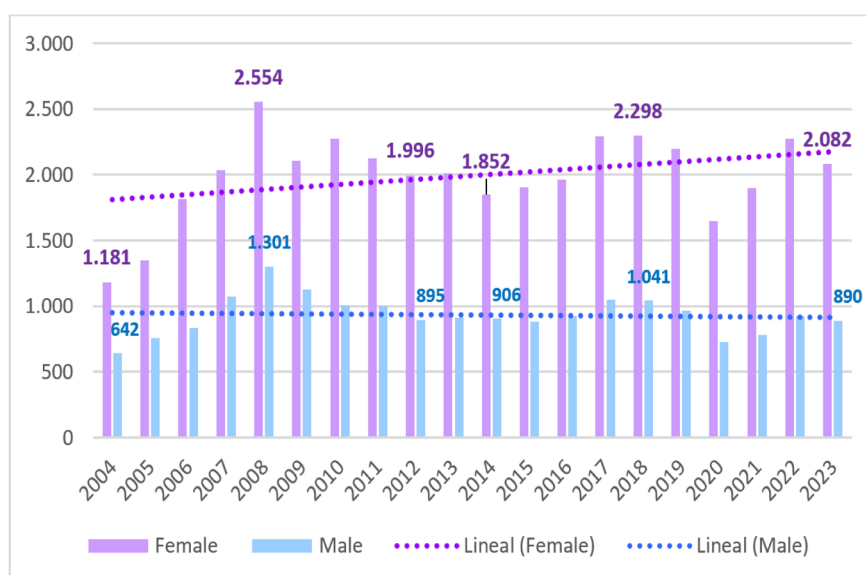
##### 3.1.1. Current diagnosis of female employees in spa tourism

In Spain, spas have a high level of female employment, in some cases exceeding 70% and even 80% (Díaz, 2014). According to our fieldwork and some scientific meetings, in spas such as Salugral (Extremadura), 87% of the staff are women, while in the case of Cuntis (Galicia), women make up 90% of the workforce. These general perceptions and data of specific case studies are corroborated when analyzing the general figures obtained from the IGME.

Figure 3 shows how, since official records have existed (2004), the figures for women employed in Spanish spas have always been higher than those for men. The temporary fluctuations have not changed the trend of continuous positive growth in the number of women employed in spa tourism for the period 2004-2023. In contrast, the general trend for male employment in this sector is shown to be very linear and stable for the period analyzed, without any clear chronological upward growth. This evolution means that, in the last year analyzed (2023), women held 2082 direct jobs in spa tourism, whereas men accounted for well under one thousand (890).

The differences between female and male employment figures in Spanish spas show marked contrasts, especially when considering the types of employment generated (Table 1). We can observe differences of more than 50% in years such as 2023, when a total of 2082 women were recorded as employed (70%) compared to 890 men (29%) in the category of direct employees. For maintenance staff, the differences are marked and more significant. Men employed in this subsector represent 93.2% (221 men), while women make up 6.8% (16 women). This indicates that while in general terms women comprise the majority of staff, they mostly do not work in maintenance tasks, but rather in other tasks of the spa establishment.

Figure 3. Evolution of direct employment in spas in Spain, by sex (2004-2023).



Source: the authors, using data from IGME.



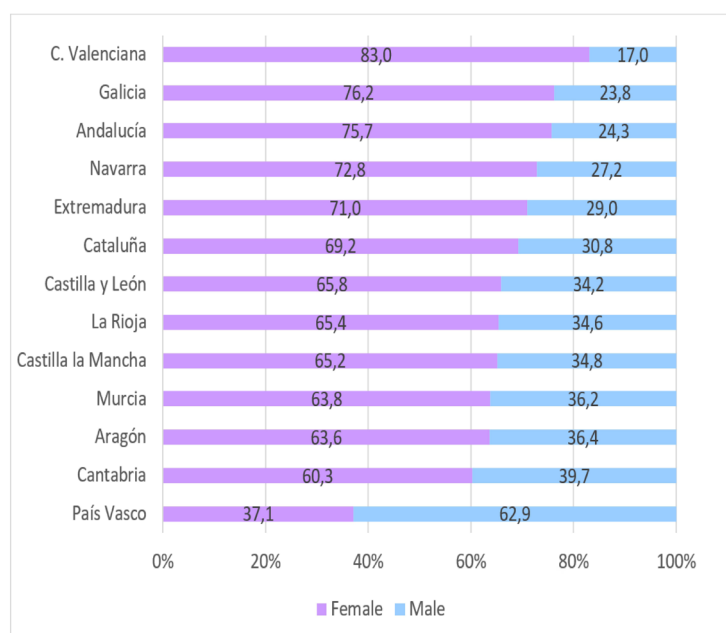
Table 1. Types of employments generated in spas in Spain by sex (2023). Source: the authors, using data from IGME.

	Female	% Female	Male	% Male	Total
Direct employed	2082	70.1	890	29.9	2972
Maintenance employed	16	6.8	221	93.2	237
Under subcontracts employed	18	66.7	9	33.3	27

Regarding staff employed under subcontracts (Table 1), an important difference is observed between men and women. Male employees comprise 33% (a total of 9), whereas female employees make up the remaining 66% (a total of 18 women). This indicates that women are more concentrated in outsourced sectors and in jobs with less stability, reflecting structural inequalities in access to quality employment positions. This implies heightened economic vulnerability, poorer working conditions and fewer promotion opportunities for women, which contributes to perpetuating the gender gap in the labor market.

From a regional perspective (Figure 4), the data according to sex in direct employment in Spanish spa tourism are similar across the Autonomous Communities. In general, female employees represent an average of 70% of staff, while men occupy the remaining 30%. The Valencian Community has the highest figure of female employment (83%), while Cantabria has the lowest (60.3%), albeit above the percentage of male employees. The positive pattern of female employment is repeated in all Communities, with the exception of the Basque Country. In this case, the percentage of women employed in spas (37.1%) is considerably lower than for men (62.9%). A priori, this striking difference does not have a clear determining factor, and should be treated with caution due to the possibility of information bias. In the data for the Basque Country, only two spas are included, with the total number of employees being relatively low (26 women and 44 men) compared to the figures for other Autonomous Communities, where they run into the hundreds: Galicia (438 women and 137 men), Valencian Community (259 women and 53 men), Catalonia (234 women and 104 men), Aragón (194 women and 111 men), Navarre (169 women and 63 men), Andalusia (162 women and 52, Cantabria (129 women and 85 men), men) and Castilla la Mancha (116 women and 62 men).

Figure 4. Percentage of direct employment in spas in Spain according to sex and Autonomous Community (2023).



Source: the authors, using data from IGME.

### 3.1.2. Current diagnosis of female users in spa tourism

In Great Britain, spas have traditionally been seen as places of sociability since their flourishing from the end of the 17th century in cities such as Bath. In Germany, another of the cradles of modern European spa-going, for women the spas of the 19th century were often genderless spaces that allowed agency and freedoms that were not permitted in the home or on the street (Lempa, 2017). In Spain, several studies show that the spa facilities were separated for men and women, in the south (Francés, López & López, 2018) and in the north (Gil de Arriba, 1994; Suárez-Muñoz, 2016). Nevertheless, their operation up until now on the European continent have generally been dominated by male perspectives and a constant focus on men (Herbert, 2009).

It is therefore clear that the role of women in spa tourism has constantly been made invisible. Historically, women have only rarely been mentioned as users, mostly to indicate that they used the waters in an attempt

to cure infertility (Velázquez & Ripoll, 1992), for fertility (Ramírez, 1997), or to highlight episodes of prohibition on women entering the baths, as occurred following the Council of Laodicea in the year 320 (Echevarría, 2019). However, these accounts indirectly reveal the presence of women as users of spas since antiquity, although always with a more pejorative discourse and more associated with reproductive labor than with leisure or personal enjoyment.

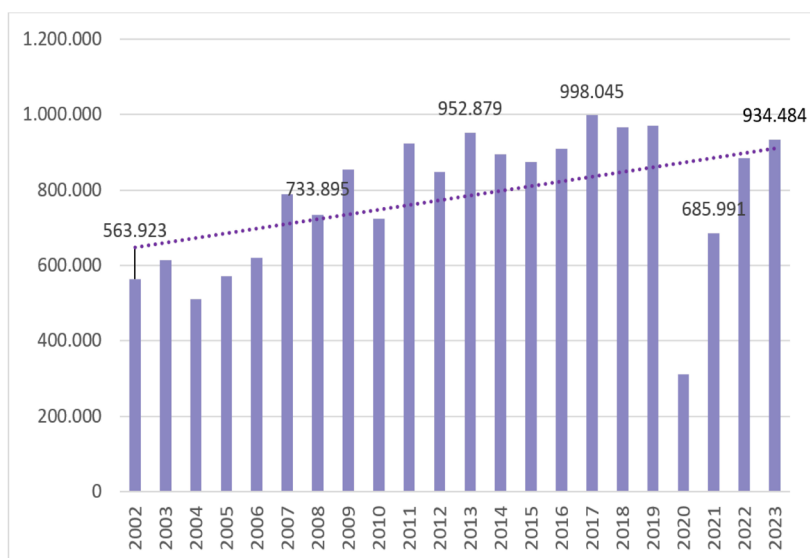
Today, in the United States, women continue to represent the majority of spa-goers, at 70% (Sherman, Clemenz & Philipp, 2007). The dynamic is similar in Europe and, specifically, in Spain. Though some authors have shown that there has been a change related to a growth in the sector in the proportion of male spa-goers, these have not surpassed the number of female users (McMurdy, 2002; Sherman, Clemenz & Philipp, 2007; Henn et al., 2008).

Monteson and Singer (2002) also state that women comprise the higher percentage of spa-goers in the US. They write: "Spas [in the US] need to expand the existing market by becoming more 'male friendly' in terms of facility features, decor, treatments and marketing strategies" (Monteson & Singer, 2002, p. 361). This same reality should be applied to the mainly female demand that has existed in Europe for decades.

Although there is unanimous agreement in scientific conferences and field visits over the greater presence of women than men in Spanish spas, official organizations do not collect sex-disaggregated data on spa-goers. Figure 5 shows the total number of spa-goers per year in spas across Spain. The figures are significant: in some recent years, such as 2017, the sector nearly reached one million users. However, these figures have not been disaggregated by sex by IGME, and it is difficult to establish percentages of male and female visitors out of this total computation.

To partly address this institutional information gap, we have obtained some guiding ideas from the literature and fieldwork. The study by Henn et al., (2008) on the national level showed a large majority of women users. On a more local scale, the study by Patricio (2015) for spas in Galicia revealed that 63% of the clientele in 2012 were women. Likewise, the studies on the profile of spa-goers in Andalusian spas showed that more than 60% of clients were women (Anaya-Aguilar, 2021a, 2021b), and in the specific case of Alhama de Granada (Granada), women made up almost two-thirds in comparison with men (Pinos, Shaw & Maroto, 2020). Through in-situ interviews with management, we discovered that in Canena (Jaén), 75% of spa-goers were women and 25% men. In this instance, there was considerable dependence on older clients from IMSERSO (Spanish Institute for the Elderly and Social Services). The greater life expectancy of women might explain these percentages. In the case of the spa at Archena (Murcia), an establishment that only depended on IMSERSO for 20% of their visitors, according to the management, out of a total of 40,992 clients in 2021, 61% were women and 38% men. The percentages are similar in Castilla Termal Olmedo (Valladolid), where of a total of 19,900 users in 2021, more than 60% were women. Lastly, at Baños de Montemayor (Cáceres), there were 10,595 users in 2021, of whom a majority were women.

Figure 5. Evolution of number of spa-goers (total) in spas in Spain (2002-2023).



Source: the authors, using data from IGME.

In summary, the majority of clients of spa tourism in Spain are women. This may be due to their greater interest in the treatments offered, a greater awareness of the therapeutic benefits of the waters, and/or biological reasons, if one analyzes the users from more elderly age groups. This reality should lead to a rethink of the services offered in order to adapt it to the needs of the largest segment of clientele.

### 3.1.3. Current diagnosis of female managers in spa tourism

Tourism is, by definition, an activity practiced outside the home and its immediate area. However, the origins of spa-going in Spain arise from the bathhouses, with the first legislation regulating their functioning being

passed in 1817. These bathhouses were often private homes open to guests, particularly in the summer season. In these “commercial homes” there was a blurring of the boundaries between home and place of work. This is an interesting question for further analysis of the work-home relationship through an integrated perspective on gender and tourism. Although both members of the couple who ran these establishments could assume the responsibility of attending to the spa-goer, it was generally women who took care of this work, as attested by the studies of Larrinaga (2014) in Spain and Talinbayi, Xu and Li (2018) internationally.

In Spain, women were traditionally responsible for receiving guests and managing their visits in bathhouses. The residents of small towns or villages with mineral-medicinal baths would leave their houses to visitors who came to take the waters during the three summer months, and this process was managed by the women of the family. Following the Spanish Civil War, this marked the beginning of the service of lodging and bath. This came about when small towns or villages with spas did not have any hotels and/or when there was an excess of visitors interested in taking the waters, generally in the summer, as confirmed by Julia Gutiérrez, the mayor of Alange (Extremadura), Marisol Morandeira, mayor of Guitiriz (Galicia) and Fabiola Romero, mayor of Cortes y Graena (Granada). As well as being an economic benefit to the locality (since it temporarily increased the population due to the unusual number of visitors), this form of lodging service gave considerable relief to the family economy and economic independence to women, who were in charge of managing the lodging while the men continued their labor activity outside the home.

In the Spanish literature, it has been noted how, with regard to gender and the management of spas, there have been notable differences over the centuries. According to Suárez-Muñiz (2016), neither of the three bathhouses in Gijón or the five spas in San Lorenzo, which began operating after 1850, belonged to women (neither as owners nor license holders). There were no license requests for openings by women, which can be linked to the historical and political period and to the fact that women did not have enough economic capacity or independence from their spouses to undertake a business that required a large investment. However, it seems that the economic issue did not overcome women's business ventures in this period, and more than half of the licenses for “*casetas de baño*” (more modest bathhouses) were granted to women. This business grew and in the second half of the 19th century, the first records of female owners (and managers) of *casetas de baño* appeared (Suárez-Muñiz, 2016). This case study of Gijón is likely a reflection of the situation for spas in the rest of Spain in that period.

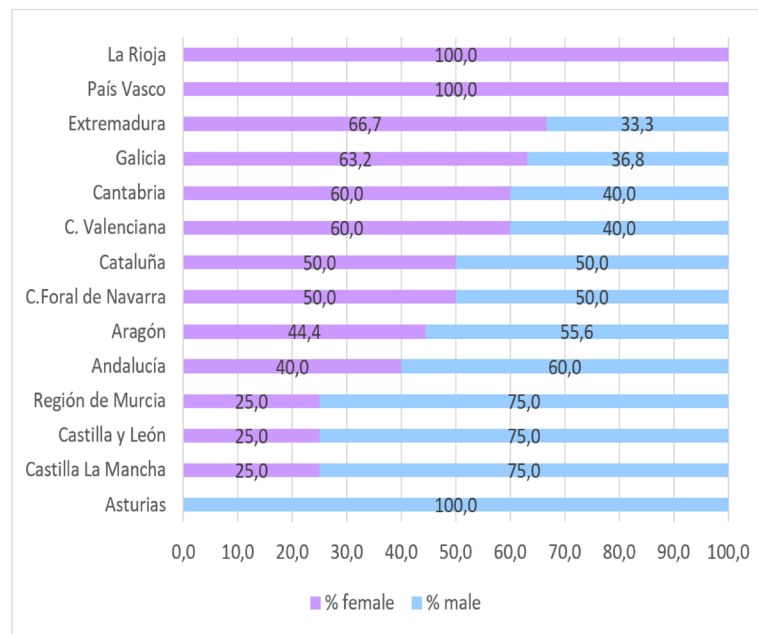
Today the situation does not seem to have changed a great deal. According to the debates held at the Villas Termales de Graena Convention (2022), the experts in spa tourism estimate that in Spain only 35% of all spas (approximately 113 active establishments) are managed by women. In other words, women occupy lower-level positions, or those that receive less social recognition, whereas men occupy the higher positions of spa management.

With the aim of obtaining accurate data on this matter, we requested information regarding the sex of the “Owner/Title Holder” and “Name of Operator” listed in their Mining Statistics. IGME responded that this was not possible, not due to the data protection laws, but because “the operator and title holder are entities, not natural persons. They are almost always the same company. The few exceptions tend to be town councils that possess a spa (the title holders) but that grant the exploitation rights to a business (the operator)”. Nevertheless, it is essential to continue advancing this study and promoting social equality enshrined in state legislation by finding out who is in charge of these entities, with information disaggregated by sex.

Aside from business management, Spanish spas have the medical aspect of the trade, with its own leadership. In this sense, once again, the history of Spanish spas is marked by the names of male doctors in the country's establishments (Mondariz, Lanjarón, Alhama de Granada, etc.). Today, in contrast, this question is one of the areas where there is greater parity, as the analysis of the 79 contact details of the leading medical staff collected in the latest vademecum, *Vademécum III de aguas mineromedicinales españolas de 2020*, shows. The percentage of medical directors in Spanish spas is similar for both sexes, albeit with a slight difference in favor of women (41 women medical directors compared to 38 men).

Figure 6 shows the representation of directors of medicine by Autonomous Community. Although there are regions such as La Rioja or the Basque Country where 100% of the medical staff is female, there are also high percentages of men in some regions (Asturias with 100% men). However, in general terms, women are fairly equally represented in this area of the spa industry compared to other areas. The current equality of access to university-level education and the ability of women to finish their studies would explain this recent levelling up, compared to the reality of earlier decades.



**Figure 6. Percentage of men and women in medical management in the spas of Spain, by Autonomous Community, in 2022.**

Source: the authors, using data from Maraver, Vázquez & Armijo (2022).

This data should be taken with caution. The *Vademecum* lists 78 Spanish spas, although the actual number of active establishments is higher, and therefore the former does not represent the national total. Furthermore, the relative data are far removed from the situation in absolute data, because Communities such as Galicia, with 19 doctors, or Andalusia, with 10, have been compared with others with lower numbers, such as the Basque Country or Asturias, which have only one medical professional in the category of medical director.

The results provided in this section are in line with press headlines for specific cases, such as that of Castilla Termal: “In celebration of International Women’s Day, six women, managers at Castilla Termal Hoteles, recall how the company, a pioneer in implementing policies that fulfill the Sustainable Development Goals set by the UN, has been promoting equality for years. So much so that, currently, 60% of their management positions are held by women, who are responsible for leading and managing resources to provide experiences of well-being and relaxation in their four spa hotels” (Indisa, 2022). A tendency toward a greater participation of women in leadership roles is therefore to be expected in the spa tourism industry in Spain, moving away from the division of gender roles that reflects inherited cultural stereotypes and expectations.

### 3.2. Structural strategies to promote the role of women in spa tourism

In 2013, the Association of Spas of Andalusia (Asociación de Termalismo de Andalucía) attempted to implement a Plan for Equality with the support of the Ministry of Health. The aim was to put forward routine measures for improvement (non-sexist language and work-life balance for staff), and to design actions for raising awareness for the sector to encourage the creation of products adapted to women (programs for pre- and post-natal women, menopause, and ailments more likely to be suffered by women, such as fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, or recovery from breast cancer, as well as breathing programs for caregivers). They also published a set of rules to eradicate sexist advertising. However, this proposal was short-lived, as the Association disbanded not long afterwards due to a lack of funding (Díaz, 2014).

The lack of continuity of the Plan beyond the local level does not mean that it could not be relaunched, encompassing both users and employees, managers and owners. As of 2022, a national requirement came into force for companies with more than 50 workers to implement a plan for equality, which means that certain changes with gender perspective could take place in Spanish spas in the near future. In this regard, it is important to take into account the need for policies of equality and work-life balance that would benefit the large percentage of women employed in spas in Spain.

Making the role of women in spa tourism in Spain visible is both necessary and topical at this time. In this task, we should take into account the aforementioned differences, needs and experiences of men and women in an equitable manner. Hence, we propose the following as courses of strategic action:

1. Promote equal employment opportunity: guarantee that men and women employees and future recruits have the same employment opportunities and professional development at all levels of the spa tourism sector. This includes the eradication of gender stereotypes in hiring and promotion, and support for pay equality through legislation and within establishments. Likewise, there is a need for effective policies of equality and work-life balance.

2. Offer inclusive services: design services and treatments for clients that are inclusive and sensitive to the needs and preferences of men and women. This can include offering specific treatment options for each gender, and comfortable and safe spaces for all visitors. This requires specialized studies based on socio-demographic profile to address the specific needs of each group.
3. Eliminate gender stereotypes in advertising and marketing: avoid promoting gender stereotypes in advertising and the portrayal of spas. Instead, represent men and women in an equitable, diverse and non-sexualized way in the marketing and visual communication of the establishment.
4. Train and sensitize staff: develop training and awareness about gender and equality for all spa staff. This will help to create an inclusive culture and promote an understanding of the needs and expectations of men and women who visit Spanish spas. At the same time, the training should be a tool to enable any person to have the chance of accessing any employment position without gender stereotypes.
5. Compile data disaggregated by gender: obtain data disaggregated by gender from official organizations in relation to the number of clients, staff employed, and managers of spa establishments in Spain. This will enable a more precise understanding of the differences and make it possible to adapt the services and marketing strategies more effectively for spa-goers.
6. Promote research and knowledge transfer: support research on the subject from public spheres of knowledge and enable their dissemination into society in order to make visible the examples of good and bad practices, and raise awareness of and denounce inequality.

The key for the integration of gender perspective is to recognize the inequalities with official and accurate data that are representative and verified for the national total, and promote an equitable and satisfactory tourist experience for all members of the tourist system, regardless of their gender. In addition, there is a need to address this gender perspective through the different spheres that make up the spa establishment, and not only with a bottom-up or top-down approach without results being complementary and simultaneous.

The incorporation of a gender perspective to the spa sector can also benefit the development of local areas with spas in Spain (markedly rural in character), because, on the one hand, it involves a precise regional diagnosis for its planning, and, on the other hand, the possibility of raising awareness of the importance and connection of the sector to an under-represented community in the rural world: women.

Spas, therefore, with their opportunities and scope for women, can perform an important role in rural development in various ways:

1. Employment creation: spas tend to require female staff to operate and provide services for visitors, which can generate employment in rural areas where job opportunities tend to be limited. This can help reduce depopulation and give work opportunities to women, ensuring the stabilization of the regional population.
2. Opportunities for skilled jobs: many young and highly qualified workers, among them university graduates, have to leave rural areas due to the lack of skilled jobs matching their education and training. The presence of a spa, with particular positions that require qualifications and training, ensures that young and educated workers are attracted and/or persuaded to stay, at the same time as representing an opportunity for rural women to occupy leadership and management roles in the spa.
3. economic impact at a local and even supralocal scale. Visitors spend money on lodging, food, activities, and local products, which benefits local businesses, fosters business ventures (both male and female), and revitalizes the local economy.
4. environmental and cultural value. The investment and upkeep of these places contributes to the preservation of rural heritage, which can have a positive impact on cultural tourism and local development.
5. Promotion of rural tourism: spas are often located in rural areas that may be less well known or visited. By promoting spa tourism, one can attract more tourists to these areas, which is an opportunity for sustainable development and the promotion of slow tourism, as opposed to mass tourism.

Spa tourism in Spain, through gender perspective, can thus have a twofold function: regional and social. On the one hand, it can be an incentive for rural development in a broad sense (demographic, economic, social, et cetera). On the other hand, it could base itself on the high involvement and close relationship with women to assert their regional and social importance, and present itself as a strategic sector. Hence spa tourism is a niche sector for women, which represents an opportunity both to make their work visible and to promote their empowerment in rural areas. At the same time, this can positively contribute to rural development, as it represents a chance to reverse depopulation, revitalize the economy, take care of local heritage and the environment, and contribute to equality and the furthering of social opportunities. Along the same lines, making this strategic sector visible should bring about institutional recognition, which would favor investment and planning based on sustainability criteria in rural areas with spas.

## 4. Discussion

We deem this study to be both relevant and original, because it analyzes the role of women in spa tourism in Spain and the importance of this issue for the rural development of regions with spas, thus providing a critical and up-to-date perspective on the traditional invisibility of women in this sector. Throughout this paper we have shown that, in general, spa tourism has an important relationship with the female community. Yet, paradoxically, it is an issue that has barely been recognized or studied from the social and business, institutional and academic-scientific points of view. The study of this issue has therefore been overdue, since it has had a marginal position in the scientific literature, and our aim has been to contribute to our knowledge with this research. Our interest in developing the study was inspired by the statements written by Xu (2018), who shows that gender inequality exists spatially in the tourist workplace and in places of tourism consumption. We were also motivated by the conviction that tourism studies can successfully contribute to the geography of gender (Xu, 2018).

Regarding the previous scientific literature, most of the results we found do not specifically refer to spa tourism. In general, they concern the medical and health effects of thermal baths for women, in which the latter are passive subjects, without any reflection on their active role in the tourism system. This problem has been a constraint to a solid and up-to-date theoretical framework. We have therefore taken into account suggestions from studies by authors such as Rodríguez-Sánchez (2017), who mentions the need to analyze business women, and Carribon (2009), who emphasizes the timely need to examine female employees, in order to construct a scientific discourse of the current reality in its entirety practically from scratch. However, in its discourse and scale, this study builds upon and adds to the work of authors such as Herbert (2009), Carribon (2009) and Naimark-Golberg (2010) in the international context. We adopt a geographical and tourism approach, somewhat removed from the traditional historicist viewpoint that was more focused on masculine narratives, and seek to situate women as the protagonists of their analysis, with an active role in the spa tourism of Spain. The ultimate goal is to avoid women being a shadow relegated to a few “sepia postcards of a refreshment bar or the gallery of a spa establishment. Or, like the employee of the baths on the poster of Salies, they are a simple stooge” (Carribon, 2009).

We have thus striven to provide detailed answers to the questions raised at the beginning of this paper. Spa tourism in Spain employs more women than men, yet these jobs are mainly related to providing treatments and care services to clients, rather than maintenance. This reveals, even today, notable evidence of job selection with clear gender stereotyping. In this regard, the finding of McDowell (1997), almost thirty years on, seems to be confirmed today, and the positions of employment in Spanish spas are not neutral with regard to gender. Thus we analyze the female workers as the main subject of the meta-analysis, going beyond previous studies in which they analyze the female workers' perceptions of clients with a commercial purpose (Anderssen, 2017) or the characterization of working conditions (Frost, Van Dijk & Ooi, 2023), applying an integrated geographical perspective. Moreover, the results conclude that, as Little (2013) showed for southwest England and Roos (2009) for Norway, in the case of Spanish spas, women are in the majority, both as therapists and as clients.

In terms of the female users, the results indicate that the spas in Spain, despite having a considerable volume of clients, attract a greater number of women than men. In line with Montesón and Singer (2002), this is a historical trend that has not changed, and Spain is a long way from an immediate shift to spas where the main proportion of clients are men, as McMurdy (2002) has shown for the US. However, although there are similarities in demand from women and men, there are also differences that should be taken into consideration (Sherman, Clemenz & Philipp, 2007). In this sense, our study aims to be useful content for the business staff of spas and the appropriate institutions when it comes to offering new services and adapting existing ones to gender-specific needs, because this point is important both for a market and a society in continuous evolution.

In the analysis of the women involved in the management of spa tourism in Spain, gender inequality is established as a problem in this sector. Women appear to be underrepresented in this facet of the spa industry, suggesting that they face structural barriers that impede their equal participation in positions of leadership, decision-making and tourism planning of spas in general. The lack of women's representation in these spaces, despite their experience and historical presence in them (Larrinaga, 2014), perpetuates the sector's gender inequality, and relegates their participation merely to positions of caregiving and limits the development potential of rural communities, when one takes into account the strategic role that women have in them. In this context, there is a clear need for policies and specific actions, on the structural, business and social level, to address this duality.

The methodology we have used, with triangulation of methods, can be applied to other European countries with spa tourism that has similar characteristics in terms of offer, demand, management and geographical location. This could resolve some of the deficiencies in official information of such a specific type of tourism and make it possible to carry out comparative analyses between territories. Furthermore, this study has the added value of fieldwork and selected direct sources, which has made it possible to gather new data on the situation of spas in Spain.

In the scientific sphere, this analysis is original due to its novel perspective, integrating the variables of gender, tourism and rural development. This involves the combination of differentiated but complementary research lines in geography. The study fulfils a double function because, on the one hand, the women involved in spa tourism are made visible through a geographical perspective (geography of gender), combining

geography and tourism. On the other hand, we emphasise what these women mean for the development of rural spaces with spas (rural geography and tourism geography).

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations that could be overcome in future studies on spa tourism, comprising an expansion of this investigation. First, there is a need to improve the quality and quantity of data made available by official Institutes. It would be useful if IGME could give a precise definition of the different subtypes of employment, as well as the inclusion of categories of work that have not been considered: management, medical management, healthcare personnel, customer service, etc. Likewise, it would be expedient to disaggregate the data of clients by sex, as they do for employment, and also the specification of sex regarding the ownership and/or management of spas. Ultimately, there is a need to fill the gap in the supranational data (at the level of the European Union). Similarly, other organizations responsible for official statistics, such as the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) (Spanish National Statistics Institute) or the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), could provide disaggregated information on spa tourism. With these data it would be possible to advance in studies on the possible social impact derived from spa tourism in general and from a comparative perspective in a more precise way, conceptually and regionally speaking. Analyses could also be developed for the following purposes: to identify the barriers and challenges that women face in the spa tourism industry; to accurately assess the economic impact of women's participation in spa tourism and their impact on local economic development; to study the experiences and perceptions of the women involved in the spa tourism system; to investigate the empowerment of rural women through spa tourism; and to identify examples of good gender practice and responsible tourism in spas in Spain.

## 5. Conclusions

In spa tourism, the role of women has often remained invisible or underrepresented since antiquity. However, women undertake important roles in spas, both as users and as employed professionals or in management posts, as this is a highly feminized sector.

Women are well-being clients and seek treatments and services to improve their health and quality of life, and they represent the majority of clients compared to men. In this regard, spas should broaden their range of services and above all adapt to the needs and preferences of women.

The participation of women in spa tourism is not limited only to their experience as users only. They also occupy positions as therapists, masseuses, and customer service staff in the spas. The most recent data on the proportion of women employed in spas in Spain shows that it is common to find a significant presence of women in these roles, although less in maintenance jobs and management and leadership positions. Therefore, women often occupy those positions associated with caregiving, and which are also less recognized socially.

In Spain there are female owners and managers of spas, although they are less represented than men. Nonetheless, although women are present in the highest roles in Spanish spas, it is an evolving process and there is room to continue advancing toward greater gender diversity. We can thus identify a lack of female representation in this area and a comparative disadvantage regarding the progress and leadership of women.

Spanish spas are generally located in rural areas, which have a strong economic dependence on spa tourism. Hence they could benefit from a more inclusive and equitable approach that recognizes and values the presence and role of women in this sector and their contribution to rural development. The invisibility of women in spa tourism has a negative impact on rural development, as it limits the economic opportunities and empowerment of women, which contributes to gender inequality. Furthermore, the lack of recognition of the role of women inhibits institutional support and the development of inclusive and equitable policies and tourism strategies. In this context, strategic measures are being proposed to promote equal opportunities in spas and we highlight the importance of providing data from official institutions that will support future studies in this field. Ultimately, the goal is to promote more inclusive and sustainable rural development in spas locations in Spain.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

Aida Pinos-Navarrete: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, and Writing. Juan Carlos Maroto-Martos: Methodology, Validation, and Formal Analysis, including data analysis. Edianly Carballo-Cruz: Software, Investigation and Visualization. María Egea-Hernández: Writing – Review and Editing, and Draft Preparation.

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