

# Fruit warehouses, COVID-19 pandemic and women workers in la Ribera del Xúquer (Valencia, Spain)

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**Abstract:** This article discusses work in the fruit warehouses of Ribera del Xúquer, an area representative of other agro-export areas of the Valencian Community, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for the workers, the great majority of whom were women. Our results, based on fieldwork and qualitative methodology, show that although the norms and work space were common, the women workers most affected in terms of risk, precariousness and life insecurity, are temporary agency workers, with a clear overrepresentation of immigrant women. Our research shows the relationship between risk and neoliberal work organization and how inequalities in the division of labour and social inequalities, in terms of class, gender and ethnicity, have reinforced each other.

**Keywords:** fruit warehouses; women workers; COVID-19 pandemic; ethno-labour stratification; risk management.

## ENG Almacenes frutícolas, pandemia COVID-19 y trabajadoras en la Ribera del Xúquer (Valencia, España)

**Resumen:** Este artículo aborda el trabajo en los almacenes frutícolas de la Ribera del Xúquer, una comarca representativa de otras zonas agroexportadoras de la Comunidad Valenciana, durante el primer año de la pandemia COVID-19, y sus consecuencias para las trabajadoras. Nuestros resultados, basados en trabajo de campo y metodología cualitativa, muestran que, si bien las normas y el espacio de trabajo eran comunes, las trabajadoras más afectadas en términos de riesgo, precariedad e inseguridad vital son las trabajadoras temporales de ETT, con clara sobrerepresentación de mujeres inmigrantes. Nuestra investigación muestra la relación entre riesgo y organización neoliberal del trabajo y como las desigualdades en la organización del trabajo y las desigualdades sociales, en términos de clase, género y origen étnico, se han retroalimentado.

**Palabras clave:** almacenes frutícolas; trabajadoras; pandemia COVID-19; etnoestratificación laboral; gestión del riesgo.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Analytic framework. Global agri-food warehouses, female workers and pandemic. 3. Research methods and design. 4. Ribera del Xúquer female warehouse workers under quality governance. 5. Female warehouse workers as essential workers. 6. Conclusions. 7. Bibliography.

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## 1. Introduction

Global chains structure agri-food production under the control of large distribution groups that must coordinate highly diverse local contexts with a wide variety of actors (Gereffi *et al.*, 2005). In recent decades, quality standards have become the form of corporate governance of the chains. Standardization establishes indirect control (Gibbon *et al.*, 2008) by creating a set of rules that all actors must follow, thereby shaping and regulating the work, both in terms of production and harvesting in the fields and of processing in warehouses. In this globalization of the agri-food system, warehouses, a historically feminized space, acquire greater relevance as a node for managing quality and integrating the activity of the different actors in the chain (Busch and Bain, 2004; Gadea *et al.*, 2021). Although we have extensive literature on quality standards, the consequences of their application for workers remain a relatively little addressed topic (Selwyn, 2012; Castro *et al.*, 2017). This article addresses work in globalized warehouses in Ribera del Xúquer, Spain, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ribera del Xúquer has been a citrus export area since the mid-19th century, and is representative of other agro-exporting areas of the Valencian Community, and now

fully integrated into global agri-food chains. In Ribera del Xúquer, the vast majority of the workers in the warehouses are native women, although in recent years the presence of immigrant women has increased, as in other Spanish agro-exporting areas.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the agri-food sector was declared strategic by the Spanish government and its workers were considered essential workers. Unlike other areas of the agri-food chains, basically in the global South (Clapp and Moseley, 2020), activity was maintained in Ribera del Xúquer, as in other Spanish agro-exporting areas (Pedreño, 2020; Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2020). In the warehouses, measures were adopted to maintain the activity and minimize the sanitary risk. In this context, the workers adopted various strategies to cope with the situation, strategies that go beyond the workplace. On the one hand, their work is essential to guarantee the supply of fruit in the proper quality conditions. On the other hand, the new situation and the gender ideology has imposed on them, as it has on the vast majority of women (Eurofond 2020; Petts *et al.*, 2021), greater requirements of attention, care and responsibility for their home and families.

This article discusses work in the fruit warehouses of Ribera del Xúquer, a feminized space organized according to quality standards, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article has three objectives. First, to learn about the measures adopted in the organization of work as a consequence of the pandemic and its effects on female workers. Second, to understand the experiences of women workers and the strategies they have developed to adapt to the new situation, both at work and at home. Third, to understand whether the pandemic situation generates differences among women workers and to identify the main factors, both occupational and social, that explain these differences.

Below, after presenting the analytic framework of the article and describing the methodology used, we offer an analysis of the situation of the fruit warehouses in Ribera del Xúquer, before the COVID-19. Then, the findings are presented analyzing the measures taken in the organization of work, their consequences for women workers and the strategies they have developed. The final section reviews these findings together and draws conclusions.

## 2. Analytic framework. Global agri-food warehouses, female workers and pandemic

Global agri-food production is structured in chains in which large distribution groups hold the dominant position and control the process indirectly (Gereffi, 1994). Coordinating dispersed production zones, with diverse local contexts and actors, is a very complex and central task (Gereffi *et al.*, 2005). In this context, quality has become a formula for corporate governance, a competitive advantage over other producers and/or marketers and a mechanism that increases the power of large-scale distribution. Quality standards constitute a model of corporate governance (Ponte *et al.* 2011), a form of indirect control that acts through standardization (Gibbon *et al.*, 2008). At the same time, these general trends are differentiated according to their embeddedness in each local area (Coe and Yeung, 2015), the relationships that are established with local stakeholders, including local and national institutions (Selwyn, 2012) and the historicity of each place.

This globalization of the agri-food system makes warehouses strategically important. Nowadays, in addition to their traditional work of handling and packaging, warehouses also undertake the tasks derived from quality management, in a double sense. Firstly, their work process must conform to quality standards (Bonanno and Cavalcanti, 2012; Castro *et al.*, 2017). Secondly, given its intermediate position between the different agents in the chain, the warehouse has acquired a leading role in the application of quality standards and other requirements of large distributors (Busch and Bain, 2004), and in the growing integration of the activity of the different actors (Gadea *et al.*, 2021).

Although warehouse work has been mechanized and technified, it continues to require a significant intensive mobilization of seasonal labour. Historically, fruit and vegetable warehouses have been a feminine and devalued work space, adjusted to the conditions of seasonality, hourly availability and wage moderation justified by their social consideration as family help and/or supplementary income (Lara, 1998; Castro *et al.*, 2020). With agri-food chains, this type of work organization, based on feminization, precariousness and sexual segmentation of work, is maintained by updating its features, both in Latin America (Lee, 2010; Figueroa, 2015), and in Spain, with a growing presence of immigrant women (Castro *et al.*, 2020; Gadea *et al.*, 2021). This organization of work constitutes one of the keys to the functioning of the system and requires labour costs to be contained in order to maintain profitability, despite the new quality requirements demanded. In addition to reducing costs, feminist political economy theory analyzes this feminization of labour as another facet of the new political economy of gender (Allen and Sachs, 2012; Figueroa, 2015), which naturalizes the

social hierarchies of the local context, in terms of class, gender and ethnicity (Anthias, 2012), to the benefit of companies and employers. Also from an intersectional perspective, feminist organizational studies have emphasized the interrelationship between gender inequalities in companies and gender, class and ethnic inequalities in the social context in which a company is embedded (Acker, 2011; Holvino, 2010). The authors argue that the unequal organizational practices of companies are only possible because of the inequalities present in the social context. At the same time, these organizational practices tend to reproduce these inequalities and devalue the work performed by people in the most precarious situations. The devaluation of women's work does not only mean that it is underpaid, it is a social process that denies these workers their social value (Castro *et al.*, 2020).

This situation in the warehouses became more significant and complex with the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation generated by the pandemic has not meant a break with neoliberalism, but rather a global event that reveals its contradictions (Grasso *et al.*, 2021; Stevano *et al.*, 2021; Mezzadri, 2022). Most Western states, including Spain, responded to the pandemic by applying Keynesian measures to sustain the business sector, employment and a minimum income to a confined population, with other typically neoliberal measures to ensure the profits of large companies (Zanoni and Mir, 2022), as shown by the refusal to liberalize vaccines (Paiva and Miguel, 2020). This set of measures has led to a reorganization of productive and reproductive work, reinforcing pre-existing inequalities (Dobusch and Kreissl, 2020; Grasso *et al.*, 2021) or generating new inequalities at various levels.

From the perspective of Social Reproduction Theory, the pandemic constitutes a crisis of the neoliberal social reproduction regime (Mezzadri, 2022), which is based on individual responsibility and cuts in social spending, such as education and health (Fraser, 2017). Likewise, COVID-19 has deconstructed the false dichotomy that separates productive and reproductive work. More generally, the pandemic has revealed the radical interdependence that exists among people in all spheres of social life (Dobusch and Kreissl, 2020; Grasso *et al.*, 2021), which until now had been veiled by neoliberal individualism. However, this interdependence does not imply social harmony (Butler, 2015) and is based on the inequalities of the social system.

While at first it seemed that COVID-19 affected everyone, early data and research soon showed the different impact according to age, social class, gender and ethnocultural background. In Germany, Austria and Spain, members of the working classes report higher levels of economic and health risk, both for general economic impacts and for their type of work, mobility and living conditions (Holst *et al.*, 2021; Dobusch and Kreissl, 2020; Bernardi and Gil-Hernandez, 2021). Other substantial differences are established by gender. Research in Germany, Italy, and the USA shows that women suffered more from the economic shock (Kulic *et al.*, 2021; Collins *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, among European and American women there was a clear increase in domestic and care work (Eurofound, 2020; Moreno-Colom *et al.*, 2023; Petts *et al.*, 2021). Without being exhaustive, the different ethnocultural background also establishes clear differences. In pandemic, the living conditions and quality of life of immigrants in Great Britain, Germany and Spain worsened significantly more than those of natives (Shen and Bartram, 2021; Soiné *et al.*, 2021; FOESSA, 2022).

### 3. Research methods and design

This text is based on the results of two periods of fieldwork. The first, between October 2018 and February 2020, was focused on examining how work is organized under quality governance and its implications for women workers. The pandemic interrupted our work and made us broaden our objectives, to learn about the impacts of COVID-19 on the working and living conditions of some women workers who were declared essential. With these objectives in mind, the second period of fieldwork took place between February and May 2021.

In both periods, semi-structured individual and group interviews were the main technique used, although observation was also carried out. In the first period of fieldwork, 29 key informants were interviewed (workers, crew chiefs and warehouse managers, quality technicians, union members and labour inspectors). Thanks to the contacts established in the area, another 26 people with similar key informant profiles were interviewed during the pandemic (table 1). To determine the profiles, typological sampling and theoretical sampling were combined to achieve a structural representativeness (Mejía, 2000; Flick, 2014) of the productive organization. Other criteria were gender and nationality, given that the work organization is sexually and ethnically segmented.

Table 1. Profile of the interviews

		October 2018 to February 2020	February to May 2021
Field workers	Male	12	9
	Female	1	1
Warehouse workers	Male	0	0
	Female	7	8
Warehouse managers	Male	0	0
	Female	1	2
Quality technicians	Male	3	1
	Female	1	3

		October 2018 to February 2020	February to May 2021
Union workers	Male	1	0
	Female	1	1
Labour inspectors	Male	1	1
	Female	1	0
Total		29	26

Source: the authors.

Our first contacts were through the workers' unions, which we then were complemented using the snowball method (Biernacki y Waldorf, 1981; Mejía, 2000) to recruit representative informants of each profile. The number of interviews was established by saturation (Alonso, 1998; Flick, 2014), when interviewees' speeches began to repeat. In total, 55 people were interviewed<sup>1</sup>. The interviews were analyzed from a socio-hermeneutic perspective (Alonso, 1998, Fairclough, 2010), in which the discourses of the actors are interpreted taking into consideration their social context, their interests, the ideas and representations that are mobilized and the specific historicity of each place. We also worked with the 2020 Agricultural Census and data from LABORA (Valencian Office of Occupancy and Training).

#### 4. Ribera del Xúquer female warehouse workers under quality governance

Ribera del Xúquer is a natural and historical area, shaped by the river Xúquer, with 1255.31 km<sup>2</sup>, in the province of Valencia. Since the mid-19th century, Ribera del Xúquer specialized in the cultivation of citrus fruits for export European market. One and a half centuries later, fruit growing continues to have economic and social importance. Ribera del Xúquer is representative of other Valencian citrus-growing areas. These are traditionally agro-exporting coastal areas, with an economic structure centered on services, a significant industry and smallholder fruit farming, an important number of cooperatives, and fully integrated into global agri-food chains (Bono, 2010; Noguera, 2010). These Valencian areas show similar trends to other Spanish agro-exporting areas (Etxezarreta *et al.*, 2015). In addition to their subordinate inclusion in agri-food chains, they share a common structural recourse to immigrant labour and the growing flexibility and precariousness of labour. In the Valencian fruit-growing areas, these trends manifest in a highly differentiated way, depending on the work space. In the countryside, immigrant workers constitute the fundamental labour force with an increasing use of temporary employment agencies and the different forms of flexibility made possible by the 2012 labour reform (Torres y Pérez, 2021)<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, the vast majority of warehouse workers are native women.

Warehouses emerged at the end of the 19th century as a feminized space. These female warehouse workers were working class women, with no other work alternatives. Historically, their work has been considered a help or complement to the family income which, given the gender representation, has undervalued their productive function and veiled the training and skills required (Domingo and Viruela, 1997; Candela and Piñón, 2005).

At present, the traditional sexual division of labour remains: around 80 per cent of warehouse workers are women. Despite social changes that have resulted in more women working as managers and quality technicians, the traditional legitimization of the sexual division of labour, based on the delicacy attributed to women and strength to men, continues.

The Board has always been men, the manager has always been a man... although later the salesmen have been men and women (in the warehouse) the delicate part, of preparing orders, has always been women... the man carries a lot of weight (EI15).

The warehouse workers are women with little training and few labour alternatives. As in other Valencian citrus-growing areas (Candela and Piñón, 2005), there are three profiles of workers: older women with long working careers, although discontinuous due to childcare; middle-aged women, married with children, who continue to work; and a third group of young, single women. The vast majority are native women, but in the last decade the presence of immigrant workers has increased. In some cases, they are immigrant women who live with their families in one of the municipalities of the area, often for years. In other cases, they are workers recruited by temporary agencies and who usually live in the Metropolitan Area of Valencia, from where they commute daily to work.

The quality standards implemented in the warehouse have standardized work processes, exacerbating two pre-existing trends. On the one hand, greater professionalization, mechanization and standardization of work processes; on the other hand, an increase in the pace of work and stress for the workers. According to our interviewees, the application of quality standards<sup>3</sup> has had an impact on product quality, but has not improved their working conditions.

<sup>1</sup> Of the 55 people interviewed, 32 are Spanish and 23 immigrants (of Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish, Moroccan, Ecuadorian, Argentinean, Algerian and Senegalese origin). The interviews were conducted in Spanish and Valencian and are presented as Eln, the individual interviews, and EGn, the group interviews.

<sup>2</sup> This reform made by the Popular Party authorized, among other measures, stringing temporary contracts together and company agreements with conditions inferior to the general agreement of the sector. These aspects have been repealed, in February 2022, by the left-wing government.

<sup>3</sup> By the beginning of the 21st century, the most relevant standards were already present in Ribera del Xúquer, such as GlobalGAP, British Retail Consortium (BCR), Food International Featured Standard (IFS).

Quality standards and special orders, with specific customer specifications, require the workers to pay greater attention and care in the selection and packaging of the fruit without being given more time. Similar to the table grape workers in Murcia (Castro *et al.*, 2017), our interviewees point out that the pace of work, their fear of making mistakes and the constant pressure generates stress for them and, sometimes, a bad working environment. One manager illustrates this with the case of an order that requires a piece-by-piece selection, while another order is being prepared for a “less demanding customer”.

For Marks & Spencer we do quite a lot. The preparation takes a lot of time, it occupies the workers for a long time, you have to look at (the orange), it's good for here (Marks & Spencer), it's good for there (another customer), and the manager says: work fast. I had to keep saying it... And they've called me a pest, what a pain in the neck, they've called me everything (female warehouse manager, EI11).

Another problem is the increasing number of just-in-time orders from large distributors, which must be delivered within one or two days. These demands can only be met by large warehouses with two shifts. In the case of small and medium-sized warehouses, just in time means that many workers do not have a clear schedule.

It (just in time) has completely changed how we work and directly affects people's lives. It affects their salaries, their schedules and the reconciliation of work and family life... That is the fight we have with the companies... It makes no sense that they call you at 10 p.m. to tell you that you come at 5 a.m. the next day and that happens (female warehouse worker, trade unionist, EI18).

The organization of work to meet just-in-time orders degrades the conditions of many workers, makes it impossible to reconcile family and social life and, as the trade unionist points out, leaves “people at the expense of what the large supermarkets want” (EI18).

In the warehouses of Ribera del Xúquer, compared to the fields (Torres y Pérez, 2021), there is greater compliance with the collective bargaining agreement. In addition to working hours, wages and other aspects, the agreement<sup>4</sup> regulates the types of contracts, temporary and permanent-discontinuous<sup>5</sup>, and the change from the first type to the second, which offers greater protection, security and recognition of seniority. The average salary is 1,200 euros net for 40 hours per week, which can be increased by seniority in the company. The fact that the agreement is complied with does not mean that there are no irregularities. According to all of our interviewees, it is the temporary agency workers who have the worst working conditions. Their real salary is lower than that of warehouse workers, all the hours they work are paid as ordinary hours, even if it is on weekends or at night, and they must be permanently available.

Although they are all women workers, in the warehouses we find a segmentation where type of contract, ethnic origin and social insertion seem to feedback on each other. We have women workers with permanent-discontinuous contracts, with better conditions, mostly Spanish, and immigrant women, with years of residence and inserted in the local social networks. The workers with temporary contracts, Spanish and immigrant women, have a more unstable position. The most precarious situation is that of temporary agency workers, the vast majority of whom are immigrants and who tend to live outside the area. Our women workers faced the pandemic with relatively different labour and social situations.

## 5. Female warehouse workers as essential workers

Similar to other European governments (Grasso *et al.*, 2021), the Spanish government ordered a general confinement of the population from March 14 until June 7, 2020. In addition, measures such as the use of masks, maintaining physical distance, frequent disinfection and limitations to shared transportation were adopted. Likewise, essential sectors and workers were established to guarantee basic services and supplies for the population. With the exception of healthcare workers, these essential workers occupied low-skilled jobs, without the possibility of teleworking, in sectors such as agriculture, transportation, care and food establishments and pharmacies (Bernardi y Gil-Hernández, 2021).

### 5.1. Measures in the work's organization and consequences for women workers

Warehouse workers were declared essential workers and the warehouses of Ribera del Xúquer maintained their activity. Although special measures were mandated, the same just-in-time work organization, high work rates and strict compliance with quality standards were maintained, with negative consequences for the workers.

During the first month of the pandemic, measures were improvised in warehouses in an attempt to implement the general guidelines of the health authorities. As early as May 2020, the Labour Inspectorate established a protocol of measures for work environments, later modified according to governmental guidelines. These protocols have been applied across the board in fruit warehouses, albeit with multiple ad hoc adaptations. In addition to general measures for the entire population, the prevention measures adopted in warehouses affect the facilities, the organization of working times, the place and process of work, as well as the behaviours and routines of female workers.

<sup>4</sup> Collective bargaining agreement for the handling and packaging of citrus fruits and vegetables of the Valencian Community 2020-2024. DOGV 9238/20.12.2021.

<sup>5</sup> Discontinuous permanent workers are part of the company's staff, even if they do not work the whole year, they receive a bonus according to the years worked and have the right to be called the following year in order of seniority.

In the facilities, measures have been adopted to facilitate social distance between workers and mobility flows. The canteens have been enlarged, with open windows, the lockers have been redistributed and dispersed in different parts of the building, one-way directions for moving around have been established, and the capacity of the toilets has been limited, etc. The measures implemented create new routines for the workers. For example, access to the warehouse has been modified, with disinfection of shoes and temperature check. Hydroalcoholic gel and bleach are available at the various work stations for individual and space self-disinfection. There are warehouses where a manager goes through the different sections dispensing hydroalcoholic gel in order to keep up the pace of work.

My job was to pass out gel to the women. Those gloves are all black from (the fruit) from the fields [...] You can't stop for the worker to clean her hands, no, apply gel and continue [...] Okay? That's every hour or every hour and a half. (Spanish, female warehouse manager EI22).

In addition to the use of masks, constant disinfection, schedule adjustments, etc., other measures have affected the workplace. In the processing and packaging lines, for example, distances have been increased, where possible, and rigid plastic curtains have been installed to separate workers from each other. However, these separators make it difficult for workers to move around and slow down the pace of work. In order to keep up with the pace of the line, workers have to move the curtains or work without keeping their distance. This happens in particular in the processing of special orders, with more triage and packaging work, as exemplified by the following quote:

(the plastic separator)... You may have seen some little baskets of six or five khakis on the line, when the khakis fall, they fall all over the place. That if you don't hurry that's not done... then, they always put one or two girls (reinforcements). But sometimes there comes a time when you were there, side by side. And I don't know, there were some infections, we didn't get infected, but there were some girls who did (Argentinean, female warehouse worker, EI23).

In mid-2020, in order to reduce the risk of infections, it was recommended to create bubble groups in different work areas. This has been put into practice unevenly. The permanent groups of women workers have been created in the warehouses of large companies and cooperatives. This is not the case in smaller warehouses where it is not feasible to maintain stable and closed groups and respond just in time to the requirements of large distributors. In addition, during periods of greater demand, many workers work overtime or double shifts, which means working with people they do not usually work with, which is perceived as a situation of greater risk. The women workers organized in stable groups have been, for the most part, permanent-discontinuous workers and, to a lesser extent, temporary workers in department stores. If the criterion of the bubble groups is to minimize risk, the workers in temporary employment agencies, the vast majority of whom are immigrants, accumulate the maximum number of contacts and therefore the highest risk.

With the pandemic and the measures taken, travel to the warehouse became a new problem for women workers. The warehouses are located in industrial parks and transportation is necessary. In the past, workers in the same municipality or area organized themselves to share cars and reduce costs. With the pandemic and restrictive measures adopted, this was no longer possible or is very limited. The problem of transport was ignored by the vast majority of companies so it relapses on the workers. The measures adopted in the organization of work were aimed at maintaining production and adequate sanitary conditions for the workers. While the first objective was achieved, the same cannot be said of the second. Since the same work organization was maintained, some of the measures adopted were not applied in practice due to the pressure of just-in-time, such as plastic separators on the production line or maintaining "bubble groups".

## 5.2. The strategies of female warehouse workers

Warehouse workers managed the pandemic situation with a variety of strategies depending on their socio-economic status, family situation, social relationships and other factors. Some female warehouse workers decided to stop working for fear of becoming infected, so as not to put other members of their family at risk, and because they were in a position to do so. Their family unit had the financial capacity to allow them to lose that income. One of our interviewees commented that she started the 2020-21 campaign earlier because of the resignation of the more veteran workers:

Last year (2020), in March-April, I was one of the first ones they called because workers with the most seniority in the cooperative, being older and more at risk, did not want to. They were very afraid, better your life than work. Although I need work to live... I was afraid but with my family's financial situation at that time I could not refuse (female warehouse worker, Moroccan, EI38).

Like our interviewee, the salary of the vast majority of women workers is basic to their family budget, especially during the pandemic. In many working families in the area, during the confinement and a good part of the year 2020, the wife's salary compensated for the husband's unemployment, given the paralysis of other economic sectors. The vast majority of women workers continued their activity, developing a variety of strategies to minimize risks and "not to take the virus home", as pointed out in almost all the interviews. These strategies affect various aspects of work in the warehouse, the management of the close contact situation or the displacement of the workers.

One of these strategies concerned masks, their type and use in different situations. After the first month of improvisation, the companies provided the workers with cloth masks. Many of them bought and used FFP2 masks, considered to be safer, which entailed an extra expense. The company mask was used more when working with their usual group, the FFP2 mask when it was considered that there could be more risk, when working with non-habitual colleagues, shift changes or overtime.

Another relevant issue has been the management of confinements. During the first months, sick leave was granted to the person infected by COVID-19 and to workers who were close contacts. Later, in October 2020, the criteria were modified. Workers who had been close contacts of a person infected with COVID-19 had to stay at home and confirm their health status by PCR. If the PCR result was positive, a worker was granted sick leave from the day she stopped working; if the PCR result was negative, she could return to work, but without being paid for the days she had been at home. Given the situation of overcrowding in public health centers, it could take several days to get a PCR. In most cases, it has been the workers who have borne the costs of the diagnostic tests. There have been many situations in which the tension between minimizing the health risk and the financial cost for the worker has been evident. Some workers complied, as a precaution, with strict confinement. Other workers paid for a private PCR test in order to obtain an immediate diagnosis and reduce the number of days at home without pay. Other workers continued their activity, without undergoing any tests, because they had no symptoms and could not afford to lose their daily wages.

This Winter (2020) everything happened. Those who wanted to take the test immediately called the health center and said: I was having lunch with that worker and she tested positive... and some said: we were in the car with masks on, windows open, I can't lose my salary. There the company did not control, and they went back to work (female warehouse manager, EI22).

Another problem to solve was commuting. Women workers have had to adapt and deploy various travel strategies according to their socio-economic level, degree of social relations and municipality of residence. When possible, they have opted for the individual use of their own car, to be transported by a family member or, for short distances, to travel by bicycle or scooter. At other times, they have continued to share a car, adjusting to the rules of each period. Often for financial reasons, to reduce costs, but also for social relations and solidarity, as exemplified by this quote.

When she went together (by car), you could only take one person, she had to get in the back and when she got out you had to disinfect it. So the solution? Better not to take anyone. But if somebody asks you... I won't leave a coworker stranded (without transportation) (female warehouse manager, Spanish, EI22).

Workers who do not have their own vehicle, who live in a municipality other than where the warehouse is located, and have few relationships among their coworkers, have had problems in ensuring their daily commute. Using public transport is not always possible or takes much longer. These situations affect more the temporary workers and, above all, the temporary agency workers. In these cases, these workers had to use temporary employment agencies vans, which, according to various testimonies, did not comply with the passenger limitation measures.

These work strategies have been tried to combine with family strategies. The pandemic has exacerbated the difficulties in reconciling work and family life, particularly for female workers who were in charge of dependents (Eurofound, 2020; Petts *et al.*, 2021).

In addition, the "family-oriented" Spanish welfare state has traditionally delegated the care of the elderly and minors to women. In one of the group interviews, conducted in April 2021, women workers highlighted the difficulties in reconciling work and family given the long working hours, the physical and psychological exhaustion and the changes in schedules due to just-in-time.

- 12. Conciliation (work-family), there isn't any.
- 15. You have all the rights, for maternity leave, for elderly parents... if you can take these reductions (of work and salary). I have to work 14 hours and there is no conciliation.
- 14. You end up exhausted... from lack of sleep, physical and mental fatigue. There are times when I get home and tell my daughter not to turn on the TV. All day long the noise of machines, of people... I want silence (EG39).

During the pandemic, this situation "has been the same" (EG39), although with less family and neighbourhood support in order to avoid contagion; for months the care of children by their grandparents has not been possible. During confinement, in cases where the husband did not work, he took care of the children. This assistance did not free women workers from domestic worries and chores. In the first months, with a lot of insecurity and little information, all the women interviewed reported daily dedication to disinfecting work clothes, taking extreme measures of personal hygiene and also those at home. Later, from September 2020 onwards, the progressive normalization of economic activity and the incorporation of husbands to work in non-essential sectors reduced their domestic support. Faced with this situation, there have been a variety of situations: those who have been able to find support among their family and social relations; those who have had to hire another woman to care for their relatives; or those who, unable to solve their family responsibilities, have requested a one-year leave of absence without pay, a possible option for permanent-discontinuous employees.

### 5.3. Pandemic situation increases inequalities

As in other social spheres (Grasso *et al.*, 2021; Bernardi and Gil-Hernández, 2021), the pandemic has increased inequalities between workers and between territories. Before the pandemic, the warehouses of Ribera del Xúquer already had a segmented structure in which the type of contract, ethnic origin and social insertion in the area, established differences between some workers and others. The pandemic, the measures adopted and the continuity of the same work organization have increased the labour and social differences between workers. A good indicator is the strategies used to minimize risks.

Only permanent-discontinuous workers, Spanish and immigrants who have been residing in La Ribera for many years, have been able to choose a fixed work shift and a bubble group. Although they are all working class, their ability to manage working times, invest more in prevention (FFP2 masks, private PCR tests) or respect quarantine times if close contacts are infected with COVID has depended on their economic situation. As in other Spanish agro-exporting areas (Pedreño, 2020; Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2020), given the social situation of female workers, many of them have not had these options, the majority of whom are immigrants. Another factor that has increased differences during the pandemic has been the extensiveness and diversity of social relations. Both Spanish and immigrant workers with roots in the municipalities of La Ribera have been able to draw from the basic resource of relatives, neighbours and friends to help reconcile work and family responsibilities. However, immigrant workers from temporary agencies in more precarious social situations have not had this support, or it has been more limited. These inequalities at work, as highlighted by Acker (2011) and Holvino (2010), correlate with social inequalities in terms of health risk, precariousness and living conditions. In pandemic, the two types of inequalities have fed back on each other. In Ribera del Xúquer, like other Spanish agro-exporting areas such as Murcia (Castro *et al.*, 2023), immigrant workers have suffered a greater negative impact of the COVID 19 pandemic at work and social level, as it has also been the case in other European countries, such as the Nordic countries (Kuns *et al.*, 2023).

In our interviews, we asked the women workers about their experience of being essential workers. They consider that their work has been essential but that it is not valued or socially recognized. They are well aware that without their work there would be no fruit in the market, a work that was more intense in the 2020-2021 season due to the significant demand for citrus. However, they say, this has not been translated into gestures of recognition. It is true that the managers of some warehouses have sent letters, videos and messages of thanks to the staff. Although in the vast majority of companies, as one of our interviewees pointed out, "we have not been compensated financially" (female warehouse worker, Spanish, EG39).

The pandemic also establishes differences between territories, in our case between the Spanish agro-exporting areas. There have been multiple cases of COVID-19 among female warehouse workers in Ribera del Xúquer, particularly during the second wave (September-December 2020), coinciding with a high incidence in this area and in the Metropolitan Area of Valencia. Although several interviewees emphasize the importance of socially-caused infections, it is not possible to distinguish one social sphere from the other. In the fields and warehouses of Ribera del Xúquer, or other Valencian agro-export areas<sup>6</sup>, there have not been major outbreaks limited to agro-industrial activity, but rather a community spread of COVID-19, unlike agro-exporting areas of Lleida, Huesca, Zaragoza and Murcia (Pedreño, 2020; Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2020), with a much greater use of immigrants who carry out the agricultural circuit, high incidence of overcrowding and poor living conditions. In these circumstances, the recognition of migrant workers as essential workers meant that, at the same time, they were a risk and a source of public alarm (Pedreño *et al.*, 2022).

In these areas, municipalities were again confined and in some cases production was stopped, with great repercussions in the Spanish mass media in 2020. Since we do not have disaggregated COVID-19 figures, it is difficult to say in which areas there have been more infections. Another issue is the different consequences in some areas and others. Although the organization of work is very similar in agro-exporting areas, the health risks varied depending on the type of workers, their degree of labour and social precariousness, and their living conditions.

### 6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has had and continues to have serious repercussions for society as a whole, with differences according to social spheres and groups. Along with the measures of confinement and limits to social interaction, the agri-food industry continued its activity and its workers were declared essential.

The indirect control that large distributors groups establish through quality standards (Ponte *et al.*, 2011) implies a neoliberal organization of work (Castro *et al.*, 2020) that, under normal conditions, it already meant an increase in the pace of work and stress for women workers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, despite special measures were mandated, the same just-in-time work organization, high work rates and strict compliance with quality standards were maintained, with negative consequences for the workers.

In the fruit warehouses of Ribera del Xúquer, in addition to the general rules, such as the use of masks, the measures adopted have focused on increasing distances, modifying spaces (lockers, canteens, work lines...) and rearranging mobility flows, installing plastic separators and creating bubble groups. Like other essential workers in Spain (Bernardi and Gil-Hernández, 2021) and in other countries (Stevano, 2021), women warehouse workers have had to deal with more health risks on the job, despite the measures adopted. One of our contributions is to show the relationship between this increased risk and the neoliberal organization of work that was maintained in the warehouses. Some of the measures adopted, such as distances and plastic

<sup>6</sup> The exception was the outbreak occurred in October 2020, in a warehouse in the middle of the countryside of Sagunto, used as accommodation for seasonal workers, and 30 migrants were infected. Las Provincias, 16 October 2020.

separators in the work lines and the organization of bubble groups, have not been very effective given the high pace of work and just-in-time orders from large distributors, which force them to change shifts, work overtime and modify the stable groups of workers. Another aspect of this neoliberal logic was the inaction with respect to transportation, which was essential to maintain production, but also constituted a risk for infection. The companies treated the issue of transportation as an externality, a problem they ignored, making it fall on the shoulders of the workers and increasing their risk. Last but not least, being named essential workers has not led to higher pay or an improvement in the social consideration of their work, which continues to be devalued (Castro *et al.*, 2020).

Another consequence of the pandemic has been the increased difficulties in reconciling work and family. During the confinement of 2020 and the following months, the traditional recourse to grandparents or other family members was very limited by the isolation measures, exposing the problems of the neoliberal social reproduction regime (Mezzadri, 2022), especially in a low-cost welfare state like Spain with little capacity to provide protection (Guillén and León, 2016).

In this situation, women workers have implemented a variety of strategies, combining the work and family dimensions. In some cases, depending on their financial and family situation, they have chosen not to go to work. The vast majority of workers, for whom this option was not feasible, have tried to manage the risk with strategies in various areas. Thus, they combined the use of masks, those supplied by the company and their own FFP2 masks, depending on the work groups and work areas. The issue of close contact with an infected person has been managed differently, from strict compliance with quarantine, private PCR tests or, when there were no symptoms, continuing to work. For many workers, the need to earn a daily wage has been more urgent than caring for their own health and that of their partners and cohabitants. There has also been a variety of ways to resolve the issue of commuting to the warehouse. Our results show how these health risk inequalities at work correlate with social inequalities external to the company (Acker, 2011; Holvino, 2010). The working conditions accepted by immigrant workers in temporary companies, with lower pay and higher risks, are explained by their social precariousness.

In addition to strategies in the work environment, women workers have had to develop a variety of strategies in the family environment, in order to protect the health of the family, care for its members and guarantee the daily needs of the family. As in other social spheres, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the close social linkage between productive and reproductive work (Grasso *et al.*, 2021; Mezzadri, 2022). Women workers have tried to combine their interests in both spheres, maintaining their salaries and caring for their families, according to their possibilities and resources.

As we have seen, these work and family strategies have varied according to various factors. One is the socioeconomic situation, which establishes differences such as having access to a car or not, being able to choose whether or not to work overtime, and facing extra expenses, from FFP2 masks to hiring a woman to take care of the children. Other factors refer to the employment situation, given that the situation of discontinuous permanent workers is more consolidated and they have more room for maneuver, albeit limited, than temporary workers. Likewise, the relational capital of women workers has established differences. These social differences, in terms of socioeconomic status, type of contract, origin and social relations, have exacerbated the differences at work, as pointed out by Acker (2011) and Holvino (2010), given that they establish how much room for maneuver a worker has to avoid or minimize risky situations. In general terms, female workers with permanent-discontinuous contracts, Spanish and immigrant workers who have been settled in the area for years, have had been better able to manage and minimize risks in the situations considered most dangerous. These options have been more limited for temporary workers. On the other hand, temporary agency workers, the vast majority of whom are immigrants, have no ability to manage the situation and accumulate the maximum number of risk situations.

Our results confirm the general literature on the increase in pre-existing inequalities during the pandemic (Grasso *et al.*, 2021; FOESSA, 2022), while highlighting how one of the mechanisms that has operated is the feedback between inequalities in the organization of work and social inequalities, particularly for women (Acker, 2011; Holvino, 2010). These inequalities in the organization of work are exacerbated by compliance with quality standards in the just-in-time organization imposed by large distributors groups. Likewise, our research highlights the relevance of analysis at the local level. Our study shows how, within the same productive sector, state framework and work organization, this general tendency towards inequality takes shape in different ways, both at the level of workers and of territories. On the one hand, inequalities among women workers have worsened, reaffirming the need for an intersectional analysis to capture these unequal impacts. On the other hand, these inequalities are also territorial. Although there have been multiple cases of COVID-19 infection in the fields and warehouses of Ribera del Xúquer, this territory has not experienced a large outbreak like those that occurred in other Spanish agro-exporting areas of Lleida, Huesca, Zaragoza and Murcia (Pedreño, 2020; Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2020), due to the labour and housing conditions of the workers. In other words, because of the different ways in which work is organized in the territories of the global chains (Coe and Yeung, 2015; Selwyn, 2012).

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