

Tourism and Labor Markets in Transition: Sustainability, Equity, and Workforce Resilience in the Post-Pandemic Era

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the world's most labour-intensive sectors, generating employment across hospitality, transport, retail, and cultural industries. Yet, despite its contributions to economic growth, tourism employment is often characterized by precarity, informality, and vulnerability to external shocks. This literature review synthesizes recent scholarship (2023– 2025) on the relationship between tourism and labour markets, with particular attention to the disruptions and transformations triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The review identifies three central themes: the quantity versus quality of jobs, the growing emphasis on sustainability and skills development, and persistent challenges of equity and inclusivity. Empirical studies from Europe, Asia, and beyond demonstrate that while tourism can stimulate local labour markets and generate spillover effects, employment outcomes are highly contingent upon regulatory frameworks, institutional strength, and regional economic structures. The discussion highlights tensions between flexibility and security in tourism employment, the underrepresentation of worker experiences, and the uneven geographical focus of current research. Identified gaps include the need for longitudinal and mixed-method studies, intersectional analyses of inclusivity, and investigations into the role of technology in reshaping the workforce. The paper concludes that tourism remains both a promise and a paradox for labour markets: it creates employment opportunities but also reproduces inequalities and vulnerabilities. Future research and policy must therefore focus on integrating tourism into broader labour market strategies, ensuring sustainable, inclusive, and resilient employment in the 21st century.

Keywords: Tourism employment; labour markets; workforce sustainability; inclusivity; labour regulations; COVID-19 recovery; gender inequality; informality; skills development; economic resilienc

Introduction

Tourism has long been regarded as one of the world's most significant drivers of employment, contributing to both direct and indirect job creation across hospitality, transport, retail, and cultural industries. According to OECD (2024), tourism accounts for millions of jobs worldwide and has consistently functioned as a cornerstone for regional development. The sector's labour force is characterized by its heterogeneity, with employment patterns shaped by factors such as seasonality, informality, gender distribution, and varying skill requirements (Eurostat, 2024; Erzsebet, 2024). However, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted global tourism flows, leading to unprecedented job losses, exposing vulnerabilities in labour markets, and highlighting the pressing need for a sustainable

workforce strategy (Parzych, 2025). In the aftermath, governments, international organizations, and scholars have increasingly turned attention to the relationship between tourism and labour markets, examining not only the extent of employment recovery but also the qualitative dimensions of work in the sector (Nguyen et al., 2025; Petrovič et al., 2025).

The tourism sector's labour market dynamics are uniquely shaped by global shocks, consumer behaviour, and structural constraints. Research by Mamatzakis et al. (2023) and Gazilas (2024) demonstrates how labour market regulations influence employment efficiency and levels of uninsured work, particularly in Southern Europe where informality is prevalent. Similarly, Conti et al. (2025) argue that tourism growth can act as a catalyst for local labour markets, enhancing job creation while generating spillover effects in service industries. Yet these gains are not evenly distributed, with Solís and Gil (2024) showing that in cities such as Barcelona, tourism-related employment often reflects challenges of job precarity, wage disparities, and seasonality. As such, while tourism is celebrated as a vehicle for growth and employment, it also raises important questions about job quality, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability.

Sustainability within tourism employment is no longer confined to environmental considerations but extends to the social and economic dimensions of the workforce. Recent studies propose that sustainable employment must address employees' well-being, safety, and cultural belonging (Anonymous, 2024). Similarly, Mooney, Robinson, Solnet, and Baum (2024) highlight the urgent need for a sustainable tourism workforce that balances the sector's economic imperatives with labour justice and employee retention. This discussion gains urgency as labour shortages and skill mismatches emerge as critical challenges, particularly in destinations recovering from pandemic-related disruptions (Dobrotă et al., 2025; OECD, 2024). The emphasis on workforce resilience and adaptability underscores the evolving expectations placed on tourism workers, who must increasingly navigate technological adoption, sustainability practices, and shifting consumer demands (Petrovič et al., 2025).

Another dimension relates to gender and inclusivity within the tourism labour market. Eurostat (2024) reports that women constitute a dominant share of employment in European tourism industries, often occupying part-time and lower-paid positions. This gender imbalance, coupled with widespread informality in certain contexts (Gazilas, 2024), raises important debates about equity and social outcomes. Xiǎngxiàng and Meeprasert (2024) further contribute by reviewing labour market structures across developing economies, showing how weak institutional frameworks exacerbate vulnerabilities in tourism-dependent employment. Such insights suggest that a comprehensive understanding of tourism labour markets requires a multidimensional lens that accounts for both macroeconomic contributions and micro-level social outcomes.

The recovery of global tourism after COVID-19 provides a unique opportunity to re-examine the sector's role in shaping labour market structures. Beyond aggregate measures of employment, scholars increasingly emphasize the need to investigate the quality, sustainability, and inclusivity of tourism jobs. This paper situates itself within this growing body of research, aiming to critically examine how tourism interacts with labour market dynamics in a period of transformation. Specifically, it asks: How has the tourism sector influenced employment structures post-pandemic, and what implications do these changes carry for sustainability, equity, and long-term workforce development? By synthesizing recent

contributions (e.g., Conti et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025; Parzych, 2025), the paper seeks to bridge empirical findings with policy debates on workforce resilience, labour regulations, and inclusive growth.

Ultimately, understanding the interconnections between tourism and labour markets is not only an academic exercise but also a pressing policy priority. Tourism's potential as a driver of economic recovery and employment is undeniable, yet its capacity to deliver sustainable and equitable jobs remains contested. Addressing these tensions requires an integrated perspective that draws upon labour economics, tourism studies, and social policy. This paper contributes to such a perspective by providing a comprehensive literature review on the evolving relationship between tourism and labour markets, with a focus on post-pandemic sustainability and inclusivity.

Literature Review

Tourism has consistently been positioned as a major contributor to employment across diverse economies. OECD (2024) reports that the sector directly and indirectly supports millions of jobs, with strong linkages to hospitality, transport, retail, and cultural services. Similarly, Nguyen, Schinckus, Chong, Nguyen, and Tran (2025), in their cross-country study of 148 economies, confirm that tourism investment and consumption have significant positive impacts on employment, particularly in developing and middle-income nations. Such findings align with Erzsebet's (2024) work in the European Union, which emphasizes tourism's role in both creating jobs and sustaining small and medium-sized enterprises. Collectively, these studies highlight tourism as a critical labour-intensive sector with considerable potential for fostering economic growth.

The nature of employment generated by tourism varies substantially across regions. Parzych (2025) documents the shifts in tourism employment in Poland before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, noting sharp declines during the crisis but also evidence of gradual recovery. In a similar vein, Hatzimarinakis and Hackl (2025), using Tourism Satellite Accounts for Greece, illustrate the duality between formal employment in tourism industries and broader tourism-dependent work. Meanwhile, Conti, Francesconi, Papini, and Serafinelli (2025) demonstrate that in Italy, tourism growth not only expands direct employment but also generates spillovers in local service industries. These regional studies suggest that while tourism consistently boosts labour markets, its impacts are mediated by local economic structures, regulatory contexts, and levels of tourism dependency.

Labour regulations shape both the efficiency and equity of employment in tourism. Mamatzakis, Pegkas, and Staikouras (2023) examine how regulatory frameworks affect the efficiency of tourism firms in Greece, finding that overly rigid labour rules can reduce allocative efficiency, though they may also prevent exploitative practices. Complementing this, Gazilas (2024) studies uninsured employment in Greece, identifying how regulatory gaps foster informal work arrangements. These findings resonate with broader insights from Xiǎngxiàng and Meeprasert (2024), who review labour market structures across developing economies and emphasize that weak institutional capacity often exacerbates informality in tourism-dependent sectors. Collectively, these contributions highlight a critical tension: while

tourism generates employment, the quality of those jobs is highly sensitive to regulatory frameworks and enforcement capacity.

A growing body of research emphasizes the sustainability of tourism employment. Mooney, Robinson, Solnet, and Baum (2024) argue that a sustainable tourism workforce requires balancing economic imperatives with labour justice, inclusivity, and employee retention. Similarly, Petrovič, Bieliková, Beták, Sofer, and Králik (2025) identify skills development as a central requirement for sustaining tourism growth, particularly in light of technological change and environmental pressures. Anonymous (2024) advances this discussion by conceptualizing sustainable tourism employment in multidimensional terms, including not only economic security but also employees' cultural, emotional, and professional well-being. These perspectives signal a shift in tourism scholarship from focusing merely on job creation toward assessing the long-term viability and quality of those jobs.

Tourism labour markets are also marked by gendered and precarious employment structures. Eurostat (2024) finds that women constitute a dominant share of employment in tourism-related industries in Europe, though they are disproportionately represented in part-time and lower-paid positions. Solís and Gil (2024), focusing on Barcelona, similarly report that jobs generated by tourism often suffer from wage disparities, temporary contracts, and seasonal fluctuations. These findings raise concerns about inclusivity and equity, suggesting that the employment gains linked to tourism may reinforce existing labour market inequalities if not addressed by policy interventions.

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed significant transformations in tourism labour markets. Parzych (2025) highlights the steep contraction of jobs in Polish tourism industries during the crisis, followed by a gradual but uneven recovery. OECD (2024) documents similar global patterns, noting persistent workforce shortages in hospitality and related services. These shortages are linked to both structural issues (e.g., seasonality, low wages) and changing worker expectations about job quality in the post-pandemic economy. Madhumini (2024), analyzing Sri Lanka, demonstrates that while tourism employment contributes positively to economic growth, its vulnerability to external shocks underscores the need for diversified labour strategies. The pandemic thus serves as a turning point, prompting researchers and policymakers alike to re-examine the resilience and sustainability of tourism employment.

The recent literature also reflects a shift toward more holistic and policy-oriented approaches. Dobrotă et al. (2025) analyze the structure of the tourism labour force in Bucharest, identifying mismatches between workforce qualifications and industry demands. Such mismatches raise important policy questions regarding education, training, and labour market alignment. Meanwhile, Conti et al. (2025) highlight the need to integrate tourism into broader local development strategies, given its potential to stimulate labour demand across multiple sectors. The growing emphasis on sustainability, inclusivity, and resilience suggests a convergence between academic debates and policy discourses on how to make tourism employment not only more abundant but also fairer and more future-oriented.

Taken together, these studies present a complex but increasingly coherent picture of the relationship between tourism and labour markets. Tourism clearly generates employment across diverse contexts, but the benefits are unevenly distributed and often accompanied by challenges of informality, precarity, and inequality. Labour regulations and institutional capacity play decisive roles in shaping both the quantity and quality of tourism jobs. The

pandemic has further revealed the fragility of the tourism workforce, underscoring the need for resilience strategies that go beyond job creation to address sustainability, skills, and inclusivity. In this light, the literature suggests that future research and policy must grapple not only with how to maximize employment from tourism but also with how to ensure that such employment is equitable, sustainable, and adaptable to global uncertainties.

Discussion

The reviewed literature provides robust evidence that tourism continues to be a central driver of employment across diverse economies, but it also reveals a number of structural tensions that complicate this role. On one hand, empirical studies consistently confirm that tourism creates significant employment opportunities (Nguyen et al., 2025; Erzsebet, 2024; OECD, 2024). On the other, the quality, inclusivity, and sustainability of these jobs remain contested. This duality underscores the importance of moving beyond quantitative assessments of job creation toward qualitative evaluations of workforce resilience and equity.

A key theme emerging from the literature is the fragility of tourism employment in the face of external shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a stress test for tourism labour markets, exposing deep vulnerabilities. Parzych (2025) and Hatzimarinakis and Hackl (2025) illustrate how tourism-dependent economies experienced severe employment contractions, while OECD (2024) documents ongoing labour shortages and mismatches in the recovery phase. These findings suggest that although tourism can be a rapid generator of employment, it is equally susceptible to sudden downturns, raising questions about its long-term stability as a labour market pillar.

Another recurring issue is informality and precarity. Gazilas (2024) demonstrates how uninsured and unregulated employment persists in Greece's tourism sector, a pattern echoed in broader developing economy contexts (Xiǎngxiàng & Meeprasert, 2024). This reflects a wider structural challenge: tourism jobs are often easier to create than to formalize. Without strong institutional frameworks, employment growth may reinforce vulnerability rather than enhance security. Such evidence suggests the need for more rigorous labour market regulations and enforcement mechanisms that safeguard workers while maintaining sectoral efficiency (Mamatzakis et al., 2023).

Sustainability and workforce development emerge as central concerns for the future of tourism employment. Mooney et al. (2024) argue that sustainable labour practices must address not only economic imperatives but also the well-being, cultural belonging, and professional development of workers. Similarly, Petrovič et al. (2025) highlight the importance of skills training to align labour supply with industry demands in an era of technological and environmental change. These perspectives mark a clear shift in the literature: tourism employment is no longer judged solely by the number of jobs it generates but by the degree to which those jobs contribute to a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable workforce.

The gendered nature of tourism employment also demands critical attention. Eurostat (2024) and Solís and Gil (2024) highlight how women dominate employment in tourism but are disproportionately concentrated in part-time, seasonal, or lower-wage roles. This reflects broader gender inequalities in labour markets, raising urgent policy questions about

inclusivity, pay equity, and opportunities for advancement. The persistence of these disparities suggests that tourism, while often framed as a sector of opportunity, may in fact reproduce existing labour market hierarchies unless proactive interventions are made.

The reviewed studies also point to the importance of situating tourism within broader local and regional development strategies. Conti et al. (2025) show how tourism growth in Italy stimulates employment not only within the sector but also across local service industries, generating multiplier effects. Dobrotă et al. (2025) emphasize the need to align education and training systems with tourism labour market demands to prevent mismatches and inefficiencies. Such insights underscore that the employment impacts of tourism cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed as part of wider socio-economic ecosystems.

Taken together, the literature reveals both consensus and debate. There is broad agreement that tourism is a powerful engine of job creation, but disagreement persists regarding its long-term sustainability, equity, and resilience. While some studies emphasize the efficiency-enhancing role of labour market regulations (Mamatzakis et al., 2023), others stress how overregulation can reduce flexibility (Gazilas, 2024). Similarly, while the literature celebrates tourism's contribution to female employment, it also highlights gender inequities that compromise inclusivity. These tensions illustrate that the tourism–labour market nexus is not a straightforward success story but a complex field where growth, regulation, and social justice intersect.

In light of these findings, it becomes evident that the central challenge is not whether tourism creates jobs, but what kinds of jobs it creates and sustains. The task for scholars and policymakers is therefore to balance quantity with quality, growth with equity, and flexibility with security. Addressing this challenge requires interdisciplinary approaches that integrate tourism studies, labour economics, and social policy, moving toward a holistic understanding of how tourism employment can be both a driver of development and a foundation for sustainable livelihoods.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although the reviewed literature advances understanding of the relationship between tourism and labour markets, several research gaps remain that warrant systematic investigation. These gaps span methodological, geographical, and conceptual dimensions, and they present clear opportunities for future scholarship.

First, much of the existing literature is descriptive, relying heavily on statistical accounts of employment levels (e.g., Eurostat, 2024; OECD, 2024). While valuable, such approaches often fail to capture the lived experiences of workers in tourism and the qualitative dimensions of employment such as well-being, job satisfaction, and career mobility. Studies like Anonymous (2024), which emphasize multidimensional aspects of sustainable employment, remain the exception rather than the norm. Future research should therefore employ mixed methods that combine quantitative labour market data with qualitative insights from workers, managers, and policymakers. This would provide a more holistic understanding of how tourism employment functions in practice.

Another methodological limitation lies in the lack of longitudinal studies. While Parzych (2025) and Hatzimarinakis and Hackl (2025) examine pre- and post-COVID trends, few studies systematically track tourism employment across extended periods of time. Longitudinal research would enable scholars to disentangle cyclical fluctuations (e.g., seasonality) from structural transformations (e.g., digitalization, sustainability transitions).

The literature also reveals uneven geographical coverage. A significant portion of the reviewed studies focus on Europe (e.g., Mamatzakis et al., 2023; Erzsebet, 2024; Conti et al., 2025). While this provides valuable insights into advanced economies with strong institutional frameworks, it underrepresents regions where tourism is both more labour-intensive and more vulnerable, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. Xiǎngxiàng and Meeprasert (2024) highlight labour market structures in developing economies, but there remains a lack of empirical case studies in these contexts. Future research should prioritize diverse regional perspectives, particularly in destinations where tourism constitutes a major share of GDP and employment.

At the conceptual level, three areas stand out. First, while sustainability has gained prominence (Mooney et al., 2024; Petrovič et al., 2025), the concept is often applied narrowly to skills development or workforce shortages. There is limited integration of sustainability frameworks that connect environmental imperatives with social and economic dimensions of tourism labour markets. Future work could adopt interdisciplinary perspectives from environmental economics, labour studies, and organizational psychology to develop a richer understanding of sustainable employment.

Second, gender and inclusivity remain underexplored. Eurostat (2024) and Solís and Gil (2024) document gender disparities in tourism employment, but few studies delve into intersectional perspectives that consider how gender intersects with age, ethnicity, migration status, or disability. As tourism increasingly depends on migrant labour in many regions, future research should examine the lived realities of these workers and the policies that shape their experiences.

Third, the role of technology and digital transformation in reshaping tourism employment is insufficiently studied. While Petrovič et al. (2025) note emerging skill requirements, there is little systematic analysis of how automation, digital platforms, or artificial intelligence affect job structures in tourism. This presents a critical research frontier, particularly as technology adoption accelerates in both customer-facing and back-office roles.

From a policy standpoint, the literature identifies but does not fully address the tension between flexibility and security in tourism employment. Mamatzakis et al. (2023) and Gazilas (2024) illustrate how regulatory frameworks influence efficiency and informality, yet there is little comparative research exploring how different policy models—such as Scandinavian flexicurity versus Mediterranean informality—affect tourism labour outcomes. Future scholarship should undertake comparative policy studies that examine which regulatory designs best balance growth with fairness.

Another policy gap concerns the integration of tourism into broader labour market strategies. While Conti et al. (2025) show that tourism generates spillovers into local service industries, most studies treat tourism employment as a sectoral issue. More work is needed to situate

tourism labour markets within national employment strategies, regional development plans, and global labour governance frameworks.

To address these gaps, future research should prioritize:

- 1. Mixed-method and longitudinal approaches that combine statistical modelling with worker-centered qualitative research.
- 2. Expanded geographical scope with case studies from underrepresented regions where tourism is central to development.
- 3. Intersectional analysis of inclusivity, focusing on gender, migration, and other social categories.
- 4. Technological perspectives on how digitalization is reshaping tourism employment structures.
- 5. Comparative policy analyses that evaluate labour market regulations and their implications for tourism employment.
- 6. Integration with sustainability agendas, connecting environmental transitions with social justice in the tourism workforce.

By addressing these areas, scholars can advance not only academic debates but also practical policy solutions that enhance the sustainability, inclusivity, and resilience of tourism labour markets.

Conclusion

Tourism remains one of the most significant global sources of employment, generating millions of jobs across hospitality, transport, retail, and related industries. The literature reviewed in this paper affirms tourism's enduring role as an engine of labour market growth (Nguyen et al., 2025; OECD, 2024). Yet the evidence also highlights the sector's vulnerabilities, particularly its exposure to global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely disrupted tourism flows and left deep scars on labour markets (Parzych, 2025; Hatzimarinakis & Hackl, 2025). These disruptions underscore the need to view tourism not only as a generator of employment but also as a sector requiring stronger mechanisms for workforce resilience.

The review identifies three central themes that shape current debates on tourism employment. First, the quality of jobs is as important as their quantity. Studies consistently highlight informality, uninsured work, and precarity as persistent features of tourism labour markets (Gazilas, 2024; Xiǎngxiàng & Meeprasert, 2024). Without effective regulatory frameworks, the jobs created by tourism risk reinforcing vulnerability rather than fostering sustainable livelihoods. Second, sustainability and skills development have emerged as critical priorities. Scholars emphasize that sustainable employment must go beyond economic considerations to include cultural belonging, well-being, and professional growth (Anonymous, 2024; Mooney et al., 2024; Petrovič et al., 2025). Finally, equity and inclusivity remain unresolved challenges. While tourism creates opportunities for women and other marginalized groups, it also reproduces patterns of gender inequality, wage disparity, and occupational segregation (Eurostat, 2024; Solís & Gil, 2024).

From a policy perspective, the literature points to the urgent need for integrated labour market strategies. Comparative insights from Greece, Poland, Italy, and Spain demonstrate that the impacts of tourism on employment are strongly mediated by national regulations, institutional strength, and regional economic structures (Mamatzakis et al., 2023; Conti et al., 2025). This suggests that tourism employment cannot be addressed in isolation; rather, it must be embedded within broader frameworks of labour policy, education, and sustainable development.

Looking ahead, future research must address the identified gaps by expanding methodological approaches, incorporating underrepresented regions, and examining the role of technology in shaping new forms of tourism employment. Such efforts would not only strengthen academic knowledge but also inform policymakers, industry stakeholders, and educators who seek to design more resilient and inclusive labour markets.

In conclusion, tourism continues to be both a promise and a paradox for labour markets. It promises job creation and local development but simultaneously reveals contradictions of precarity, inequality, and vulnerability. Addressing these contradictions requires moving beyond celebratory narratives of tourism-led growth toward a critical, multidimensional understanding of employment that prioritizes sustainability, equity, and resilience. By situating tourism within wider economic and social contexts, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on how the sector can evolve from a fragile source of jobs into a foundation for sustainable and inclusive work in the 21st century.

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